



Flight of the Tivinel

Jeff Pages

PLIGHT OF THE TIVINEL

BY

JEFF PAGES



PLIGHT OF THE TIVINEL
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My thanks also to another friend and author, Marco Peel of Spain, whose novel *A Parallel Path* inspired Joel's and Loraine's barefoot pilgrimage along the Paths of Saint James in France. His help in navigating their route and suggestion of a likely location where the inevitable trouble catches up with them is much appreciated.

As always, my blind friend Ray Foret Jr has been a literal sounding board for me throughout the writing of this work, providing constant feedback on my strengths and weaknesses and helping me out of the corners I'd painted myself into. For this I'm eternally grateful.

To my friends and relatives who joined me in Woy Woy for the launch of *Cry of the Bunyips*, many thanks for making it such a memorable evening, the alarm in the nearby dress shop notwithstanding. I look forward to seeing you all again for the launch of this book.

Last but not least, thanks to the wonderful staff at Zeus Publications for their great work and support over the decade since this series began.

Author Biography

Jeff Pages was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1954 and from a very early age was fascinated by science and technology. After finishing high school he attended the University of Sydney from where he ultimately obtained a doctorate in Electrical Engineering. In 1989 his work took him to Tamworth in north-western New South Wales, where he joined the Tamworth Bushwalking and Canoe Club and spent many weekends bushwalking in the nearby parks and forests. In 1995 he moved back to the Sydney region and now lives at Umina Beach on the northern shore of Broken Bay.

He has always enjoyed going barefoot as much as possible and has been a member of the Society for Barefoot Living, an Internet-based discussion group, since 1996.

In 2013 he became a keen geocacher, combining his love of technology and bushwalking in the GPS-based hunt for caches hidden by fellow participants.

His first novel, *Barefoot Times*, was published in 2004, followed by *Call of the Delphinidae* in 2006, *The Mind of the Dolphins* in 2008 and *Cry of the Bunyips* in 2011. *Plight of the Tivinel* is now the fifth book in the series.

Further background information can be found on the series' website at www.barefoottimes.net .

Dedication

For Kevin Dawson, in appreciation of his ongoing support throughout the series and particularly his help with the launch of *Cry of the Bunyips*.

In memory of Craig Smith (1964 – 2013)

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Reprise

Pedro stood leaning against the rail, watching Jim disappear as the fog enveloped the boat once more. Charon placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t fret, Pedro, for your friend has found true happiness and peace. That’s not our fate, though, at least not for now, as you have another task to perform. After that, well this is a big cosmos and I’m sure there’s lots of mischief we can make.”

“What must I do?”

“You’re a smart lad, Pedro; I’d have thought you’d have it all figured out by now.”

Pedro grinned as the pieces started falling into place.

“We must hurry, for dawn is approaching and he’ll soon be waking up.”

The mist darkened as the boat’s damp wooden deck disappeared beneath his feet, replaced a moment later by the touch of dry leaves and sandstone. A creek babbled nearby as the eastern sky began to glow. He looked around, trying to correlate the landscape with the maps and satellite images he’d been studying.

In a hollow amongst a clump of bushes, a young boy stirred. Pedro walked over to him, aware of the rustling leaves and snapping twigs beneath his feet. The boy looked up, his mouth gaping wide.

“Well don’t just sit there gawking,” Pedro said with a grin, waiting for his twin to stand before leading him north through the bush towards the track.

Part One

Catalyst



Outcast

Pedro woke in the gloomy half-light of dawn, suddenly aware he wasn't alone.

"Who the hell are you?" a phlegmy voice called out from the other side of the barn.

A heavily-built man, a farmer if the akubra hat and gum boots were anything to go by, stood just inside the half-open door. Pedro moved to his right, squeezing between an upended tractor engine and a pile of packing cases while hoping the gloomy interior would help conceal him.

"Don't move, boy; stay where I can see you."

Yeah, sure, Pedro thought, ducking down and crawling through a narrow gap behind a stack of newspapers. Between him and the door stood a workbench covered in assorted tools and half-finished projects, with a gap between it and the wall just big enough for him to squeeze through if he could avoid bumping anything and making a noise.

"What are you doing, boy?"

The farmer was starting to sound flustered; Pedro hoped he didn't have a gun. If he could just be distracted long enough, there was a chance of escape. Pedro picked up the nearest thing he could spy, an old tin can full of nails, and, as quietly as possible, threw it back behind him. The can hit the floor, disgorging its contents with a satisfying clatter.

"What the —"

As the farmer strode towards the noise, Pedro dashed for the door, but his little toe caught the handle of a rake, knocking it down onto his back and throwing him off balance. The farmer swung around, moving with surprising agility for a man of his size and wrapping his huge palm around Pedro's wrist just before he could reach the door.

“Stop squirming, you little runt,” the farmer said as Pedro tried to pull himself free. “Now who are you and what were you doing in here?”

“I was sleeping.”

“Sleeping?”

“I got lost in the bush but found this place last night.”

“You’re not that boy everyone’s been looking for, are you?”

“Me? No, that was –”

“You must have been freezing out there in just those shorts you’re wearing. What happened to your shirt and shoes?”

“No, this is all I ever –”

“Come with me and I’ll take you into town. Your parents must be sick with worry.”

“My parents are –”

“Stop your yakking and come along, boy.”

The bright sunshine outside caused Pedro to squint and almost stumble as the farmer led him to a battered old four-wheel-drive. He bundled him into the passenger seat, not letting go of his arm until the seat belt was secured.

“They really should do something about all the school groups going out into the bush up here. Damn fools are always getting lost.”

“I wasn’t with –”

“They should fine the parents and the school, too right, and use the money to pay those poor sods that go out looking for them. Either that or leave them out there to perish.”

Pedro shook his head and groaned.

“I bet you’re starving, aren’t you?”

Until then Pedro hadn’t been aware of any hunger, even though more than twenty-four hours had passed since his arrival in this reality, but the mention of food had awoken the emptiness inside him, causing his stomach to loudly rumble.

“I dare say they’ll give you something to eat, once they’re through whipping your arse off for getting lost. If it were up to me I’d let you starve a few more days, make you think twice about doing it again.”

“I didn’t mean to –”

“A map and compass along with some training on how to use them, that’s what you lot need. That and enough common sense not to go wandering off the track, am I right?”

Pedro sighed, wondering how he’d gotten himself into this mess.

The orchards and hobby farms soon gave way to large suburban blocks adorned with cardboard mansions, spotless four-wheel-drives and rusty Kombis. Grevilleas, wattles and jacarandas sprouted out of garden beds bordered by triangular rocks set in concrete like crazy stone-age dentures. Some even had plantations of palms, a testimony more to the resilience of the trees surviving in the cold mountain climate than to the taste of their owners.

The farmer turned into the main street of town, negotiating the flocks of shoppers wandering aimlessly across the road before pulling up outside the police station.

The interior looked like something out of the 1950s, with small high windows, pale green panelling and a dark-stained wooden counter separating the public area from assorted desks and filing cabinets. Fading posters sticky-taped to the walls reminded visitors to lock their cars and homes, admonished them to not drink and drive, and pointed out the dangers of illicit drugs.

“I’ve found the lost boy you’ve been looking for,” the farmer told the desk sergeant, pulling Pedro forward by the arm.

“Which lost boy would that be?”

“The one that’s been on the news these last few days.”

“Peter Thorpe? He was found yesterday.”

“What? So who’s this then?”

The sergeant stared at Pedro. “Well?”

“Me? I’m Pedro.”

“Who?”

“Look, I think there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding here. I wasn’t lost, not really, just took a bit of a wrong turn and ended up coming out of the bush pretty late, which is how I came to be sleeping in your barn, so no harm done, as they say, and I’ll be off now.”

“Hey, just a minute, we need to –” the sergeant said, but before anyone could stop him, Pedro slipped out the door and dashed down the street.

He'd almost passed the newsagent when a sudden thought crossed his mind. Turning, he ducked inside and, with his back to the counter, picked up a copy of the morning paper and began flicking through it. He found what he was looking for on page five.

Missing Schoolboy Found

Peter Thorpe, the fourteen-year-old who became lost in the Blue Mountains National Park on Monday while on a school excursion to the Ruined Castle, was found yesterday morning by State Emergency Service volunteers. Suffering only minor scratches and abrasions, he was reunited with his parents shortly before noon.

The boy told police he'd become disoriented while investigating a rocky outcrop to the side of the track and had spent the night in a hollow beside a creek deep in the valley. Meanwhile the school headmaster has publicly thanked the rangers and volunteers who helped in the search and again denied claims that inadequate supervision was to blame.

Pedro was both miffed and relieved to find there was no mention of his involvement in Peter's rescue. After finding him in his nest beside the creek, he'd led him out of the wilderness to safety, but for reasons he couldn't explain, had hidden when he'd heard the SES searcher calling Peter's name.

His gaze moved to the photograph accompanying the story. Aside from Peter's slightly shorter hair and tidier appearance, it was like looking in a mirror. He'd truly become Peter's twin brother at this point in time, a time which the front page banner proclaimed to be Wednesday the 22nd of February, 1989.

When he'd last been in the physical world, it had been 2066 and Peter had been ninety-one years old. He couldn't help wondering how many laws of physics he'd broken in travelling back here. *Or was this all just a memory replaying in his mind? If that was true, though, how'd he know where to find Peter?*

Before he could ponder such questions any further, a hand fell on his shoulder, causing him to jump around.

“You’re not getting away that easily,” the police sergeant said, holding up a black-and-white photograph. “Care to explain how it is you’re a dead ringer for the boy we found yesterday?”

Pedro shrugged, dropping the newspaper before the policeman could see the story he’d been reading.

“Cat got your tongue, huh? Well you have until we get back to the station to come up with an answer.”

Just to prove Pedro’s expectations wrong, the interview room was bright and airy, with no high intensity lights or thumb screws in evidence. A cassette recorder was built into the desk, but the sergeant made no move towards starting it.

“You’re not under arrest or facing any charges,” he said, following Pedro’s gaze. “I just want to get to the bottom of who you are and what you’re doing here.”

“I’m not sure,” Pedro began to say, but the policeman cut him off.

“Let’s just start with your name, shall we?”

“I’m Pedro.”

“Do you have a surname?”

Pedro wanted nothing more than to say no, but he didn’t think that’d wash. He took a deep breath, feeling the perspiration on his brow starting to form. “Um, Thorpe; I’m Pedro Thorpe.”

The policeman stared at him as if he’d just said he was the Dalai Lama. “Come again?”

“Pedro Thorpe.”

“I see. Are you in any way related to our geographically-embarrassed Peter?”

“Um, that’s a difficult one to answer.”

“A simple yes or no will suffice.”

“Um, yes, I guess you could say that.”

“You’re what, his cousin?”

“More like his twin brother, sort of.”

The policeman stood, taking a step towards the door before turning back to Pedro. “Just wait here, will you? Can I get you a coffee or something?”

“Yes, please. Strong and black.”

“Twin brother, you say.” The sergeant stepped from the room, bolting the door behind him with an ominous thud. Pedro wondered if perhaps claiming to be the Dalai Lama might have been a better move after all.

A minute later a constable, who couldn’t have been much older than himself, entered the room, handing him a steaming cup and a plate of dry biscuits. “Do you want sugar?”

“No, this’ll be fine, thanks.”

The constable stared at him as he sipped the coffee, making him wonder whether it might be laced with truth serum or something.

“This is good, really,” he said, grinning. “I was expecting some of that instant crap.”

“We have a proper percolator here, thanks to the sergeant’s missus.”

Pedro picked up a biscuit and started nibbling on it as his empty stomach rumbled in anticipation. “God bless her soul.”

The constable gazed around the room, looking everywhere but at Pedro as he gobbled up the remaining biscuits. “The sergeant shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“I hope not. I have people to see and places to go.”

“Really? Well I’m sure once he’s made his phone calls everything will be fine.”

The sergeant gave a nod of dismissal to the constable as he re-entered the room and sat himself down facing Pedro. He tapped his notebook with his pen, frowning.

“I’ve just spoken to Michael Thorpe.”

“Uh huh.”

“He assures me Peter is an only child and that there’s no Pedro Thorpe amongst any of his immediate relations. So let’s start back at the beginning, shall we? Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Pedro Thorpe, Peter’s twin.”

The sergeant shook his head. “I think Peter’s parents would know if he had a twin, don’t you?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that. Michael’s an astrophysicist, if I could just speak to him –”

“No, not until you start telling me the truth.”

“I am telling you the truth; a DNA test will prove it.”

“A what?”

Pedro scratched his chin, reminding himself that it was 1989. “I guess they don’t have that technology yet, do they?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Take my fingerprints then. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Identical twins never have the same fingerprints so it won’t prove anything.”

Pedro paused for a moment before grinning. “That may be so, but I bet you my fingerprints are exactly the same as Peter’s.”

“Impossible.”

“Perhaps, but even so I reckon they’ll be identical right down to the last loop and whorl.”

“And if they’re the same?”

“I’ll tell you who I really am.”

“Why don’t you just tell me now and be done with it?”

“You won’t believe me without the fingerprints.”

The sergeant scratched his chin. “All right, then, but only if Peter’s parents allow him to have his prints taken.”

“Sure, okay.”

“Come on and let’s get it done, then.”

The young constable was given the task of escorting Pedro into the broom closet identified by a small sign as the fingerprinting room, while the sergeant went to call Michael Thorpe again.

From the tiny desk squeezed in against the wall, the constable removed the ink, plate, roller and record cards, placing them carefully in their correct positions as if Pedro was an examiner in the police academy.

“Just relax,” he said, taking Pedro’s right hand and rotating it into the correct position. Pedro felt like saying the same thing back to him, but didn’t.

After a couple of false starts, a complete set of prints from both his hands were recorded to the constable’s satisfaction.

“You can wash your hands in the bathroom now and then I’ll take some photos to go with the prints.”

After removing most of the ink from his fingers, Pedro stared into the bathroom mirror, trying to use his wet hands to change his tangle

of dishevelled brown hair into something like the neatly parted locks of his twin. Although created by the same follicles as Peter's, Pedro's hair had taken on a life of its own and refused to cooperate.

His ablutions completed, the constable escorted him over to where the far wall had been marked from floor to ceiling in centimetres.

"Take off your shoes."

"Huh?"

He stared at Pedro's bare feet. "Oh, okay, you're not wearing any. Doesn't that hurt?"

"No, but I bet those boots you're wearing do."

The constable nodded sheepishly as he handed him a small blackboard bearing his name, a five-digit code and the date. "Stand on those marks with your back hard against the wall."

A bright flash from what looked like an antique camera stolen from a photography museum left glowing after-images in Pedro's eyes.

"Now turn to the side."

Another flash, but one he didn't have to look at.

"And now the other side."

"Do you want the back of my head too?"

"Only if you want to sue your barber."

Pedro grinned at the constable's unexpected levity.

"All done?" the sergeant asked, walking over to join them.

"Yes, sir."

"I have good news and bad news for you, young Pedro."

Pedro wondered if he'd be calling him that if he knew how old he really was.

"Peter's parents have agreed to have him fingerprinted, on the proviso that the prints are destroyed afterwards, but they won't be able to do it until the weekend."

"I see."

"That leaves me with the problem of what to do with you in the meantime."

"You could let me go and I'll promise to come back next week."

The sergeant shook his head. "The Department of Family and Community Services has agreed to take you into their care until we can find out who you really are and where you belong."

Pedro gulped.

“You could just answer those questions for me now and save all the bother.”

“Sorry, but like I said, you won’t believe me without the evidence in front of you.”

“I can believe lots of things.”

“Trust me, you wouldn’t.”

The sergeant sighed. “Very well; Constable Wiggins will take you to your new home then.”

* * *

The Department of Family and Community Services, housed in a new brick and glass block of government offices, looked modern and sterile. White vertical blinds covered the windows while the synthetic navy-blue carpet on the floor contrasted the pale blue paintwork on the office dividers. The Bakelite name tags slotted into metal holders on each door underlined the transient nature of their occupants.

“So who do we have here?” the prim and proper woman behind the desk asked.

Pedro, taking an immediate dislike to her for addressing him in the third person, glanced at the constable who stared back at him.

“Oh, you’re asking me? I’m Pedro.”

She carefully printed his name on the top of the form in front of her. “Surname?”

“Thorpe.”

“Is that with an *e*?”

“Uh huh. *T-h-o-r-p-e*.”

“Your home address?”

Pedro had no idea and was about to say as much, but before he could, some inner voice spoke out and said, “37 Bellevue Parade, Eastwood.”

He tried to hide the surprised look on his face as he added this to the growing list of intriguing twists to his existence in this reality.

The woman turned to the constable. “We’re not a taxi service, you know. Is there any reason why he can’t simply be returned there?”

“The people who live there deny any knowledge of him.”

“Are they your parents, Pedro?”

“In a way, I suppose.”

She stared at him.

“It’s difficult to explain without making me sound crazy.”

“Any explanation is better than none, young man.”

“Okay, then. I’m their son’s twin.”

“But surely they’d know if they had twins.”

“I’ve never existed in this reality until now.”

The woman stared at him.

“I told you it’d sound crazy, but the police sergeant will have proof when he gets Peter’s fingerprints and matches them to mine.”

She wrote a few more notes on her form. “Is there any reason why he isn’t wearing a shirt or shoes?”

“That’s how we found him.”

“This is all I ever wear,” Pedro said, hitching up his frayed denim shorts which had drooped more than he thought might be appropriate in his present predicament.

She frowned. “What about when it’s cold?”

Pedro shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me.”

She made another note on the form before turning to the constable. “Tell Sergeant Kent he was right to send him here. We’ll have the duty psychologist at Sunnygrove make an assessment before we decide what to do with him. Now if you could just sign here?”

“What’s Sunnygrove?” Pedro asked as the constable signed him over.

“That’s going to be your home until we figure out who you really are.”

She picked up the telephone on her desk, muttering a few words before replacing the receiver. A moment later a large man entered the room.

“Pedro, this is Nigel who’ll take you down there now.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Nigel said, pumping Pedro’s hand as if he were drilling for oil. “Do you have any belongings?”

“No, just me.”

“Let’s go then.”

“Good luck,” the constable said, patting Pedro on the shoulders. “From what I’ve heard, you’re going to need it there.”

“He’s only joking,” Nigel said, out-grinning the fabled Cheshire cat as he guided Pedro through the back of the building to the staff car park.

* * *

Pedro’s immediate impression of Sunnygrove was of a prison hiding behind a boarding school façade. Its sandstone two-storey buildings, set amongst what would have otherwise been a picturesque field of trees and well-manicured lawns, looked like the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing, ready to devour anyone daring to enter its domain. What troubled him most, though, was the high fence surrounding the facility with the barbed wire angled to keep the residents in rather than intruders out.

Nigel pulled up in front of one the buildings, stepping around the car to unlock Pedro’s child-proof door. The Department took no chances on their captives escaping. Half-open double doors set under a stone arch revealed a gloomy interior of dark-panelled wood as he led Pedro inside and down a corridor on the left. He entered the third room along.

“We have another one for you,” he said to the elderly woman behind the desk, handing her the form the Department woman had filled out.

“Mr Thorpe, is it?”

“Yes, with an *e*.”

“You’re a very fortunate young man, Mr Thorpe with an *e*. This boarding school’s second to none when it comes to housing and educating young vagrants found living on the streets.”

“I wasn’t living on the streets.”

“According to this you have no place of abode.”

“Actually I do, but my parents don’t know me yet.”

“That’s nonsense and I’ll hear no more of it.”

Pedro glared at her but said nothing.

“Right now you may think us harsh and unkind, but by the time you leave you’ll be thanking us.” She opened the blue loose-leaf binder on the desk in front of her. “I’m putting you in room 219 with

Colin Dunlop. He's a couple of years older than you and will provide a good role model."

"Does he snore?"

A ghost of a grin crossed her face before being erased by her perpetual frown. "I most certainly hope so. Now we should get you into uniform as soon as possible."

"Uniform?"

"Good grief, child, we can't have you going around like you are now, can we?"

An hour later Pedro found himself sitting in a classroom amongst some thirty other boys, all dressed in pale green long-sleeved shirts, baggy brown shorts, itchy socks and heavy black shoes about as flexible as hardened steel. The teacher, a grizzly middle-aged man with a stick of chalk in one hand and stick of bamboo in the other, glared at the class, seeking out his next victim.

"Paterson! What is a light year?"

All eyes turned to the small blonde-headed boy in the front row. "Um, is it the opposite of a leap year?"

The teacher whacked his cane across Paterson's desk. "Stand up, boy. You have a mind like a sieve."

He shoved him over to the blackboard before turning back to the class. "Anyone else?"

Several hands went up. "Is it a hundred years?"

The teacher shook his head while tapping his cane again on Paterson's desk.

"A thousand?"

"A million?"

Pedro half-heartedly raised his hand.

"Yes, you, the new boy."

"It's the distance light travels in a year."

"What's your name, boy?"

"Err, Pedro Thorpe."

"All right, Mr Thorpe, perhaps you can tell us how far away the nearest star is."

"You mean apart from the sun?"

The teacher frowned.

“That’d be Alpha Centauri, or is it Proxima Centauri?”

“You tell me.”

“Um, Proxima I think, but I’d have to look it up to be sure.”

“You do that and tell us tomorrow what you find. Now do you know how far away they are?”

“About four and a half light years, I think.”

The teacher tapped his cane again. “You surprise me, Thorpe. Now can anyone else tell me what that means? What would we see tonight if Alpha Centauri went supernova right now?”

A boy at the back thrust his hand up. “Nothing, sir, because we’d all be blown to bits.” He clapped his hands together for emphasis.

The teacher’s face turned red.

“Oh wait, I get it now. It’d take four and a half years for the explosion to get here, and then we’d all be blown to bits.” He clapped his hands together again.

“Very good, Reeves, there’s hope for you yet.”

“What about the cosmic rays and stuff? Wouldn’t they get here before the light?”

“That’s a very good question and really gets to the crux of it all. Anyone?”

“Nothing can travel faster than the speed of light,” another boy said. “I heard that somewhere, I’m sure.”

“That’s right, well done! Einstein’s theory of relativity proved that nothing, not even information, can travel faster than light, so there’s no way we could know about that supernova until four and a half years after it happened.”

Pedro raised his hand again. “What about subspace?”

“What?”

“You could use subspace to find out about the supernova straight away. It’s pretty much instantaneous.”

“And what comic book did you read that in?”

“No, it’s true, sir, only, um, I guess it hasn’t been discovered yet, has it?”

“Stand up, Thorpe.”

Pedro stood as the teacher strode towards him.

“Don’t you *ever* contradict me in class again, do you understand?”

“But sir, subspace does exist, I swear. It’s a quadrature space to our own.”

“Hold out your hand, Thorpe.”

“Huh?”

The teacher whacked Pedro’s leg with the cane. “Hand out, palm up!”

Pedro cautiously raised his hand.

“There is –” WHACK! “– no such –” WHACK! “– thing as subspace.” WHACK! “Is that clear?”

“Um, yes sir.”

“Good, now sit and not another word from you.”

Pedro stared at him, taking in for the first time his blonde hair and pale, almost anaemic, complexion. A memory came to him from the deep past, a memory he shared with Peter from when they were one and the same. It had been seventy-seven years ago, hence right in this here and now in which he was living, yet it had been a different version of reality back then.

The principal, a thin energetic man in his late forties or early fifties, welcomed everyone back for the start of another year and gave a special welcome to the new students. He then introduced us to a new member of staff, a Mr Andrew Schilling who would be teaching science. At the mention of his name a chill went up my spine.

A chill indeed, he thought, because standing before him was that very same science teacher, that very same Andrew Schilling.

“You *know*, don’t you?” Pedro said before he could stop himself. “You know about subspace because you, you’re not human, you’re Eridanian!”

“What did you say?”

“What colour does your blood turn when you cut yourself, huh? It goes green, doesn’t it?”

“How dare you!” The teacher grabbed Pedro by the ear, pulling him out of his seat and towards the door. “The rest of you can read chapter three of your text books while I take this clown to explain himself to the headmaster.”

Once outside the classroom, he grabbed Pedro by the shoulders and pushed him back against the wall. “How is it you know about subspace and Eridanians?”

“It’s like you said, I read it in a comic book.”

“Don’t bullshit me. This school’s full of rogues and thugs so no-one will bat an eye-lid if some scruffy vagrant suffers an untimely accident.”

“Your real name’s Andushin, isn’t it?” Pedro said in Eridanian. “You and your Barradhim masters should be more than a little worried that this scruffy vagrant has blown your cover so easily. Perhaps, *sir*, it might be worth your while to find out how that’s happened before you start arranging accidents.”

“What is it you want?”

“I have to get out of here.”

“Impossible.”

“Nothing’s ever impossible. I know who it is you’re looking for.”

Schilling’s jaw dropped. “You, you mean Dodo?”

Pedro nodded. “I can help you find him.”

“How?”

“I want to join up with you; I want to become a Barradhim agent.”

Mysteries

“That was odd,” Michael Thorpe said as he hung up the phone.

“Who was it?” Peter asked.

“That police sergeant from Katoomba. He wanted to know if you have a twin brother.”

Peter grimaced.

“What is it, son?”

“Um, nothing, just a dream I had, that’s all.”

“He also wanted to know if you’d be willing to be fingerprinted at the local police station here.”

“Huh?”

“He wouldn’t say why, only that he wanted to clear up a bit of a mystery.”

Peter shrugged. “Yeah, sure. It’s not like I’ve stolen anything or gotten into any mischief.”

“I should hope not,” Rachel said. “I don’t like it, though I suppose it’d only look suspicious if we didn’t cooperate.”

“He said it was nothing criminal and that the prints would be destroyed as soon as he’d finished with them.”

“It’s all very strange if you ask me, but –”

“It’s fine, Mum, really,” Peter said. “*No problema.*”

“The proper Spanish is *problema*, not *problemo*, Peter.”

“Whatever.”

“That reminds me,” Michael said. “That policeman also wanted to know if we had a relative of about Peter’s age named Pedro.”

“That’s Spanish for Peter.”

“Exactly.”

A light rain had begun to fall as they entered the Eastwood Police Station, making the interior seem excessively bright compared to the

gloom outside. The young policeman behind the counter grinned as they approached.

“I’m Michael Thorpe. Sergeant Kent from your Katoomba station asked me to bring my son in for fingerprinting.”

Bring him in for fingerprinting. Innocent or not, those words made Peter feel like a criminal, guilty beyond doubt of some unknown misdemeanour.

“Yes, he called earlier and said you’d be coming. Just bring the boy over here; it won’t take more than a minute or two.”

The policeman gently held Peter’s wrist, guiding his hand as he inked each finger and pressed it against the recording card. *My criminal record*, he thought as he stared at the five black prints, a pattern unique to him and him alone. *What was this all about? And who was the mysterious Pedro?*

“*Well don’t just sit there gawking,*” the boy in the dream had said, his imaginary twin brother who’d rescued him from the bush. Of course it hadn’t happened; he was just as much a figment of his imagination as the big hairy monster that had taken him away and fed him from a pot of stewed vegetables.

“The other hand now,” the policeman said, snapping Peter back to the present. *It was just a nightmare, a big long nightmare caused by being lost in the bush, and yet it was that imaginary twin who’d led him to safety.*

“Thanks very much,” the policeman said as he handed Peter a cloth to clean the ink from his fingers. “I’ll just fax it through to Sergeant Kent and then you can have the card as a keepsake.”

“It’ll be something to show your grandkids,” Michael said, ruffling Peter’s hair.

* * *

“Wiggins, come and see what you make of this,” Sergeant Kent said.

“What is it, sir?”

“The Peter Thorpe prints just came through from Eastwood. Please tell me I’m crazy.”

Constable Wiggins studied the fax in minute detail, comparing each print to those he'd taken from the boy calling himself Pedro. "I don't understand; they're a perfect match."

"As perfect as you'd ever hope to see."

"But even identical twins have different prints; they taught us that at the academy."

"That's right, so the only explanation is –"

"Peter and Pedro are the same person, but, but how can he be in Eastwood with his parents while locked away up here at Sunnygrove?"

"I think we should go and check up on their new inmate, don't you?"

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" the principal of Sunnygrove asked while beckoning Sergeant Kent and Constable Wiggins into his office. "I hope it's not more trouble with the Pritchard boy."

"No, no, Pritchard's been keeping his nose clean of late. I'm a confirmed sceptic, but perhaps he really has seen the error of his ways and turned over a new leaf."

"I'm pleased to hear it. We try our best here, as I'm sure you know, but there are always one or two who are just, well, beyond redemption."

"Of course. No, it's the new boy you received last week, Pedro Thorpe."

"I'm sorry, John, but you're about an hour too late. His parents came to collect him first thing this morning. Of course his real name was something quite different –"

He shuffled through the folders stacked on the corner of his desk. "Here it is. Theodore Grant, he turned out to be. He said his mates had put him up to posing as that lost boy, on account of his resemblance."

Sergeant Kent scratched his head. "Did, um, did his parents leave an address?"

"Indeed they did. Let me write it out for you. He's not in any serious trouble, is he?"

"No, it's just a bit of a mystery I'd like to clear up if I can."

“Well good luck with it; I know how annoying loose ends can be.”

“They’re the bane of my life, that’s for sure. Thanks for your help.”

“Any time, John.”

The policemen had almost left the office when the headmaster called them back.

“There is one thing that struck me as peculiar, John. It’s hardly worth mentioning but, since I know you’re a stickler for details, well —”

“What is it?”

“It’s just that the boy had thick brown hair and a moderately dark complexion, yet both his parents were blonde and very pale-skinned. Odd, don’t you think?”

“He might have been adopted, or perhaps the product of an earlier marriage.”

“Of course; I should have thought of that myself.”

“That all sounds pretty plausible, sir,” Wiggins said as they walked down the front steps, “except for the fingerprints.”

“Exactly. How the devil can that boy, whatever his name is, have the same damn prints as Peter Thorpe?”

“It’s beyond me, sir.”

“By rights we shouldn’t even be pursuing this since no crime’s been committed, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let go until I have some proper answers.” He pulled out the slip of paper the principal had given him. “Let’s hear what Mr and Mrs Grant have to say.”

“This can’t be right, sir,” Wiggins said as they pulled up outside the Grant residence in Springwood. The house, an old weatherboard property that had seen better days, sat on an overgrown block with a fading *For Sale* sign barely poking its head above the long grass and weeds.

“This case just keeps getting more and more curious. See if there’s any sign of recent visitors, then we’ll check out the estate agent and find out who really owns this place.”

Wiggins picked his way through the weeds to the front porch, before stooping over to inspect the steps leading up to it. “Sir, I think you’d better take a look at this.”

“What is it?”

“A couple of footprints, but they’re, like, weird. Someone walked up here with muddy bare feet, see, but on each foot the middle toe’s the longest.”

“Go and grab the camera from the car, and that ruler to show the size of them.”

Sergeant Kent stretched, feeling a twinge in his back. *Rain’s coming*, he thought. This investigation was fast going beyond his level of authority, if it hadn’t done so already, and by rights he should be handing it over to a detective inspector. *But what could he say?* A vagrant child, giving a false name, had been reclaimed by his parents. If it wasn’t for those fingerprints and now this odd footprint –

“Damn loose ends!” he said to no-one in particular.

“Sorry sir?”

“Nothing, Wiggins. This whole business is giving me the heebie jeebies, that’s all.” He took the ruler from the constable and placed it alongside the first footprint. “Let’s get this over with; then we can go see the estate agent and track down the owner of this dump.”

* * *

“They’ve gone,” Pedro said, stepping back from the front window of the house.

“It would’ve been better if you hadn’t involved the police,” Mrs Grant said.

“I didn’t; they involved me. Anyway, I think they spotted one of your footprints on the front steps.”

“Andrew, you really must try to keep your shoes on when you go outside.”

“Damn Earthlings and their strange anatomy,” Andrew Schilling said. “I must get back to the school now as I have a class this afternoon. Don’t let the boy out of your sight.”

“So what happens now?” Pedro asked.

“You’ll be taken to Eridani as soon as we can arrange a ship,” Mr Grant said, “but until then you’ll be lying low here and keeping out of trouble.”

“You could’ve at least come up with a better name for me than Theodore. I mean, really.”

“Consider yourself lucky that we’ve taken you in at all. If it wasn’t for Andrew’s insistence that you might be useful to us, you’d have been quietly terminated already.”

“That would be unwise.”

“Why do you say that?”

Pedro just lowered his head, staring at his toes as he wiggled them in their new-found freedom.

“How much do you know about us?” Mrs Grant asked.

“You’re Eridanian, obviously, and you serve someone named Barrad who’s a descendent of the Barefooters from Meridian and Cornipus. Is that enough?”

“Are you a Barefooter yourself?”

“To be honest I don’t know what I am, but on the whole that’d seem likely, don’t you think?” He wiggled his toes again for effect.

“I’m sure our instructors will be able to resolve that for you.”

Pedro shrugged.

At that moment the communicator on the table beeped. Mr Grant picked it up, mumbling a few words in Eridanian before completing the call. “A ship will be here in a couple of hours.”

“Here? You can hardly land it in the middle of suburbia without attracting undue attention.”

“Of course not. We have a secluded rendezvous place out in the bushland.”

* * *

Constable Wiggins squeezed the patrol car into a parking space in the main street of Springwood. Four shops down, nestled between a delicatessen and newsagent, stood Abernathy’s estate agency. Looking as if it had been renovated as recently as 1950, with ratty banners enticing passers-by to *View Now!* or buy the *Mountains’ Finest Investment Property*, he wondered how they’d managed to remain in business through the recent economic turmoil.

A young man, with a nose several sizes too big for his face, bared his teeth in what Wiggins thought was supposed to be a welcoming smile. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Sergeant Kent and this is Constable Wiggins," Kent said. "We're trying to contact the owners of a house you have listed for sale." He showed the clerk the piece of paper the Sunnybrook principal had written the address on.

"Let me just check for you."

He pulled a large bound book from under the counter and began leafing through it, first forwards and then backwards until finally pushing it aside with a puzzled expression on his face.

"I'm afraid we don't have anything listed at that address. Are you sure you have the right agency?"

"It has your *For Sale* sign out the front, although it looked like it had been there for quite some time."

"Let me just check with Mr Abernathy."

He disappeared into the gloomy office at the back of the shop. A minute later a withered old man who must have been well over a hundred shuffled out. "Can I see that address?" he asked in a loud raspy voice.

Kent held out the piece of paper at arm's length while he squinted at it through his Coke-bottle glasses.

"Now let me see, I did have that listed some time back, I'm sure, but it was sold."

"Do you remember who bought it? Was it anyone named Grant?"

"Grant? No, it was a business, one of those holding companies, I'm sure. It was something like *Tinker Bell*, but that's not quite it."

Kent and Wiggins gave each other puzzled looks while the old man started leafing through the book.

"Here it is. Tivinel Holdings was the company that bought it, though I'm not sure what they'd be doing with it as the land's zoned residential and they couldn't run any business from there. It struck me as rather peculiar back then, but we do get to see a lot of peculiar people in this game."

"Do you have any contact details for them?"

"Only a post office box in Sydney, that's all."

Kent jotted down the address in his notepad, though he doubted it'd be of any use. Experience had taught him to never discard any potential leads.

"What now?" Wiggins asked as they stepped back onto the street.

"We go back and take a closer look at that house."

* * *

Kent and Wiggins again pushed their way through the overgrown lawn to the front porch of the house.

"Serge, look," Wiggins said, coming to an abrupt halt at the steps. "Those footprints have gone."

"So they have; someone must have seen us photographing them and washed them off."

"Do you think they might still be here?"

"There's only one way to find out. I'll try the front door while you check around the back."

Wiggins gave him a doubtful look.

"Go on; if they had a dog it'd be barking already."

If anything, the side passage and back yard were even more overgrown than the front, making Wiggins more concerned about stepping on a snake than being attacked by a dog. He'd just reached the back corner of the house when a door slammed shut and, peering around the side, he saw a blonde-headed man and woman leading the Pedro boy across the yard to a gate at the back.

"Hey – hello – excuse me," he called out, but without turning they quickened their pace before passing through the gate and disappearing into the bushland behind the property.

"Serge, around here, quickly!" he yelled, turning his head towards the front of the house. "They're getting away!"

A moment later, Kent appeared around the front corner. "Don't just stand there, Wiggins, go after them!"

His fear of snakes forgotten, Wiggins took off through the tall grass and weeds.

"Sir, look," Wiggins said, pointing to the muddy ground in front of him. "There are more of those strange footprints."

"One of them looks normal, though; probably the boy."

“I think you’re right. We should’ve brought the camera with us.”

“Too late for that now. Keep following them.”

The track descended down a series of rock steps into a gully before crossing a small stream and climbing out the other side.

“I can see now why they’re all barefoot,” Wiggins said, staring at his muddy boots and the wet cuffs on his trousers. “Do you have any idea where they might be going?”

“It beats me; there’s nothing out here but trees and scrub.”

“Could it be a marijuana crop?”

“It’s secluded enough but I don’t think so; they know we’re following them and would hardly be leading us to it.”

“I guess not, but what else could it be?”

The track they were following emerged onto a rock ledge surrounded on all sides by thick scrub.

“Which way now?” Wiggins asked.

“Hush.” Sergeant Kent cupped his hands over his ears. “Can you hear that?”

“What? Hear what?”

“A faint humming and, um, and voices; I’m sure I heard voices.” He turned around, trying to discern the direction of the faint sounds. “They’re up through there.”

Wiggins squeezed around a particularly spikey bush, trying not to tear his uniform on it.

“This way,” Kent said from a couple of metres to his right. “There’s a bit of a gap through here.”

The scrub parted again to form a rough track leading directly up to the top of the ridge. The humming noise grew louder as they approached.

“What do you think –”

“Shush.”

Sergeant Kent suddenly stopped. He turned to Wiggins, waving him to crouch down alongside him. In front of them the scrub opened onto a large rock shelf spanning the top of the ridge. Standing not three metres away were the two adults and boy, but what had captured the gaze of the policemen was the small silver craft sitting alongside them. About the size of a minibus but more streamlined, it was the source of the humming sound they’d heard.

One of the adults was speaking to the boy in a melodic language that sounded a bit like Swedish but wasn't. The boy nodded, saying something in reply before turning and climbing on board the craft. The woman followed him in while the man did a cursory check around the perimeter of the craft before joining them.

The hatch swung back across the opening, merging seamlessly with the hull in a dull thump. A moment later the humming intensified as the craft slowly lifted off, rising to a height of about a hundred metres before disappearing in a flash of blue light. A loud crack like a close lightning strike caused the policemen to ram their hands over their ears.

"Did you –" Wiggins began, but Kent cut him off.

"I didn't see anything, and neither did you if you value your job."

Wiggins was sure, though, that his sergeant wouldn't let this be the end of the matter.

Eridani

“That was a bit risky jumping to subspace so close to the ground, wasn’t it?” Pedro asked as the bouncing of the craft gradually settled.

“It’s well within our safe operating limits and we’d rather not be detected on the primitive radar you people have.”

“I think those policemen may have seen us.”

“No matter; they won’t be telling anyone about what they saw if they want to keep their jobs.”

“With the rate their – I mean our – technology’s advancing, it’ll only be a few years before someone discovers subspace anyway.”

“Our job is to make sure they don’t, or at least postpone it long enough so it won’t matter.”

Pedro stroked his chin. “What do you mean?”

“We’re not at liberty to say, at least not until you’ve proved your worth to the syndicate.”

Pedro closed his eyes, wondering how he was ever going to extricate himself from this. Charon the ferryman had sent him back into this time for a reason, he was sure, but he doubted if flying off to Eridani to join the camp of the enemy was what he had in mind.

“Why don’t you make it easy for yourself and just tell us where to find the Dodo boy?” Mr Grant asked.

“If I did, you’d have no reason to keep me alive.”

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about us, but we’re not all cold-blooded killers.”

Pedro shrugged. “I’m not yet ready to take your word on that, but don’t worry, I’ll lead you to Dodo when I’m sure it’s in my best interest to do so.”

Pedro thought he had his head around his eighty-year leap back in time, until the craft dropped out of subspace and he caught his first glimpse of Eridani. A few days earlier by his reckoning, when he’d

arrived at that planet with the Collins family and friends, it had oceans in both hemispheres, but now one of those had gone. In its place was the Great Southern Desert, for the ocean restoration wouldn't begin for another twenty-two years from his present place in time. After all Jim had told him of the trials and tribulations faced by Norrie and his team in undertaking such a mammoth task, he had to force back a cry of despair at the thought of all that work being undone.

"What's wrong?" Mr Grant asked.

"The southern ocean –"

He grabbed Pedro around the shoulders, pushing him back against the wall. "How is it you know about that?"

"What? Me?"

"Leave him," Mrs Grant said. "There are others better equipped to deal with him."

"MG469, you're clear for descent. See you on the ground, Alvin."

Pedro stared at Mr Grant. "Alvin?"

"So?"

"Nothing."

The spacecraft dipped and began decelerating as Pedro tried to imagine the Grants done up as chipmunks, but somehow the image didn't fit. Grizzly bears, perhaps, but not chipmunks. He covered his mouth, trying not to laugh.

Below, the barren equatorial highlands gave way to forested foothills interspersed with huge lakes. From their vantage point in the outer fringes of Eridani's atmosphere, there was little visible evidence of civilisation.

"How will I get through customs and immigration?" Pedro asked. "I don't have a passport or anything."

"The government here doesn't believe they have enemies, so there's little in the way of security at the spaceports. The customs agency is more concerned with freight than passengers, but in any case we have operatives embedded in the bureaucracy to make sure no awkward questions are asked. Just keep your mouth shut and there'll be no problem."

"Whatever you say."

It was raining heavily as the craft touched down on a landing strip adjacent to one of the lakes. Mr Grant turned it towards the cluster of metal-clad buildings to the left of the strip before pulling up outside one and opening the hatch.

“You remain here,” he said to Pedro as he stepped from the craft and darted around the side of the hangar. A few moments later, the door across the front began rolling back. Mrs Grant eased herself into the pilot’s seat and rolled the craft inside.

Two Eridanian men were conversing with Mr Grant as his wife ushered Pedro from the craft. One of them glanced up at him, scowling, before re-joining the conversation.

“This way,” Mr Grant said, hurrying them out the back door and across a rain-swept car park to a small vehicle.

At the exit from the space port, they turned away from the lake along a narrow road winding its way through orchards and fields of grain. Although appearing tranquil and calm, the epitome of a peaceful society, Pedro knew this world and its people harboured dark secrets stretching back over thousands of years. He wondered how much the Grants really knew and, for that matter, how much he knew.

The road crossed a small stream before climbing into hillier terrain, the farmland now giving way to thick forest on either side. The rain eased as they rose, with occasional shafts of watery sunshine breaking through the clouds. After making a tight hairpin bend, they crossed the top of the ridge and began descending towards a sizeable township nestled either side of a broad river.

Although Pedro was sure there’d be many Eridanian towns looking much like this, he was in no doubt it was the one he’d just recently visited with Jim and Anton; the one they’d called *Angust*.

“Can we stop here for a moment?” Pedro asked as they approached the cemetery on the outskirts of town, and was surprised when their driver pulled over.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs Grant asked.

“There’s something here I, err, I need to see, I suppose.”

“Well don’t be too long.”

Mr Grant followed as he stepped beneath the stone archway at the entrance and along the sandy path leading through a grove of trees

towards a fountain splashing noisily at the far end. Lilies covered the pools of water identified as the *Memorial Ponds*, a contrast to the smelly weed-infested bogs he recalled from his previous visit.

Pedro turned to the right and stopped, staring at the carefully-mown lawn extending beyond the rows of more recent graves. He crouched down, running his fingers through the blades of grass covering the undisturbed soil.

Tears formed as he recalled the miserable sight of his friend tearing at those blades after discovering not only his own grave but that of his beloved wife. In that moment, Pedro had understood what it truly meant to suffer, fading into insignificance his own petty grievances with life and the universe. While Jim had sobbed himself dry in that deepening twilight, he'd sworn to cast aside forever his persona of Peter's *evil twin* and the terrible toll that grudge had taken, leaving him now to ponder once more the irony of his present predicament.

"There's no-one buried here," Mr Grant said. "This area's reserved for future expansion."

Pedro nodded, a grin now growing on his face. "He's not here."

"Who? Who's not here?"

"It means he's still alive."

"What are you talking about?"

"Me? Nothing." He ran his fingers through the grass again, galvanising his belief that his friend Jim was alive on this planet, in this very town most likely, and wouldn't be buried beneath where he now crouched for another sixty years. Whatever had propelled him back in time was real, as real as the blades of grass between his fingers and toes.

He stood, lifting his shirt and holding it with his teeth as he wiped his soiled hands against the skin of his stomach. "It's real; it's really real."

"Come on, we have to go."

"Yeah sure, I've seen all I needed to." Casting one final glance back at the patch of grass, he followed Mr Grant to the waiting car.

Pedro stared out the window as they drove slowly through the quiet back streets of Angust. On the left was a park where groups of

children kicked balls to each other; he was pretty sure it was the same park Jim had pointed out on their first visit. *Could one of those children be Jim?* He thought it unlikely, though, as Jim would have been fourteen, the same age as himself, but those children looked mostly younger.

The car turned into a side-street. Although Pedro was quite fluent in spoken Eridanian, he'd had little contact with their written language and it was mostly just a bewildering array of squiggles and lines to him. The street sign did look familiar, though, familiar enough to recall a name. *Benton Road.*

As if replaying a bad dream, the car pulled up in front of a modest brick and tile dwelling. It looked a lot newer than Pedro recalled, and the trees in the garden were smaller or non-existent, but the house was unmistakable.

"These people are Barradhim administrators," Mr Grant said. "They'll know what to do with you."

"Huh?"

"Just come inside and keep your wits about you."

An elderly man opened the door, but it wasn't the man Pedro was expecting to see. He wiped his suddenly perspiring forehead as his surroundings seemed to waver for a moment.

"What's this you've brought here?" the old man asked.

"Andushin found him; he knows a lot more about us than any Earthling should."

"And yet he still lives?"

"He claims to know where Dodo is hiding."

"I see; bring him in."

Pedro remembered the layout of the house as they led him inside, although the furnishings were different. A teenaged boy sitting on the armrest of a sofa stared open-mouthed at him before jumping to his feet.

"What's this, this *thing*?"

"Be quiet, Jameed," the old man said.

"But Grandfather —"

"Go fetch your parents and close your mouth before you swallow a gnat."

The boy glared again at Pedro before turning and running from the room.

Jameed.

“Jim and Pedro, meet Jameed,” Anton had said to the elderly man who’d opened the door on their first visit.

“Jim, did you say? Don’t I know you?”

“I, um, I don’t think so,” Jim had blustered, making Pedro certain they’d known each other quite well in spite of their seventy-six-year age difference. Yet Anton had described the elderly Jameed as a former Barradhim operative, so what was his connection to Jim?

Pedro wiped his brow again as Jameed returned to the room with his parents.

The boy’s father stared at him. “You already know too much to be allowed to live. What you say now will only determine the timing of your execution.”

Pedro nodded, before wondering whether that gesture would be recognised by Eridanians. “Yes, I understand. I want to join your organisation.”

“Impossible.”

Pedro took a slow deep breath, all the while staring at the man’s eyes. “I know who and where the carrier of the Dodo spirit is, and only I can lead you to him.”

“What makes you think we can’t find him ourselves? We have powerful allies on your planet.”

“Do you know anything of time cusps?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve spent seventy years inside one and have seen your future. Without me, you will never find Dodo and, through him and the Emu carrier Billy Collins, your organisation will be destroyed.”

Pedro couldn’t help noticing the man’s flinch at the mention of Billy’s name.

“That’s a lie!” Jameed said. “Time cusps last at most a few weeks and have no value to anyone.”

“That’s usually so,” his grandfather said, “but much longer ones are not unknown. Perhaps this Earth child could tell us how our demise will come to pass.”

Pedro furrowed his brow, trying to recall the historical documents he'd read while travelling between galaxies with Jim. "Dodo and Billy will close the subspace tunnel in your southern hemisphere desert, thwarting Barrad's plan to destroy this world, and will defuse the supernova threatening the Firstborn's planet. The Firstborn will return to this galaxy as living beings and Billy's son will defeat Barrad himself."

Jameed glared at Pedro with murder in his eyes. "No-one can defeat Barrad!"

"Ah, the certainty of youth," his grandfather said. "Only a fool considers himself invincible, dear boy. Now tell me, Earth child, when these things come to pass, what will happen to this world's southern desert?"

"The ocean will be restored and the foreshore resettled by the Southern Eridanians."

All eyes turned to Jameed's grandfather. "Is that possible?"

The old man placed a hand on Pedro's shoulder. "Perhaps, yes, what this child has said is plausible, however unlikely it may be. You must do as he asks."

Jameed glared again at Pedro but the stern gaze of his father quenched any further outburst.

"Very well," Jameed's father said, "but he'll need training. We'll take him to the forest tomorrow."

Pedro tried to hide his sigh of relief. "Thank you. I'll make sure you don't regret this."

"Either way you still die."

"I want to be the one to kill it," Jameed said.

"Be careful what you wish for," his grandfather said, casting an uneasy eye at Pedro.

* * *

Pedro stepped from the car, taking note of the other vehicles parked alongside the abandoned farmhouse and the group of adult and teenaged Eridanians milling around on the veranda. Their vigorous conversation halted as they turned as one to gawk at the newcomer.

Pedro wondered why he looked so strange to Eridanian eyes, when Eridanians could quite easily pass as Earthlings provided they kept their feet covered, but chuckled once he realised what it was. All northern Eridanians had blonde hair, supposedly a legacy of their sun's low ultraviolet output, making his own brown locks a stark point of contrast. He expected the reappearance of the dark-skinned southern Eridanians in a decade or two would come as quite a cultural shock for these people, before realising with growing despair that, if his mission with the Barradhim succeeded, that event would never come to pass.

He turned to watch another vehicle pulling in to join them. As the door opened, his jaw dropped and his eyes seemed to pop right out of his head, for stepping out was the most wondrous creature he'd ever seen.

In Pedro's first incarnation as a physics' school drop-out, he'd been lured to the infamous Darlinghurst Road in Sydney's Kings Cross, seeking out the nocturnal purveyors of all things erotic. But the flame within had failed to ignite, those gaudy trollops with their porcelain-doll faces and penchant for orthopedically-cataclysmic footwear evoking pity rather than lust. When an increasingly exasperated prostitute offered him a full refund if he promised never to return, he'd turned away, instead devoting himself to drinking the local ale houses dry.

He'd thought at the time that his failing had been part and parcel of the damaged being Peter Thorpe had created in his tampering with the course of history, but in hindsight, Peter's love life had been no better than his. Some element of their shared genetic makeup, intent on self-eradication, had ensured there'd be no contribution to the gene pool from that branch of the Thorpe family.

The girl stepping from the vehicle was unlike any Pedro had seen. Tussled by the breeze, her wavy blonde hair sparkled in the sunlight as she raised her head, while her penetrating eyes and the inquisitive set of her mouth hinted at an intellect to match his own. Her practical attire of tank top and shorts, along with her strongly toned calves, ankles and toes, spoke of an affinity to outdoor living and adventure;

if ever there was a woman so diametrically opposed to the denizens of Darlington Road, this was her.

“She’s an attractive one, I’ll grant you that,” Jameed’s grandfather said to him, “but I’d be careful if I were you.”

“Huh? Me? Why?”

“She’s Jameed’s school friend, that’s all.”

“Oh, I see.”

At that moment Jameed’s father stepped forward, drawing everyone’s attention. “I think we’re all here now, so to begin I’d like you to welcome two newcomers today. The off-worlder with the dark hair is from a primitive planet they call Earth, and for reasons still unclear, wishes to join us. What is it they call you?”

“Pedro.”

“Strange names from a strange place indeed, but since we may have business to perform on that world in the months and years ahead, it would perhaps be wise to study his mannerisms and idiosyncrasies.”

Pedro shrugged.

“Our other newcomer is of course the lovely young lady my son invited to join with us today. Please welcome Elissi Harrish to our group.”

The sound of gentle applause washed over Pedro as his eyes rolled up and he suddenly found himself face down in the dirt.

Elissi

Pedro pulled himself upright, brushing dust from his chest and running his hands through his hair as he tried to collect himself.

Elissi Harrish: it was a name he was very familiar with. The wife of Todd Myers, she'd been instrumental in resolving Eridani's southern hemisphere crisis, had led Billy and Peter to the Firstborn's planet, restoring the Emu and Dodo spirits as living beings, and ultimately had become Eridani's High Councillor. Yet here she was at the beginning of it all, battling on the other side!

"What happened to you?" Jameed's grandfather asked.

"I don't know; maybe I'm not used to the gravity or atmospheric pressure here."

"Let me kill it before it dies of natural causes," Jameed said, but Pedro couldn't help grinning when he noticed Elissi's glare of disdain in response.

Jameed's father blew a whistle, a sharp shrill sound almost causing Pedro to topple over again. "Everyone gather round while I brief you on today's task."

When all the jostling was done, Pedro found himself standing on one side of Elissi with Jameed on the other. Jameed whispered something unintelligible to her, causing her to glance at Pedro with raised eyebrows before turning to the front. Pedro tried unsuccessfully to stop himself blushing.

"In the forest between here and the creek live ground-dwelling birds," Jameed's father began, "which build mounds of rotting leaves to incubate their eggs. They're not especially afraid of people, as our ancestors didn't find them particularly appetizing, but they're rather shy and difficult to catch.

"You'll be split into groups of three and each given a cage. Your task is to capture one of those birds."

Jameed stared at Pedro. “Dad, do they eat meat? Can I use the Pedro creature as bait?”

“No, their diet consists mostly of nuts and seeds; the cassata nut is one of their favourites so you could try those if you can find them. But as for the Pedro creature, you and Elissi will be teaming with him so I suggest you put aside your differences and concentrate on the task at hand.”

“But Dad –”

“There’ll be no argument. Come and collect your cage.”

Jameed made sure to elbow Pedro in the ribs as he walked past, while Elissi shook her head and sighed.

“What do those *cassette* nuts look like?” Pedro asked as they ambled down into the forest.

“Cassata?” Elissi said. “They’re oval-shaped and about four cubics in size.”

“How big’s a cubic?”

“About the size of your brain,” Jameed said.

“That’s one over there,” Elissi said, grabbing Pedro by the arm and pulling him aside before he had a chance to plant his fist into Jameed’s mouth.

Pedro picked up the nut, trying to think of a suitable retort for Jameed but failing. “I’ll gather a few more of these while you two try to find one of those bird mounds.”

Elissi flashed him a smile before turning back to Jameed.

“I say we put the cage on top of the mound with a trail of cassatas leading into it,” Jameed said.

Pedro shrugged, pulling the nuts from the pocket of his shorts and handing them to him. Jameed took great care to ensure his fingers didn’t touch Pedro’s skin.

“Scared you’ll catch something, are you?” Pedro said. “Well you needn’t worry; the biology of our planets is sufficiently different that cross-contamination can’t happen.”

“I’m not afraid of *anything*.”

Pedro shrugged again.

“Is there something wrong with your shoulders?” Elissi asked.

“Oh brother.”

Elissi tapped Pedro on the shoulder while pointing into the bushes with her other hand. A brown bird, about the size of a duck, crept slowly forward before scurrying across the open forest floor to the mound. After glancing for a moment at the open cage, it dismissed it as non-threatening and started pecking at the ground. Upon discovering the first of the cassata nuts, it looked around, perhaps suspecting it might be a trap, before cracking the nut in its beak and gulping down the kernel.

Jameed tensioned the twine tied to the cage door trigger as the bird crept into the opening to retrieve the last nut, but it sensed the slight movement and started backing out. He tugged and, in a flurry of squawking, feathers and scattered twigs, the door crashed down. When the dust settled, the cage remained empty save for the uneaten nut and the bird was nowhere to be seen.

“That was your fault,” Jameed snapped at Pedro.

“Huh?”

He tugged hard on the twine, causing the cage to topple off the mound with a metallic clatter. “Useless bloody contraption!”

“Stop it!” Elissi said. “If you make any more noise there won’t be a bird within fifty parsecs of here.”

Pedro smirked. “Jameed, where I come from they reckon the only way to catch a bird is to put salt on its tail.”

“Salt?”

“You know, sodium chloride, or don’t you have it on this planet?”

“Sure we do. Why don’t you go get some so we can try it?”

“Where?”

“The kitchen, you idiot!”

“Oh, right.”

Pedro dashed back up the hill.

“Can I help you?” Jameed’s grandfather asked.

“Yeah, I, um, I’m looking for the kitchen. Jameed wants me to get some salt.”

“To put on the bird’s tail, no doubt.”

“Yes. How’d you guess?”

“When you get to my age, you hear all sorts of grandmother tales.”

“On Earth we call them *old wives’ tales*.”

“Tell me, did you put him up to this?”

“I, um, I might have said something –”

The old man laughed. “It should be amusing to watch; you must tell me what happens.”

“Oh, right, yes, I will.”

“Just wait here and I’ll get the salt for you.”

“Is that going to be enough?” Jameed asked as Pedro handed him the salt container.

“It will be if you don’t spill it.”

Jameed glared at him. “Put some cassata nuts over there at the base of the mound while I hide in the bushes.”

Elissi joined Pedro as he wandered off to scavenge for nuts. “Do you think this’ll really work?”

“Of course not; it’s just some silly folklore but it’ll keep him amused for a while.”

“That’s mean.”

“And he isn’t?”

Elissi turned away, picking up a handful of fallen nuts before returning to the mound. Pedro sighed.

“Where is that rotten bird?” Jameed said from amongst the bushes.

“Keep quiet or it’ll never come,” Elissi said.

As if to prove her wrong, a scratching noise from the scrub on the other side of the mound heralded the return of their quarry. After looking nervously around, it dashed to the top of its mound, checking that its incubating eggs were undisturbed.

After a painstakingly long time, it finally spied the pile of cassata nuts in front of where Jameed was hiding and came down to investigate.

While it pecked away at the nuts, Jameed crept out of his hide, the salt container held in front of him at arm’s length. Holding his breath, he reached out and tipped the entire contents onto the bird’s tail.

It immediately stopped pecking, standing absolutely still as if turned to stone. Jameed grinned as he eased forward with hands outstretched to grab it.

“It actually works!” Elissi whispered, her hand covering her mouth.

“I don’t believe this,” Pedro said.

Just as Jameed's hands were about to make contact, the bird flicked its tail, propelling the salt into his face. He screamed, thrusting his hands over his eyes, while the bird turned, squawked at him and strutted off into the scrub.

"Don't rub your eyes!" Elissi yelled, dashing over to him with her water bottle. "Wash the salt off with this."

Jameed grabbed the bottle, pouring its contents over his face before throwing it into the scrub after the bird.

"That went well," Pedro said. "I'll go find some more nuts."

Holding back the urge to start roaring with laughter, he dashed off into the forest before Jameed or Elissi could say anything.

Pedro took his time scouring the forest for cassata nuts, until the weight of them in his pockets started causing his loose-fitting shorts to slip down his buttocks. He returned to find Jameed and Elissi piling up thorny branches alongside the mound.

"What's all this?"

"Just shut up and give me your nuts," Jameed said, glaring at him before turning back to his handiwork.

"I didn't think you fancied me," Pedro said before he could stop himself. Jameed poked his tongue out at him, snarled and returned to work.

"I'll take them," Elissi said.

Blushing at the thought of her gentle caress on his nuts, Pedro reached into his pockets, only to have his shorts suddenly yield to the force of gravity and drop to the ground.

"Oh my," she said, covering her mouth.

"Not those nuts, you moron," Jameed said.

In the shock of what had happened, Pedro took half a step backwards, placing his left heel on the leg of his shorts, so his first attempt at pulling them up resulted in him toppling head-first into the mound.

Spitting out a mouthful of rotting leaves, he kicked his shorts completely off, emptied the nuts out of the pockets and handed them to Elissi.

"What?" he said as they both stared at him.

“Bloody troglodyte,” Jameed said, gazing at Pedro’s genitalia for a moment longer before shaking his head and returning to his stack of branches.

“So what is this thing?” Pedro asked, having managed to put his shorts back on without further mishap.

Two rows of the thorny branches ran from the mound to where the open cage was sitting concealed under a bush. Elissi was laying a trail of cassata nuts from the top of the mound to its entrance.

“The bird comes into the funnel following the nuts,” Jameed said, “then when it gets halfway along, you jump out and scare it. Having nowhere else to go, it dashes into the cage to hide and hey, presto, we have our bird.”

“But –” Pedro said.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Um, no, but –”

“Then shut up and go hide over there.”

“I’m hungry,” Pedro whispered.

“Shush.”

The bird emerged from the other side of the clearing, once more looking around before dashing to the top of the mound. It scratched about, pecking at twigs and leaves, until spying the first of the cassata nuts. After breaking it open and eating the kernel, it followed the trail into the funnel opening, just as Jameed had planned.

“Go!” he whispered, and Pedro leapt out of his hiding place, waving his arms about at the opening of the funnel to prevent the bird from going back the way it had come.

“Aaaargh!” Pedro shouted, trying to make it run down the funnel and hide in the cage, but instead it squawked, flapped its wings and flew up into an overhanging tree. After another squawk it disappeared.

“Idiot!” Jameed shouted as he charged into Pedro and tackled him head on.

“It’s a friggin’ bird! What did you expect?”

“But it’s supposed to be ground-dwelling!”

“So what? On Earth we have plenty of ground-dwelling birds that can still fly if they have to.”

“What about your emu and dodo?” Elissi asked. “They’re flightless, aren’t they?”

Jameed pulled the punch he’d been about to throw at Pedro’s nose, instead rolling off him and staring up at her, while Pedro closed his eyes, sure that if he’d been standing he would have toppled over again.

Jameed pulled himself upright. “How is it you know about Emu and Dodo?”

Elissi stared at him while Pedro held his breath. The whole forest seemed to pause, as if this was one of those momentous turning-points in the history of the universe.

“Don’t be an idiot, Jameed,” she said, reaching down to help Pedro to his feet. “*Say nothing*,” she whispered in his ear while giving him a quick hug.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Jameed shouted.

“Who, me?” she said. “I like his nuts.”

A shrill whistle sounded from the top of the ridge.

“Game over, I think,” Elissi said, taking Pedro by the hand and leading him upwards. Jameed followed a few paces behind, quietly fuming.

The assorted groups reassembled outside the farmhouse, all holding empty cages. That no-one else had succeeded lifted Jameed’s spirits as he trotted over to compare failure stories with the others.

“What are you doing here?” Pedro asked Elissi after making sure they were out of earshot of anyone else.

“I should be asking you the same question. The old man will be furious when he finds out you’re here.”

“Who? Your father?”

“No, Elko, you fool.”

“Oh, right.”

“The essence you carry is supposed to be kept hidden, or hasn’t anyone told you?”

“What essence? Oh, you think I’m Peter, don’t you?”

“You mean you’re not?”

“I’m his twin, but don’t ask how that happened because I don’t know.”

“Gosh. But what are you doing here?”

“I was trying to protect him, but things kind of got out of hand.”

“In what way?”

“These people now want me to lead them to him.”

“That’s not good.”

“I was hoping you might be able to help me out of this.”

Jameed’s father blew his whistle, ending their conversation.

“I see you’ve all failed in your quests,” he said as Jameed wandered back over to join them. “Does anyone know why?”

“The birds are just too timid,” one boy said.

“The cage is too small,” said another.

“The damn birds can fly,” Jameed offered.

“Enough,” Jameed’s father said. “You’re all blaming the birds or your equipment, but that’s just a crutch. The failing was of your own making, nothing more, nothing less. The world won’t simply behave the way we want it to; we have to make that happen, and if we fail, it’s we who have failed, not the world.”

“So how do you catch the bloody things?” Jameed asked.

“Watch and learn. Jameed, give me that cassata nut.”

Jameed removed the leftover nut from his cage, while his father cupped his hands around his mouth and squawked.

“Everybody remain quiet and still.”

An answering squawk came from the forest, followed shortly after by one of the birds. Jameed’s father called again, holding up the cassata nut. The bird glanced around at the group of people before trotting forward and reaching out for the offered nut.

He stroked the bird’s feathers as it ate, then casually picked it up in both hands, carried it over to Jameed and placed it in the cage. “Boys and girls, that’s how it’s done.”

“But, but how?”

“You cheated!”

“That’s impossible!”

“No, it’s called *planning* and *preparation*.”

“You trained the bird,” Pedro said.

“In a way, yes. I befriended it, became a source of food and comfort, and in return it allowed me to pick it up and put it in the

cage. I became *non-threatening* to it, and that's the lesson I want you to take home and ponder."

"I know what they're up to," Elissi said to Pedro when they were once again out of earshot of the others.

"They're preparing to send one of them to Earth to befriend and beguile Peter."

"And they just need you to show them the way."

"We have to stop them."

"On the contrary, we have to encourage them in every way."

"Huh?"

"We have to make sure *I'm* the one they send."

* * *

One by one, Jameed's father and grandfather called each of the participants into the building for a debriefing, leaving Jameed, Elissi and Pedro to the last.

"What are you going to tell them?" Pedro asked Elissi after Jameed had been summoned in.

"The truth."

"All of it?"

"No, of course not, but I'm sure Jameed will be blaming you for everything that went wrong and I'll be trying to set the record straight."

"Thanks. So, um, are you and Jameed, like involved?"

"What?"

"Is there a romantic attachment?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"He seems very possessive of you, that's all."

"Nah, he's in my class at school and asked me to come along; my parents thought it was too good an opportunity to pass up."

Pedro nodded. "My parents don't even know I exist, not at this point in time at any rate."

"Gosh, I couldn't imagine what that would be like."

Pedro shrugged. "I'm starting to wonder if I might be just a figment of Peter's imagination."

“Surely not,” she said, taking hold of his hands. “You’re solid and warm enough, and I dare say your nose would’ve bled if Jameed’s punch had connected.”

“The people back in 2066 are probably saying the same thing, but Jim and I didn’t really exist there.”

“I don’t know; you’re real enough to me.”

She almost kissed him but turned away as the door banged open.

Jameed bounded down the steps towards Pedro. “You’re dead meat, troglodyte.”

Elissi scowled at him. “What did you tell them?”

“Only the truth.”

Pedro muttered something under his breath.

“What did you say?”

“I said you wouldn’t know the truth if it jumped up and bit you on the nose.”

Jameed raised his fists, but before he could throw a punch, his grandfather poked his head out the door. “Elissi, your turn.”

“You two, just cool it, okay? I don’t want to come back out and find one or both of you with bloody noses.”

Jameed glared at Pedro, before kicking at a clump of grass and stomping off to join another group of Barradhim youths.

* * *

“What do you think?” Jameed’s grandfather asked the other Barradhim after finishing with Elissi.

“None are anything like ready.”

“Barrad is growing nervous and wants us to move soon. The arrival of that Earth boy is the strongest lead we’ve had and we should press our advantage.”

“What did you make of his reaction to our lovely Elissi?”

“Head over heels at first sight, literally.”

“Andushin suspects there might be a family connection between him and the Dodo carrier, so she may be a good choice, at least for making initial contact.”

“Is she trustworthy? After all, she’s only just joined us.”

“Her parents are well-respected, but who knows where a young lady’s heart may lead? We should send another to keep an eye on her.”

“Barden?”

“No, he’s too boisterous and clumsy.”

“Willy?”

“Too officious; the Dodo boy will think he’s being arrested rather than befriended.”

“What about Jameed?”

“Isn’t he a little young?”

“No younger than Andushin when he was sent to Earth, and he does have a certain animosity towards the boy that I’m sure we could nurture.”

“And he’s dead-set jealous of the boy’s attraction to Elissi.”

The grandfather scratched his chin. “That could make it a very volatile mixture.”

Pedro knocked on the door before entering.

“Take a seat, young man. We were just discussing who should accompany you on your mission.”

“Oh, right.”

“So how did you find working with Jameed?”

Pedro covered his face. “Where do I start? No offence, but he’s impulsive, reactionary and all too eager to blame his failings on others.”

“But apart from that?”

“Well, I suppose he’s doggedly persistent.”

Jameed’s grandfather nodded. “You’ll be pleased to know, then, that he’ll be accompanying you to Earth.”

“What?”

“Along with the lovely Elissi.”

“Yes, but, but how, why?”

“Good, I’m glad you’re in agreement. Now we just need to discuss some of the logistics with you, as well as prepare their language and cultural training. We’ll no doubt require your input on that as we proceed.”

“How long do we have?”

“Barrad is eager to move as soon as possible, so three or four weeks at most.”

“You can’t be serious! How can they possibly learn enough of our culture and language to pass as locals in that short a time?”

“They’ll be posing as foreigners in your country, Swedish I believe as their language most closely resembles ours, and the rest shouldn’t be difficult. Don’t underestimate our learning ability.”

“Oh brother.”

* * *

“Come with me,” Jameed said to Elissi.

“What? Where?”

“Back to the bird mound. I want to try something.”

“All right then, but this had better be good.”

As they descended into the forest, Jameed kept scouring the leaf litter on either side.

“What are you looking for?”

“This,” he said, picking up a small forked tree branch.

“What’s it for?”

He pulled a heavy rubber band from his pocket, tying it to either side of the fork and testing its strength.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“Teach the bloody bird a lesson it won’t forget in a hurry.”

“You’re crazy.”

Jameed grinned. “Grab some rocks for me.”

They stood amongst the bushes near the mound, watching the bird tend to its eggs. Elissi held out her hand, stopping him from moving forward.

“I can’t get a clear enough shot at it from here; I need to move closer.”

“No, it’ll see you and disappear for sure.” She glanced around. “Why don’t you climb that tree? It won’t be expecting an attack from above.”

“Good thinking.”

He tucked his slingshot into the waistband of his shorts, filled his pockets with rocks and shimmied up the tree.

Elissi peered up at him. "Go a bit higher if you can."

He pulled himself up another couple of branches.

"That's good. Can you get a clear shot?"

"Almost." He crept out a bit further along the branch before loading his slingshot and taking aim.

"Easy now; don't rush it."

Just as he was about to release, Elissi sneezed. The bird took fright, dashing down the mound towards the scrub, while Jameed leaned over to compensate. The rock flew, missing its target by a good metre, but for Jameed, already off-balance, the recoil was enough to topple him from his perch. As Elissi watched with her hand over her mouth, he crashed through the lower branches before landing heavily at her feet.

He stared up at her, a puzzled look on his face as he tried to comprehend what was wrong. "Waah, my arm! I've broken it!"

"Don't move; I'll go and get help!"

* * *

"So tell me, Pedro," Jameed's mother said, "is the Dodo boy boisterous and self-opinionated like you?"

"No, he's pretty quiet and reserved."

"In that case, what if Jameed were to bully him and Elissi come to his rescue?"

Pedro scratched his chin. "That might work, I guess, only –"

Jameed's mother gasped.

"What's wrong?"

"Something's happened to Jameed; he's in terrible pain!"

All the Barradhim jumped to their feet and dashed for the door, leaving Pedro alone in the room. He stared into space, trying to make sense of what he'd just seen. *From everything he'd been told throughout his existence, Eridanians weren't supposed to be telepathic.*

Little Boy Lost

Peter Thorpe heard voices from behind, but kept walking.

“Look, it’s Little Boy Lost!”

“How do you lose unwanted flab?”

“I don’t know; how?”

“Send Thorpe on a bushwalk!”

“Good one. Hey, I found some bearings the other day.”

“Ball bearings?”

“No, Thorpe’s lost bearings.”

“Some people are losers, but he’s just *lost*.”

Peter knew that in a moment the singing would start, marking the end of his teasing for another day.

“And she prays to God in heaven for her Little Boy Lost.”¹

“I bet Thorpe’s mother was praying he’d stay lost!”

A sure sign it was starting to get to him, for a terrifying moment he thought that could have been true. His father had told him to ignore the teasing and they’d eventually grow tired and stop, but so far there’d been no let-up. Tiring, it seemed, was something the bully boys of Eastwood didn’t do.

He sighed as he turned down the side street towards home.

“Hi Mum,” he called out as he came in through the front door.

“Hi Peter. How was school?”

“Don’t ask.”

“That bad, huh? I hope –”

Before she could say what she hoped, the telephone rang. Peter dashed up the stairs to his room, unbuttoning his shirt and pulling off his school shoes and socks before she called him back down.

¹ From the song *Little Boy Lost*, written and performed by Johnny Ashcroft, 1960.

“It’s Danny for you. I think something’s wrong; he sounds upset.”

Peter picked up the handset. “Danny, what’s up?”

“Oh Peter, I don’t know how to tell you this. Steve, he – they called it an accident but –”

A cold dread erupted from within Peter’s core, freezing his nerve fibres as it spread outwards, consuming him. “Wh-what happened?”

“He – he was coming home from the park when a car stopped for him at the pedestrian crossing, but another overtook it on the inside and ran him down. They say the driver was drunk, but –”

“Is he badly hurt?”

“No, he’s – he’s d-dead.”

The breath in Peter’s lungs froze as the ice consumed him in its numbing grip. “Oh no, oh Danny, no –”

“The – the funeral’s on Friday afternoon, just so you know, but it’s a long way and you don’t have to – no-one’s expecting you to come, it’s just that I wanted you to know, like –”

“I – I’ll have to ask Mum. Oh Danny, I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s okay, Peter, I understand. I – I have to go now, all right?”

“Yeah, all right.”

“What’s wrong, honey?” Rachel asked as he hung up the phone, tears now rolling down his cheeks.

“St – Steve’s dead; he was run over by a d-drunk.”

“Oh Peter, I’m so sorry; this on top of everything else.”

“I, I have to go to the funeral, Mum.”

She hugged him. “You know we can’t afford to take you all the way to Brisbane and back.”

“Then I’ll go by myself on the train.”

“Don’t be silly; your heart’s in the right place, but –”

“Why not? Do you think I’ll get ... *lost*?”

Before she could stop him, he dashed out the door, leaping over the front fence and hurtling down the street in a mix of blind rage and grief. By the time he looked around to see where he was, he’d reached the reserve on the edge of the creek. Spying a fallen log at the water’s edge, he sat down, covering his face as the tears flooded out. His mind turned inward, back to that fateful day when he’d told his best friends he was moving to Sydney.

“But you can’t, Peter!” Danny said, jumping up and down in his state of perpetual agitation. “You can come and live with us, yes, he can come and live with us, can’t he, Steve?”

Steve looked up at him, as always a gentle half-smile on his face. “You’ll be fine, Peter, I know it. We’ll always be friends, no matter how far apart we are, so just go with the flow and don’t look back, okay?”

Peter, completely lost for words, just nodded.

“I know,” Danny said, “we can go to the New Year’s Eve fireworks the night before you leave and give you a proper send-off.”

Peter glanced at Steve, who nodded. “That’s a great idea, Danny. We’ll do that, for sure.”

“We’ll write to each other and stay in touch, I promise,” Steve said, “and I’m sure someday we’ll be visiting Sydney or you’ll be visiting here so we can catch up and reminisce on old times.”

“Yeah, we’ll do that.”

They’d kept their promise, exchanging letters every week or two, only it had always been Danny doing the writing. Each letter had ended with *Steve says hi* or *Steve misses you too*, but never anything from Steve himself. Peter had wondered about that but dared not ask, fearing the answer might be too painful. Now Steve had gone forever, leaving a vacuum of unanswered questions behind.

The sound of approaching footsteps roused Peter from his introspection. He turned to see a tall blonde girl standing behind him.

“Sorry, are you okay?” she asked.

Peter wiped his eyes. “Yeah, sure.”

“Oh, okay, only I thought –”

“No, sorry, I’ve just had some bad news, that’s all.”

“It must have been very bad.”

“One of my best friends back in Brisbane was, was killed.” He pulled out his handkerchief to blow his nose while trying his hardest not to start crying again.

“How terrible for you.” She sat down on the log beside him, rubbing her hand on his shoulder.

“Th – thanks.”

“My name is Ellie.”

“I’m Peter. I haven’t seen you around before.”

“My parents and I have just moved here from Sweden. Please forgive me if my English isn’t too good.”

“You’re doing fine, really. I wouldn’t have a clue how to speak Swedish.”

“Perhaps I could teach you.”

Peter smiled.

“Come and I’ll walk you back home,” she said, standing and reaching out to help him up.

“Thanks. So what do you think of Australia?”

“It’s so big and modern. Back home I lived in a small village in the mountains.”

“That sounds very nice, but I bet it was cold in the winter.”

“Winter? Yes, I suppose it was.”

“The winters here are hardly winters at all, but the summers are hot and humid.”

“I look forward to it. I hear that you have nice beaches.”

“In Brisbane I lived close to the sea and spent a lot of time in the surf, but here it’s not so easy. You have to take a train to the city then a bus or ferry to get to the beach.”

“The ferry sounds nice.”

“It is, but it’s a long trip.”

“Perhaps someday you can take me.”

Peter smiled. “Yes, perhaps.”

She stopped walking outside the gate to his house. “Here you are back home. It’s been nice to meet you, Peter.”

“Yes, thanks Ellie. Um, how’d you know I live here?”

“We’re in the units just over there and I was on my balcony when I saw you run off.”

“Oh, right.”

“Goodbye, Peter, and I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon.”

“Yes, we will, I’m sure.”

Elissi watched him go inside before looking up at Pedro, who was standing on the balcony, grinning.

“Eck,” Elissi said, pulling off her shoes as soon as she entered the unit. “I don’t know how you Earthlings can stand wearing these things.”

“I don’t know about the others, but I can’t,” Pedro said. “Still, I expect Peter would freak out if he saw your feet.”

She sighed. “I’m amazed at how alike you two are in appearance, except for your hair. Strange, isn’t it?”

Pedro shrugged. “It beats me. We were once the same person, in fact should still be at this point in time, so I guess having different hair is the least of my mysteries. So have you become Peter’s greatest friend and confider?”

“I think perhaps I have. He’d just received news that one of his friends from Brisbane had died, so he was at a pretty low ebb when I caught up with him.”

Pedro stared at her. “I share his memories, but have no recollection of that. Did he give a name to this friend?”

“No, but I’ll try to find out when I next see him, if you like.”

“Yes, but don’t upset him in the process, okay?”

“Of course not. Now that we’ve made contact, how do you want to do this? It seems we’re between a rock and a hard place, trying to both protect him and play the part of Barradhim agents.”

“I have an idea,” he said. “Leave it to me.”

* * *

“Hi Peter!” Ellie called out from her balcony across the street as he stepped out his front gate. “Wait up and I’ll be right down.”

A few moments later she joined him. “You’re looking a lot brighter today.”

“Thanks. It’s Saturday, I guess, which means no school and no bullies.”

“Bullies?”

“Some of the older kids are picking on me and calling me *Little Boy Lost*, on account of me having been lost in the Blue Mountains a month or so back.”

“Oh, that’s awful. Can’t the teachers do anything?”

“Yeah, and pigs might fly.”

“Pigs?”

“Sorry, I keep forgetting English isn’t your native tongue. No, the teachers can’t or won’t do anything.”

“That’s so sad.”

Peter shrugged. “They’ll stop eventually, I hope.”

“I hope so too. Since it’s such a lovely day, I was wondering if, well, if you’re not doing anything else, whether you could take me on that ferry to the beach.”

“I’d love to. I just have to go down the shops for some milk, but meet me here in an hour, let’s say.”

“Wonderful!” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before dashing back across the street.

“Don’t forget your towel and swimsuit!”

“Is that all you’re wearing?” Ellie asked as Peter stepped out in just board shorts with a towel draped over his shoulder.

“Of course. We’re going to the beach, aren’t we?”

“You won’t need a shirt or shoes on the train and ferry?”

“Nah, nobody cares about such things here. Anyway, I never wear shoes outside school and feel too uncomfortable in a shirt when the weather’s warm like this.”

She grinned at him. “That’s fine then; let’s go!”

“What a beautiful harbour!” Ellie said as they emerged from Circular Quay railway station.

“Yes, I must admit it’s a lot nicer looking than the Brisbane River back home.”

“I’d love to hear more about that place you lived in near the sea. It sounds so wonderful.”

“Yes, it was nice and I often wish my parents had never moved, but then, um, I wouldn’t have met you, would I?”

Ellie laughed. “No, you wouldn’t!”

“Come on, our ferry’s about to leave. I’ll tell you all about Brisbane as we cross the harbour.”

“We lived in the suburb of Redcliffe,” Peter said as the ferry rounded Bennelong Point and the Opera House, “which is on the coast north-east of Brisbane. Suttons Beach is just down the road, but it’s sheltered by Moreton Island so there’s never much in the way of

waves. It's nice for swimming, though, and my friends and I would hang out at the beach as much as we could."

He rubbed his hands over his face. "I, I just can't believe Steve's gone."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's okay. Steve and Danny were twins, alike in appearance but exact opposites in personality. Danny was the exuberant one, always bouncing around wanting to do things, while Steve was laid back and quiet, never really saying much but, but always with a gentle smile on his face."

Ellie put an arm around his shoulders. "I had friends in school back in Sweden, but none really close like yours. I can't imagine what it's been like for you these past months."

"When Mum first told me about the move, she said I'd soon make lots of new friends but it hasn't worked out like that at all. Quite the opposite, really, apart from you of course."

"I'm flattered, thank you."

Peter grinned. "We used to talk about growing up together and becoming great scientists; I was into astronomy while Danny loved chemistry and Steve wanted to be a palaeontologist."

"What's that?"

"They study fossils of creatures that lived millions of years ago. Everybody thinks of dinosaurs, but Steve's main interest was Australia's mega-fauna like the diprotodon. We once went to the Darling Downs so he could look at the fossils there."

"Where's that?"

"It's over the other side of the mountains west of Brisbane."

"I see; that must have been fun."

"It was, and it's about the only time I saw Steve get really excited about anything."

He covered his face again.

"You must hold on to all the nice things about your friend, Peter; as long as you remember him, he'll always be with you."

He sniffled. "You're right; I will."

The ferry engine stopped thrumming as they approached the wharf at Manly. To their left was the golden sand of Manly Cove fringed with Norfolk Island pines.

“Is this the beach?” Ellie asked. “I’d imagined something bigger.”

“No, this is just the harbour beach. The ocean beach is across the other side of the shops.”

“Is it far?”

“No, just a couple of blocks.”

As the light turned green, they joined the throng of people crossing the road onto the Corso. Ellie’s eyes darted back and forth as she took in the bustling mall with its multitude of shops, outdoor-eating areas and fountains.

“Gosh, we don’t have anything like this where I come from.”

“It’s always busy here, even in winter.”

Half a dozen teenaged boys walked past them, heading back towards the ferry, all barefoot and wearing only board shorts.

“I see what you mean about people not dressing up to go to the beach.”

Peter grinned. “This is my favourite place in Sydney, although I’m sure if I did a bit more exploring I’d find others I like.”

“How long have you been living here?”

“We arrived on New Year’s Day, so about four months I guess.”

“That’s long enough for the novelty to wear off but too short to feel like you belong here. No wonder you’re homesick.”

They crossed North Steyne onto the tree-lined plaza between the road and the beach. Breakers rolled in on a gentle north-east swell, while flocks of seagulls circled above the picnic tables, looking for any dropped fish or chips. Peter led them down the steps onto the sand, hunting around for a suitable spot to put his towel.

“What a beautiful place!” Ellie said. “I never would’ve imagined it’d be this nice.”

She pulled off her tee shirt and shorts, revealing a sleek one-piece swimsuit underneath.

“You’re not going in the water with your shoes on, are you?” Peter asked when she made no move to take them off.

“Um, I have very strange-looking feet, something I inherited from my mother. As much as I hate shoes, I don’t think I should take them off.”

“Don’t be shy; no-one will notice, I’m sure.”

“Well, if you’re sure you won’t freak out or anything –”

Peter grinned. "I won't stare, I promise. I won't even look."

Ellie took a deep breath before untying the laces and pulling off her sneakers. "Come on; let's go in the water before anyone sees me."

"Down here between the flags where it's safe," Peter said, running ahead and splashing into the surf.

"The water's so warm," Ellie said, joining him.

"Come on out a bit further and I'll show you how to catch a wave."

* * *

"Did you have a nice time?" Peter asked as they approached his front gate.

"Absolutely wonderful," Ellie said, still carrying her shoes. In spite of her misgivings, no-one had paid any attention to her feet on the journey home.

"I did too. Thanks for suggesting the trip."

"We must do it again sometime."

"Yeah, for sure."

"Um, Peter, before you go inside, I wonder if you'd mind coming across to my unit. There's someone who's been dying to meet you."

"Sure, why not?"

Looping his towel back over his shoulders, he followed her across the road.

Betrayal

Peter followed Ellie into the room at the top of the stairs. Before him stood a middle-aged man and woman, both with pale skin and blonde hair.

“Peter, I’d like you to meet my parents.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mrs Grant said, kissing him on the cheek. “Ellie’s been – Ellie, why aren’t you wearing your shoes?”

“They became too damn uncomfortable and besides, everyone going to and from the beach was either barefoot or wearing those floppy rubber things.”

“But didn’t anyone notice your feet?”

“So what if they did? If they don’t like them, it’s their problem.”

Peter flashed her a grin while Mrs Grant sighed.

“I’m Alvin,” Mr Grant said, offering Peter his hand. “Did you two have a nice time at the beach?”

Peter glanced at Ellie, who smiled. “Yes, thanks, it was great.”

“The harbour and beach are beautiful,” Ellie said, “and he taught me how to body surf.”

“She was a natural once she got the hang of it.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, Peter. Now there’s someone else here who’s very anxious to meet with you.”

Peter turned as a tall olive-skinned man emerged from the armchair in the far corner of the room. At the sight of his face, a chill began growing from deep within, a memory of an ancient nightmare coming back to haunt him. In his mind’s eye Peter saw an island village on an alien world bombarded by falling stars, their explosions echoing through the catacombs of his subconscious. Throughout the village, many wept while others, his people, his friends, lay dead or dying.

With that vision came a name, the name of a once-loved older brother who’d turned to evil. “Barrad?”

“It’s been a long time, Raphus, a very long time.”

“Why do you hunt me?”

“I have plans for this galaxy, little brother, great plans, but you and your twin have the potential to stand in my way. Dromaius alone I can deal with, but if you were to unite, well, let’s just say I need to stop that from happening.”

Peter took a step towards him. “You weren’t always like this, Barrad. Let go of your hatred and become the loving brother I once knew.”

Barrad stared at him, his expression unreadable.

“Your true spirit hasn’t been destroyed, just warped and suppressed. Let go, Barrad, and be free of the evil that possesses you.”

“It’s too late for me, little brother, far too late.”

“Then do what you must, for if you’re indeed irredeemable, I’ll welcome death’s release. I’ve had enough of being the *hidden one*.”

Before Barrad could respond, the door opened as Pedro bounded into the room. Peter turned towards him, the spirit of Raphus leaving his consciousness as he stared open-mouthed at his twin.

“What do you reckon, Elissi?” Pedro said. “Did the barber do a good job?”

Elissi glanced back and forth between the two boys. “Indeed, you’re now completely identical. Peter, meet Pedro.”

“You, you’re real,” Peter said. “You rescued me from the wilderness, but, but I thought I must have just imagined you.”

“Perhaps you did, but I seem real enough now. I’d always thought my existence began when you and your friend Billy started tampering with the course of history, but now I’m not so sure. We’re supposed to have shared the same childhood; I have clear memories of your senior years at high school, your undergraduate years at Sydney University and the beginnings of your doctorate, yet I have no recollection of you becoming lost in the Blue Mountains or the death of your friend in Brisbane. It had me quite puzzled for a while but I finally figured it out.”

Before anyone could react, he grabbed Elissi around the chest while whipping out a steak knife and holding it against her throat. “There’s been a change of plan, folks. You guys can have Peter, to do

whatever you want with him, while I take his place here on Earth. The Peter of the future will be, in fact has always been, me, not him. He denied me my life the first time around and I'm not about to let it happen again."

Mr Grant finally broke the stunned silence that followed. "You know too much about our organisation, Pedro. What makes you think we won't come after you once we've disposed of Peter?"

"You're right, I know everything about the Barradhim; past, present and future. Let's just say I've put that information in the hands of a trusted colleague who'll reveal everything if I'm harmed in any way."

Barrad laughed. "If you think you can blackmail me, squirt, you'd better think again. Before killing you, I could tear your mind apart, find the identity of this colleague, if he really exists, and dispose of him and any evidence he might possess. But I won't, dear Pedro, for your plan makes perfect sense. With you replacing Peter, there'll be no suspicion that anything's happened to him and hence no loose ends to tidy up. Besides, having a trusted agent embedded in Dodo's family may prove invaluable in the future. I can trust you, can't I, Pedro?"

"Indubitably."

"Let's just make sure then, shall we?" Barrad placed a hand on Pedro's forehead. "Now, if you so much as think of double-crossing me, you'll suffer a slow and painful death. Understood?"

"Of course."

"Then release the girl and go change clothes with your twin."

Pedro complied, grabbing Peter by the arm and escorting him at knifepoint into the bathroom.

"No, you can't do this!" Elissi cried. "Pedro, what the hell are you thinking?"

"Be quiet, girl," Barrad said. "I don't know who you serve, but your allegiance is clearly not to me."

She glared at him but said no more.

"I understand Jameed was supposed to be part of this exercise but was incapacitated in an unfortunate accident." Barrad glanced at Elissi. "His father wants him to do the honours, so take Peter back to Eridani with you, Alvin."

“As you wish,” Mr Grant said, bowing.

Barrad turned as Pedro and Peter re-entered the room. “You may go now, Pedro, or should I start calling you Peter. Remember your pledge and don’t give me cause to question your loyalty.”

“Don’t worry, you can count on me.” He turned, grabbing Peter’s towel before opening the door and dashing to freedom and a new life.

“I must also depart,” Barrad said. “Safe travel to Eridani, Raphus, and I’ll see you in hell.”

“What about the girl?” Mrs Grant asked.

“Make her watch the execution, then send her back to her parents unharmed. I’ll deal with them personally if she causes any mischief.”

The Grants escorted them out of the unit and down the stairs to the basement, where they were bundled into a car.

“Wh-where are you taking me?”

“Trust me, Peter, you don’t want to know,” Mr Grant said as he pulled out onto the road.

Elissi reached for his hand but he pulled it away. “How could you lure me into this? I, I thought we were friends.”

He angrily brushed at his eyes as tears began to flow, while Elissi turned away to watch the passing streetscape.

In light Saturday afternoon traffic, they soon joined the western motorway heading towards the Blue Mountains. Mrs Grant turned on the radio, tuning into a classical music station and turning up the volume to make any further conversation impossible.

The car turned into the driveway of an old run-down house in Springwood, where the Grants escorted the children around the back and through a gate into bushland. After crossing a damp gully, they emerged onto a rock shelf where a metallic shuttle craft gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

Standing next to it was an elderly police officer. “Well, well, well, what’s happening here?”

“Who are you?” Mr Grant asked.

“Sergeant Kent from Katoomba Police Station.”

“This is private property and what we do is our own business. Unless you have a warrant, I must ask you to leave.”

“Now just a moment, sir, I have grave concerns for the safety of that boy with you.”

“Perhaps you have, but as I said, no warrant, no answers. Goodbye Sergeant.”

“Just tell me who he is and how he comes to have Peter Thorpe’s fingerprints.”

“Those matters are none of your business.”

Kent turned to the boy, crouching down before him. “Are these people holding you against your will, son? You can speak freely; I won’t let them hurt you.”

“Um, I’m —” He closed his eyes for a moment, caught in the greatest dilemma of his life. This was his chance to escape, but if he did, his twin back in Eastwood would be caught and killed. He took a deep breath, steadying his nerves. “No sir, I’m fine, really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Uh huh, everything’s sweet.”

“There you are, Sergeant,” Mr Grant said, “everything’s sweet. Now leave.”

Kent glared at him before turning and heading back into the bush.

Mrs Grant opened the shuttle door. “You two, in the back.”

The children glanced at each other before complying.

“Why didn’t you say something to that policeman, Peter?” Elissi whispered as she fastened her seat belt.

“Because I’m not Peter.”

“You’re what? Pedro?”

“Shush.”

Dawn was just breaking when the shuttle landed at the Eridanian spaceport. Pedro wondered if that might gain him another twenty-five hours before his execution.

“You two wait here,” Mrs Grant said as they both stepped from the craft, locking the hatch behind them.

“How did you do it?” Elissi asked Pedro.

“Simple; Peter and I didn’t exchange clothing when we went into the bathroom, instead I told him what to say and do so everyone would think he was me.”

“You crafty devil. But what about the thing Barrad did to secure your loyalty?”

Pedro grinned. “Like all bullies, he’s ninety per cent bluff. I felt something touch my mind but it was easily deflected.”

“Oh, I see. So what are you going to do now?”

“I have to let them kill me.”

“No, you can’t!”

He took hold of her hand. “It’s the only way to guarantee Peter’s safety. The Barradhim must be satisfied he’s dead.”

“But, but what if you escaped and went into hiding on this world?”

“Eventually someone would twig to what I’ve done. No, I don’t belong in this time anyway; I’m really ninety years old even though I don’t look it or feel it.”

She kissed him. “You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met.”

Pedro sighed. “I need you to pass a message to Elko. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Tell him he must move Peter to Avalon.”

“To where?”

“Avalon; it’s a suburb on Sydney’s northern beaches. What I said about having no recollection of Peter’s childhood is essentially true, but I do know he’s supposed to be in Avalon, not Eastwood. There’s someone there he has to befriend, someone vital to how his life will unfold.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

“Tell him it has to be as soon as possible. The place he’s at now is destroying him.”

“All right.”

“There’s one other thing. Do Eridanians have any telepathic powers?”

“Telepathic? No, we don’t. Elko is a touch-telepath, as presumably is Barrad, but Eridanian biology is –”

“Yes, I know, it’s different to other worlds. So how come Jameed’s mother sensed his pain when he fell out of the tree?”

“That’s impossible.”

“I saw it happen; I was with her at the time.”

“But, but that can only mean they’re not Eridanian.”

“That’s what I was thinking; Jameed and his mother at least, and I suspect his grandfather too. You must tell Elko; tell him I think they may be Tivinel.”

“Tivin-what?”

“Tivinel. It’s a long story and –”

The shuttle rocked as Mr Grant pulled open the hatch. “Follow me.”

He led them across the tarmac to a waiting car. After securing them in the back seat, he headed off along what was now becoming a familiar road across the ridge to Angust.

“Where’s Mrs Grant?” Elissi asked.

“She had some shopping to do, and in any case she can’t stand the sight of spilled blood.”

Elissi squeezed Pedro’s hand again.

“If you two have any last words to exchange, now would be a good time to do it. I understand Jameed’s already up at the farm practising his aim.”

“Aim?”

“Yes, a crossbow is our traditional weapon of execution.”

“If he handles it anything like he did the slingshot,” Elissi said, “you have nothing to worry about.”

Pedro gave her a stunned look, making her immediately regret her thoughtless levity.

“I’ll always remember our day at the beach, P-Peter. It was the happiest day of my life.”

“Me too.”

They sat in silence for the remainder of their journey, watching the scenery as they descended from the ridge into the picturesque valley. After passing through the outskirts of town, they climbed into the southern foothills before turning through the gate of the abandoned farmhouse and parking amidst an assortment of other vehicles.

Jameed’s father stepped over to meet them, handing Mr Grant a pair of shackles. “He really is a dead-ringer for the boy who led us to him. So where’s the charming Pedro?”

“Barrad let him take the boy’s place so as not to arouse any suspicion.”

“I wonder if that was wise.”

“Don’t speak too loudly; he has many ears.”

“Yes, he does. Well come on boy, out of the car so we can get this over with and have breakfast.”

Pedro gave him a puzzled look.

“He doesn’t speak our language,” Elissi said.

“Well you tell him then.”

Elissi rendered the translation, at which point Pedro pulled himself out of the vehicle. Jameed’s father motioned for him to put his hands behind his back, before securing the shackles and escorting him to the post at the corner of the building. A Barradhim boy tied the shackles to it, making sure Pedro couldn’t move or duck.

“Go and tell Jameed we’re ready.”

Elissi went to turn away, but Mr Grant stopped her. “Barrad insists that you watch this.”

She ran her hands over her face as tears began to flow, her mind turning back to the day she’d stepped from the car to see Pedro tumbling face down in the dirt. A chuckle escaped her lips as she recalled his shorts falling down around his ankles, revealing his strange Earthling genitals. More images came unbidden: the salt on the bird’s tail, his fight with Jameed, the revelation of his identity and mission, their flight to Earth and his self-sacrifice to save the boy he’d once despised; she wondered if she’d ever see the like of him again, no matter how long she lived.

“Everybody gather round,” Jameed’s father said, snapping her out of her reverie. “Our quest for the Dodo child has been successfully completed, with Barrad himself confirming the boy’s identity. The one remaining task of terminating his life falls to my son Jameed, who would have led the mission but for an untimely accident.”

Jameed stepped forward, his left arm still encased in plaster.

“Does anyone here present object to the execution of this child?”

Pedro was about to voice his own objection before reminding himself that he didn’t speak the language. Instead he stared vacantly into the distance.

Jameed’s father handed his son the crossbow. “Can you manage it okay?”

“Sure Dad.”

He raised the weapon, taking careful aim.

“Hit him right between the nipples, if my knowledge of Earthling anatomy is anything to go by.”

Jameed paused to wipe his brow before adjusting his aim again. Ever so gently, he squeezed on the trigger, but before releasing the bolt he lowered the weapon. “Could I have some water please?”

His mother dashed inside, returning a moment later with a full glass.

“Take your time, son,” his father said.

Emptying the glass, he handed it back before once more taking aim. Again his finger squeezed against the trigger. He stared at the boy, telling himself this was another Pedro, a carbon copy of the one who’d humiliated him in front of Elissi. He felt his anger rising, but something else, something he’d never known before, became rapidly stronger. Compassion, forgiveness, a sense of empathy for this Earthling child whose only crime was to carry the spirit of some ancient being no-one even remembered.

He lowered the weapon. “I can’t do this, Dad. Not in cold blood, not like this.”

His father took it from him while patting him on the shoulder. “We can’t all be killers, son.”

As Jameed walked away, head bowed low onto his chest, his father turned, took aim and released the bolt. The moment it left the crossbow, Pedro’s skin appeared to harden, its colour fading to a sooty beige. When the bolt struck, his body shattered like a clay statue, spraying fine dust into the air. For a moment the sun brightened, dazzling the onlookers, but when their vision cleared, they saw only the bolt protruding from the post above a pair of empty shackles.

* * *

Elissi entered the room where Jameed had taken refuge.

“Go away.”

“I will, but first you need to hear me out. I admire what you just did, Jameed; it takes a lot of courage to do that in front of your family and friends.”

“I failed everyone; I’m a useless coward afraid of spilling some worthless Earthling blood.”

“No, if that’s what you really thought, you’d have shot him without hesitation. Your father is right, we can’t all be killers, Jameed, and I think that’s a good thing.”

“Don’t be silly. The Barradhim’s my family, has been for many generations, but now there’s nothing for me here.”

“That’s not true. You’re good with numbers and once said you wanted to study accountancy, didn’t you?”

“So what?”

“Every successful organisation needs good accountants behind it. Perhaps that’s how you were really meant to serve.”

“You think so?”

“Of course.”

Jameed used his good arm to wipe his eyes before turning to face her. “Did you love him? Pedro, Peter, or either of them?”

“Perhaps both of them in their own ways. Peter was such a sweet boy but with a terrible sadness at his core. I hope –”

“Yes?”

“Nothing.” Elissi pinched herself, shocked at how close she’d come to spilling the beans.

Jameed looked into her eyes. “I’m sorry I dragged you into all this.”

“No; it’s been an education if nothing else, but I don’t think I’m suited to being a Barradhim.”

Mr Grant stepped into the room. “It’s time to go, Elissi. You’re not to come back here again, you understand?”

“Yes. Goodbye Jameed.”

“Goodbye.”

* * *

Sergeant Kent stared at the computer screen. After noting the registration number of the car he’d seen parked in the driveway of that Springwood house, he’d keyed it into the database, although he thought it’d most likely show up as a rental. Except it hadn’t. “Hey Wiggins, come take a look at this!”

“*Tivinel Holdings*? Isn’t that the company that owns the house?”

“Yes, only this time we have a street address for them.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I think a trip down to Sydney might be nice on my day off.”

“Be careful you don’t go biting off more than you can chew, sir.”

Kent smiled. “Who, me?”

The office building in North Sydney looked much like all the others, but what puzzled Sergeant Kent was the sign proclaiming it to be the AusScience Sydney branch. He double-checked both the street name and number, just to be sure, before entering and approaching the reception counter.

“I don’t know whether I’m in the right place, but I’m looking for the offices of Tivinel Holdings.”

“I’ll just have to check for you. Could I have your name please?”

He pulled out his police badge. “Sergeant Kent from Katoomba command.”

“One moment, Sergeant.” She picked up a telephone handset, speaking for a few moments before turning back. “Take the lift up to the seventh floor, turn left and go to the red door right at the end of the corridor.”

“Thanks.”

Behind the red door was an unattended reception counter. Adorning the walls were astronomical pictures, one showing a spiral galaxy labelled only as NGC598, while others were presumably artist’s impressions of various planets although they looked surprisingly life-like. One, having a polar ocean, forests and lakes north of the equator and only desert in the south, caught his eye.

“They call that one *Eridani*,” a man said from behind him, causing him to jump. “Sorry I startled you, is it Sergeant Kent?”

Kent nodded.

“I’m Paul Matheson; please come on through.”

Kent followed him down a narrow corridor and into an office on the right.

“Please take a seat. Now how can I help you?”

“I’m curious about Tivinel Holdings. Just what is it and what are you doing in Springwood?”

“Is this an official investigation?”

“No, it started with a vagrant child but everywhere I turn I’m bumping into dead ends with your company’s name on them.”

“I see. Perhaps you could tell me what it is that’s troubling you.”

“It all began with that Thorpe boy who went missing in the Blue Mountains a few weeks back. I was helping coordinate the search and when he was found the next day I thought that’d be the end of it, but it wasn’t. A day later, another boy turned up, looking like Peter’s twin and calling himself Pedro Thorpe. He refused to explain himself, instead suggesting I fingerprint both him and Peter, which I did. They had identical prints.”

“But surely even twins have different prints. Aren’t they supposed to be unique to the individual?”

“I thought so too, but the prints were identical. By then Pedro had been put into the custody of a boarding school for vagrants, but by the time I got down there, he’d been taken by a couple claiming to be his parents. I traced them to a house in Springwood, a house owned by Tivinel Holdings.”

“Did you see those people?”

“Yes, they were a blonde-headed middle-aged couple, which in itself is curious since the Pedro boy has brown hair and a reasonably dark complexion. Before I could speak with them, though, they took off into the bush and boarded a strange-looking aircraft parked on a rock shelf.”

“So what happened next?”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on the place whenever I can, hoping to be able to speak to them, but saw nothing until three days ago when I found that aircraft had returned. I was checking it out when the couple emerged from the bush with Pedro and a blonde girl. They said it was private property and wouldn’t answer any questions without a warrant.”

“Indeed, the bushland behind that residence belongs to us.”

“I asked the Pedro boy if he was under any duress, but he said he was fine, so there was little else I could do but leave. I noted the

registration number of their vehicle on the way out, which led me to here.”

Paul put his hands behind his head. “Tell me, Sergeant, do you know much about what we do here in AusScience?”

“Not really.”

“A significant part of our work relates to an American-funded project called the Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence, with Dr Thomas Collins heading the team at our Narrabri radio telescope facility. It’s a project our director of Astrophysics has taken a great personal interest in.”

“You mean those people at the house were extra-terrestrials?”

“What makes you say that?”

Kent pulled out a photograph. “We saw this strange footprint on the front step the first time we approached the house.”

Paul nodded. “That planet you were looking at in the foyer, the one called *Eridani*, is an interesting world.”

“Are you saying they came from *there*?”

“I’m not saying anything, merely allowing you to draw your own conclusions. But *if* there were such a world with operatives visiting our planet, you’d expect AusScience would be keen to observe them, wouldn’t you?”

“I suppose.”

“Observing is our role and, may I say it, we’re very good at what we do, which is why, if such circumstances were to arise, we’d allow them to use our house and our bushland. Hypothetically, of course.”

“Hy-po-thetic-ally,” Kent said, as if never having heard the word before.

“Indeed, but I’m troubled by the connection to Peter Thorpe. Do you mind if I ask his father to join us?”

“No, please do. I wasn’t aware he worked here.”

“His office is just downstairs.”

He picked up the phone, speaking for a few moments before turning back to Kent. “He’ll be up shortly.”

Michael Thorpe was a bespectacled middle-aged man of slender build. Paul invited him to take a seat after making the introductions.

“Mike,” he asked, “was Peter anywhere near Springwood on Saturday?”

“No, he went to Manly beach with a girl he’s recently met and returned home about four, after which he spent most of the evening watching television.”

“Can you describe the girl?” Kent asked.

“She’s about Peter’s age with medium length blonde hair; comes from Sweden, apparently. I think they might have had a row, though, as Peter was pretty upset when he came home and didn’t want to talk about it. A pity, as he’s been having a lot of trouble making any friends since we moved here in January.”

“Do you know what she was wearing that day?”

“Yes, when I saw them leave she was in brown shorts and a yellow tee shirt.”

“That’s what the girl in Springwood was wearing.”

“What girl in Springwood?”

“Sergeant,” Paul said, “I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave this with me. Thank you so much for coming in.”

“What? But, um, but *who are these people*, and who the devil is Pedro?”

“Please, you must leave it with me.”

He stood, escorting Sergeant Kent out the door and back through the foyer while Michael waited nervously in his office.

“One more question,” Kent said as he was leaving.

“Yes?”

“What’s a Tivinel?”

Paul laughed. “That’s what we’d all like to know.”

Avalon

Peter arrived home from school to find both his parents waiting for him in the living room.

“What’s up? I haven’t done anything wrong, have I?”

“No, not at all,” Michael said. “This morning I had a call from the Director of Astrophysics.”

“Mr Halliday?”

“Yes. He said he wants us to move to a different part of Sydney, a place called Avalon on the northern beaches.”

Peter’s face lit up. “That’s great, but why?”

“I don’t know how, but he’s heard about the trouble you’ve been having with those boys calling you names and thinks there might be something more sinister behind it. He was also very disturbed when I told him about that girl Ellie.”

“But, but why would anyone be after *me*? It’s not like I’m important or anything.”

Rachel and Michael exchanged glances. “You’re the most important person in the world to us.”

“That’s not what I mean. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Mr Halliday seems to think there is, but we’re as much in the dark as you are, Peter.”

“But won’t whoever’s after me just follow us to Avalon?”

“I asked him the same thing, but he assured me that precautions would be taken and our trail will be completely cold before anyone even begins to look.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” Rachel said.

“Telling me that only makes me worry.”

“Sorry.” She gave him a hug. “We won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.”

“AusScience have already chosen a house for us and want us to go take a look tomorrow.”

“Is it close to the beach?”

“The street’s called Surfside Avenue so it couldn’t be much closer, I guess.”

“Awesome!”

“You mustn’t tell anyone here that we’re moving, though, and for God’s sake, don’t mention the address.”

“No, I won’t. Now that Ellie’s gone, I don’t have any friends here anyway.” Peter’s expression darkened. “Can I tell Danny?”

“It’d be best not to, at least not for a while.”

“But Dad –”

“Mr Halliday said we need to make a clean break.”

“Okay then, I guess.”

“I’m sure everything’s going to work out for the best, you’ll see.”

* * *

“This is awesome!” Peter said as they pulled up in front of the house in Surfside Avenue. He’d feared the street’s name might have been some developer’s idea of a sick joke, a façade for a dingy pot-holed slum located kilometres from the sea, but just beyond the back fence sparkled the enticing blue waters of the Pacific.

As he stepped onto the pavement, a man emerged from the house, closely followed by a teenaged boy wearing sneakers, jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. For a moment the light dimmed, as if a small dark cloud had crossed the sun, causing a shiver to run up and down his spine.

“Did you bring a shirt, Peter?” Rachel asked, snapping him out of his trance.

“No, Mum, I forgot.”

“As always, you rascal,” she said, tickling him on the ribs.

“Paul, what are you doing here?” Michael called out.

“Mr Halliday asked me to come and show you around, since I live in the area.”

“Rachel and Peter, this is Paul Matheson from work.”

“I’m pleased to meet you both. This is my son Cory, although he’s more of a Mr Grumpy this morning. I’d promised to take him bushwalking today, but, well, these things can’t be helped.”

Peter shook Paul’s hand before turning to face Cory.

“Shake his hand, son,” Paul said. “He won’t bite you.”

“Sorry,” Cory mumbled before reluctantly reaching out to take Peter’s hand. The moment they touched, though, the light seemed to flare ...

Peter woke with a start, surprised to find he’d dozed off in the car. He looked out as they pulled up in front of the house in Surfside Avenue.

As he stepped from the car, a man emerged from inside, closely followed by a barefoot boy wearing only board shorts.

“Did you bring a shirt, Peter?” Rachel asked.

“No, Mum, I forgot.”

“As always, you rascal,” she said, tickling him on the ribs.

“Paul, what are you doing here?” Michael called out.

“Mr Halliday asked me to come and show you around, since I live in the area.”

“Rachel and Peter, this is Paul Matheson from work.”

“I’m pleased to meet you both. This is my son Cory; he’s been looking forward all morning to meeting your son.”

“Hi Peter,” Cory said, stepping forward with his hand outstretched and a broad grin spread across his face.

For a moment Peter expected another flash of light as they touched, but nothing happened. “Nice to meet you too, Cory.”

“Your boy’s what, about fourteen?” Paul asked.

“Yes, he turns fifteen in September.”

“He’ll be in the same class as Cory, then, assuming you’re sending him to the local school.”

“Hey, that’ll be great!” Cory said, his grin growing even broader.

“What do you think, Peter?” Rachel asked.

He looked into Cory’s eyes, sensing he was on the cusp of a momentous turning point in his life. Without realising it, he broke into an enormous grin the equal of his new-found friend’s. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“I can’t wait to introduce you to everyone!” Cory said, almost jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

“How about we show them through the house first,” Paul said, “and then you can take Peter for a walk around the neighbourhood while Michael, Rachel and I sort out the details of their move.”

“Great!”

“Peter?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah, great!”

“I’m astounded,” Rachel said after Cory had taken Peter out for their walk. “I’ve never seen him make friends with anyone so quickly and easily before.”

“In all the time we were in Eastwood,” Michael said, “he never made a single friend at school, and even in Brisbane there were just the Langford twins and a couple of others.”

“Cory’s the same,” Paul said. “He hangs out with three other boys he’s known since kindergarten and until this morning, that was it. They’re three of the nicest kids you could ever hope to meet, but all the same we’d still like him to broaden his horizons a bit. One of the teachers suggested we take him to a child psychiatrist, who diagnosed Asperger’s syndrome.”

“What’s that?”

“They say he can’t make sense of social and emotional cues. There are other signs as well; he’s a veritable *little professor*, is inscrutably honest and takes everything he hears literally, which can be horribly embarrassing at times. He also has a heightened sense of touch; he hates shoes with a passion and those board shorts are all he ever wears outside of school.”

“Peter’s the same,” Rachel said.

“They reckon some of our greatest scientists and engineers have Asperger’s, so in many respects it’s more a different perspective on the world than a true handicap. Cory certainly has a penchant for science and even built himself a ham radio station in the back shed.”

“Peter’s obsession is astronomy, just like his father. On summer nights the two of them will sit outside till all hours having name-that-star competitions.”

“He usually beats me,” Michael said, “but his eyes are a lot better than mine.”

“No, he just knows more stars,” Rachel said. “He’s a walking astronomical encyclopaedia.”

“I reckon he and Cory’s tribe will be the best of friends before we know it,” Paul said.

Cory led Peter out of Surfside Avenue onto Barrenjoey Road. “This is our beach.”

“Oh wow!”

After scampering down a rough track, they emerged onto the sand at the base of the headland, with the surf beach stretching out on their left and the ocean pools on the right. Peter grabbed a handful of sand, rubbing it between his fingers.

“In Brisbane we’d die for a beach like this. Sutton’s Beach is nice, but it’s nothing compared to this.”

Cory grinned, running over to the water’s edge and letting the waves wash over his feet. Peter followed.

“You should always swim between the flags, Peter.”

“Yes, I know.”

“There can be pretty bad rips along here. Do you know how to spot one?”

“No.”

“Come back up to the path and I’ll show you.”

They sprinted up the sand and into the park overlooking the beach. “See over there where there are waves breaking either side of a calm spot?”

“Yes.”

“The calm spot is the rip.”

“But it looks so safe.”

“That’s the trap. All the water that washes in from the breaking waves has to find its way back out, forming deep channels.”

“Calm water is deep water.”

“Exactly. If you ever get caught in one, swim at right-angles to the flow, not against it, and then stick your arm up so the lifeguard will see you. People drown in rips because they panic. Don’t panic, Peter.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“There is no *try* –”

“Do, or do not.”

“Are you a *Star Wars* fan, Peter?”

“Only the world’s greatest.”

“Awesome! Come and I’ll show you the playground.”

After crossing the road, they passed through a car park before reaching a playing field where three boys were kicking a soccer ball around.

“Hey Cory!” one of them shouted. “Is that him?”

“Sure is!”

“Hi, I’m Trevor,” the first one said, offering Peter his hand. “Welcome to paradise.”

“This is Robbie and that’s Dennis,” Cory said as the other two caught up.

“I’m Peter Thorpe.”

“Of course you are.”

“Come and we’ll show him the shops.”

“Race you to the road!”

Peter followed as the four boys dashed off towards the far corner of the park, gradually overtaking Dennis and Cory as they neared their goal.

“Not bad, Peter,” Robbie said, huffing. “Do you play any sports?”

“I was on the cricket team at my old school in Brisbane, usually batting at number four.”

“We sometimes play beach cricket,” Cory said.

“That sounds like fun.”

“It is, particularly when the ball goes in the water and you have to swim out after it.”

“Just don’t hit it into any rips.”

“In the rip is six and out.”

“And the batsman has to buy a new ball.”

As they turned the corner, Peter suddenly stopped walking, staring instead at the sign.

“What’s wrong?”

“Is this *really* called Barefoot Boulevard?”

“It sure is.”

“Awesome!”

“Some of the kids call us the *Denizens of Barefoot Boulevard*,” Trevor said, “since we never wear shoes.”

“Truly *never*?”

“Pretty much.”

“What about school, though?”

“The headmaster’s cool and lets us go barefoot, mostly on account of Cory.”

“Shoes hurt my feet so the doctor said I mustn’t wear them, not that I’d want to anyway.”

“I wish I never had to wear shoes ever again,” Peter said.

“Your wish might just have come true.”

“Pinch me; I’m dreaming.”

“No, this is real, Peter; everything that went before was just a nightmare.”

“You can say that again.”

“Everything that went before was just a nightmare.”

Peter laughed. “I, I just can’t believe it. It feels like I’ve always belonged here.”

“You have, you just needed to discover it.”

Rachel looked up as Cory led Peter back into the house. “You must have been having fun; we were about to send out a search party.”

“This is such an amazing place, Mum. Are we definitely moving here? Please don’t tell me it’s all a mistake.”

Cory looked stricken, but Rachel laughed. “No, it’s all set; the removal van’s organised for tomorrow.”

“We can help if you like,” Dennis said, leading Trevor and Robbie in too.

“These are the three I was telling you about,” Paul said.

“They’ve been showing me around the town,” Peter said, grinning. “It’s great!”

“That’s wonderful, sweetheart,” Rachel said, kissing him on the forehead.

“Oh Mum, not in front of my friends!”

Rachel and Michael exchanged grins. “It’s so nice to see you smiling again, Peter.”

“Come on, son,” Michael said, “we’d best be heading back. We need to make an early start tomorrow.”

“Sure Dad.” He turned to his new friends. “See you guys tomorrow!”

“See you, Peter!”

* * *

Peter tossed and turned for ages, his mind full of questions about Avalon and the instant friends he’d found there, but when sleep finally took him, he fell into one of the worst nightmares of his life.

“Don’t worry, Peter,” Robbie said as he shackled him to the post at the corner of the building. “It won’t hurt a bit.”

Peter looked up to see Ellie standing amongst a group of men, but when their eyes met, she turned away.

One of the men stopped her. "Barrad insists that you watch this."

She ran her hands over her face, trying to hide her tears.

"Everybody gather round," Cory's father said. "Our quest for the Dodo child has been successfully completed, with Barrad himself confirming the boy's identity. The one remaining task of terminating his life falls to my son Cory, who would have led the mission but for an untimely accident."

Cory stepped forward, his left arm encased in plaster, as his father handed him a crossbow. "Can you manage it okay?"

"Sure Dad."

He raised the weapon, taking careful aim.

"Hit him right between the nipples, if my knowledge of Earthling anatomy is anything to go by."

Cory paused to wipe his brow before adjusting his aim again. Ever so gently, he squeezed on the trigger, but before releasing the bolt he lowered the weapon. "Could I have some water please?"

His mother dashed inside, returning a moment later with a full glass.

"Take your time, son," his father said.

Emptying the glass, he handed it back before once more taking aim, but after what seemed an eternity, he lowered the weapon again. "I can't do this, Dad. Not in cold blood, not like this."

His father took it from him while patting him on the shoulder. "We can't all be killers, son."

As Cory walked away, head bowed low onto his chest, his father turned, took aim and released the bolt.

Peter should've woken at that point, indeed every nerve in his body tried to make that happen, but instead the dream shifted.

"Don't worry about Pedro," Steve said, walking towards him out of a white mist. "What happened to him was a necessary evil, as he didn't belong in this time. His role is far from over, though, and you'll meet him again before the end."

“Steve, I thought you were dead!”

“I am, but you must let go, Peter. Embrace your new-found friends and find true joy in their companionship. Great things await you and only they can prepare you for what’s to come.”

“But –”

“There is no but, only do or do not.”

Steve turned back towards the thickening mist.

“No, wait!”

“Goodbye Peter. Remember in your darkest hours, I’ll always be watching over you.”

This time he woke to find sunshine streaming in through his bedroom window. A moment later his mother poked her head around the door. “Ah, you’re awake, good. It’s time to start packing the truck.”

“Truck?” he asked, still half asleep.

“It’s moving day. Come and have breakfast, then you can help your father load everything on.”

“Oh, right.”

He climbed out of bed, rubbing his eyes as the remnants of the nightmare dissolved away.

Peter grinned as the truck pulled into Surfside Avenue and he saw his four new friends waiting out the front, all barefoot.

“You boys can take the smaller boxes into the living room,” Michael said.

“And mind your feet,” Rachel added. “We don’t want blood on the carpet.”

“Stop fussing, Mum,” Peter said. “We’ll be careful.”

Cory grinned. “How do you want to do this, Peter?”

“I’ll grab them out of the truck and you guys can carry them in, if you like.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I think that’s the last of it,” Michael said. “Cory, is there anywhere you’d recommend for me to shout you all lunch?”

“I know just the place, Dr Thorpe.”

“Please call me Mike.”

“Um, if it’s all the same, I think I’ll call you Dr Thorpe.”

“Whatever you’re happy with, Cory. Lead us to your eatery.”

“That was delicious,” Michael said, wiping his mouth. “I’m glad you recommended this place.”

“The food’s always nice here,” Cory said. “If the empty plate in front of Peter is anything to go by, I think he enjoyed it too.”

“It must really have been good,” Rachel said. “He usually eats like a sparrow.”

“Mum,” Peter moaned.

Michael pulled out his wallet. “I’ll fix the bill, then you boys can go off and play while your mother and I start unpacking all the boxes.”

“Do you want to go for a swim, Peter?” Cory asked.

“Sure. Robbie? Trevor? Dennis?”

“You bet!”

“Let’s go then!”

Peter followed his four friends down Barefoot Boulevard and across Barrenjoey Road to the beach. Under a cloudless sky, a light northeast swell sent perfectly formed breakers rolling onto the sand.

“This is heaven!” Peter said as they ran down the steps. “Pinch me, I must be dreaming.”

The boys splashed into the surf, diving under a couple of waves before catching the next one and riding it all the way in.

“Perfect!”

* * *

Peter was about to knock on Cory’s front door when his father poked his head out. “He’s around the back in the radio shack.”

“Thanks.”

In the corner of the back yard, what had once been a garden tool shed bristled with assorted antennae and cables, while from within came the crackle of a shortwave radio.

Cory waved Peter inside. “I have to go now, Jeff,” he said into the microphone. “My friend has just arrived; VK2NCM out.”

“Cheers Cory and say hi to Peter for me. VK2BYY out.”

“That’s pretty neat,” Peter said as Cory switched off the radio. “How far can you transmit to?”

Cory pointed to a world map on the wall. “Japan’s pretty easy on fifteen metres of a night, but I once worked someone in San Francisco.”

“Gosh, with just that little radio?”

“Yes, but with a lot of help from the ionosphere.”

Peter nodded. “That’s affected by sunspots and stuff, isn’t it?”

“Very much; luckily for me we’re at the sunspot maximum right now so radio propagation is awesome.”

“That’s great.”

Cory’s father stepped up to the door. “Are you guys ready?”

“Yep.”

He led them around the side to the car. “Have you been to the Sydney Observatory before, Peter?”

“No, I only moved down from Brisbane at the beginning of the year and have mostly avoided the city.”

“The open days are always pretty interesting; they have telescopes dating back to the eighteen hundreds.”

“Yeah, Cory gave me a pamphlet.”

“I’ll park at the AusScience offices and we can take the train across the harbour bridge if you like; I don’t like driving in the city even on weekends.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Me too!” Cory said. “Did I tell you about how they built the bridge, Peter?”

Peter grinned. “No, but I guess you’re about to.”

“I just want to grab a couple of things from the office,” Cory’s father said as they pulled into the AusScience car park. “Do you want to come up?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He led them through the deserted foyer to the lift, taking it up to the seventh floor. At the end of the corridor was a red door which he unlocked with his magnetic card.

“Hey, this is neat,” Peter said, studying the planetary pictures on the wall. “Wouldn’t it be great if we could actually go to some of those places?”

“You never know, Peter, you just might. Do you want to come through to my office or wait here?”

“We’ll wait here,” Cory said.

Peter found himself drawn to a picture of a world with a lush green northern hemisphere but only desert below the equator. “This is really good; I could almost swear it was a photograph.”

“We call it Eridani,” a woman said from behind him, causing him to jump. She turned to Cory. “You must be Paul’s son; he’s told me all about you. I’m Rebecca Gosling.”

“Hi,” Cory said, taking a step backwards. “That’s my friend Peter.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Peter said, shaking her hand, but felt a cold shiver run through him as they touched. He glanced down, almost doing a double-take when he saw her feet. “Um, I hope you don’t think I’m rude, but are you Swedish?”

“Swedish? No I’m not, I’m afraid. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that I knew a Swedish girl with feet like yours. Her name was Ellie.”

“Ellie, you say? You’re not *that* Peter, are you, or should I call you Pedro?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“*Din fluga är öppen.*”

Peter stared at her. “Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

She leaned over to him. “Well, this is a turn-up, I must say. It seems Barrad may have executed the wrong boy.”

At the mention of the name *Barrad*, another chill ran up Peter's spine.

"Leave him alone!" Cory yelled. "You're scaring me!"

Peter felt suddenly dizzy as the room lights seemed to flare into a brilliant white...

"Do you want to come through to my office or wait here?" Cory's father asked.

"We'll come through," Cory said, as Peter's head swam for a moment.

Paul led them down a narrow corridor to an office on the right. "There's not much to see in here, just filing cabinets and my computer."

Peter stared at the PC. "Is that one of the new 386 machines?"

"It's an SX, but a 33MHz one so it really flies."

"Gosh, I'd sell Cory for one of those."

Cory looked stricken, but Peter grinned, mouthing *joke*.

"I hear they'll soon be releasing the 486, now that'll really be something."

"My dad needs a lot of computing power for his work," Peter said, "so he'll want to put his hands on one as soon as he can."

"I'll put in a good word for him with the requisitions department," Paul said, picking up two manila folders from his desk. "I meant to take these home with me but forgot."

"Can we go now?" Cory asked.

"Yep, let's go."

Rebecca Gosling was standing at the reception counter as they emerged from the corridor. "Ah, Paul, I thought I heard voices."

Cory took a step backwards, knocking Peter out of sight around the corner.

"Rebecca, what are you doing here? I thought you were based in Canberra now."

"I am, but head office needed a few things that couldn't wait until Monday. Is that your son Cory?"

Paul ushered Cory around in front of him. "Say hello to Dr Gosling; she won't bite you."

"Hello Dr Gosling."

A puzzled expression crossed Rebecca's face as she shook his hand. "This might seem an odd thing to say, Cory, but are you a time-bender, what we call a singleton?"

"What do you mean?"

"Occasionally the flow of time can split, taking two divergent paths for a while until one of them dominates. Most people are duplicated in each one, with no knowledge or memory of the other path, but a singleton is unique, experiencing each path sequentially. Does that sound familiar?"

Cory nodded.

"It's a rare gift, but some can even create such time cusps, allowing them to test each option before choosing the right one. Can you do that?"

"No, it just happens sometimes, usually if I'm scared."

"My father has the same thing," Paul said, "but I guess I missed out."

"Really? Now that's interesting, I must say. Well if you'll excuse me, Cory, I have to grab some things from the accounts department before I head back to the airport. It's been nice meeting you."

"Yeah," Cory said as Rebecca turned on her heels and marched out the door.

Peter stepped from the corridor, giving Cory a confused look.

"I'll tell you later," he whispered as his father signed them out of the visitors' book.

Paul pressed the button for the lift. "The railway station's just a few blocks down; let's go see those telescopes."

"What was all that with Dr Gosling?" Peter asked Cory while his father was buying the train tickets. "I don't care what she says, you're not a simpleton."

Cory laughed. “No, it’s *singleton*, something I inherited from Granddad I think. It’s like she said; sometimes, if I’m really scared, I can change the way things happen.”

Peter shivered, half remembering something Rebecca Gosling had said in what now seemed like a strange day-dream. *Barrad may have executed the wrong boy*. “One of those cusp things happened in the foyer, didn’t it?”

“Yes, Peter, but I went back and changed it. Don’t ask me how, because I don’t know.”

“Um, the same thing happened the day I met you, didn’t it? At first, you were Mr Grumpy –”

Cory smiled. “I thought I’d just imagined that. I panicked when your car pulled up, suddenly afraid you’d turn out to be one of those mean boys, so I tried to disguise myself.”

“The shirt, jeans and shoes.”

“Yes, but I didn’t know that really happened.”

“I suppose in a way it didn’t, not really, but I wonder how it is I remember.” Something echoed in the back of Peter’s mind, something about a showground in Brisbane and a lost Aboriginal boy. He grimaced.

“What’s wrong, Peter?”

“I, no, I’m not sure –”

Paul stepped back to them, handing them their tickets. “The next train’s on platform three; all set?”

“Yep,” Cory said, giving Peter a wink.

* * *

Rebecca Gosling poured herself a drink. “So Cory Matheson’s a singleton; now that *is* interesting.”

Interlude

Pedro looked around as the boat's damp wooden deck materialised under his feet. Fog still enveloped the fabled craft as it plied the River Styx.

"What are you doing back here?" Charon asked. "I thought you'd be taking Peter's place."

"I was sorely tempted, but my good side got the better of me."

"You were always too sentimental. So, did Peter move to Avalon?"

"I'm not sure, as the Barradhim killed me before I could find out, but I left a message for Elko with someone trustworthy."

"Ah, the lovely Elissi."

"Yes."

"Smitten, were we?"

"Who, me?" Pedro's expression darkened. "Is her betrayal of Peter the reason he never had any relationships throughout his life?"

"You'll have to ask him, but I doubt he even knows himself."

"Elissi said there was a great sadness in him."

"She's very observant. Those events you intervened in left deep scars in his psyche, even though he lost all memory of them."

"He did?"

"Of course; that was the job of Cory and his friends."

Pedro snapped his fingers. "That explains why I can't remember that part of our shared childhood. So all's well that ends well."

Charon raised his head, looking from side to side. "No, there's something still not right about the flow of time; something still festers at its core."

"Tivinel."

"What?"

"I think there were Tivinel amongst the Barradhim."

"What makes you say that?"

“I witnessed an incident of undeniable telepathy, yet the Eridanians aren’t supposed to possess that ability.”

“You’re right, they don’t. But why Tivinel?”

“A process of elimination, as they weren’t Elves, Barefooters or Barungi. But, um, that can’t be right either, as they still had Eridanian feet.”

Charon pulled up his cassock, revealing his feet for the first time.

“No, that can’t be! Does that mean *all* Eridanians are Tivinel?”

“Not at all, Pedro. With the fall of Huntress long ago, some of the Tivinel fled to your galaxy, forming a colony on Eridani and influencing the evolution of that world’s human species. In the vanity of my kin, they created the northern Eridanians in their own image. I thought they’d all died out eons ago, but apparently not.”

“When the Barradhim disbanded, I wonder what became of the infiltrators. Jameed is still living in August and his parents will be dead, but there must have been others, I’m sure.”

“We have serious work to do, young Pedro. Now that the Barungi have returned to Huntress, any living Tivinel pose a great risk to everything.”

“How’s that?”

“Did you ever hear of the Pasha, the ancient kings of Huntress?”

“Someone mentioned something, I’m sure.”

“They were the omniscient spawn of Barungi and Tivinel. The last one, Drago by name, was but a spoiled child and almost brought ruin to the civilised universe.”

“Gosh.”

“If allowed to fully develop, another such as him would be unstoppable.”

“Except by us.”

Charon smiled. “Yes, but only with help from an unlikely source.”

Part Two

Wild Berries and Yams



Nature Boy

“Sunshine Airlines welcomes passengers travelling on flight 387 to Melbourne. Please have your boarding passes ready for checking at the gate.”

“Have a wonderful time,” Jill Morison said, hugging her son, “and don’t go making a nuisance of yourself.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

She gave him a final inspection before pushing his hair back and kissing him on the forehead. “You really should’ve had your hair cut, sweetie.”

“When I get back, I promise.”

“Very well then, off you go.” She turned him around and nudged him towards the Collins family. “Don’t forget to call me when you arrive.”

“I won’t.”

“All set?” Lorina asked as he joined them at the end of the queue.

“You bet!”

Loraine turned towards him, smiling to greet him, but suddenly her jaw dropped. “What happened to your hair?”

“What do you mean?”

He tried running his hands through his long shaggy locks but found only a bald scalp instead. “What? How? This can’t be happening!”

Loraine covered her mouth. “Wh-what are those things on your feet?”

He looked down, expecting to see his well-tanned bare toes, only to discover they were encased in fluorescent pink sneakers.

“NOOOOOOO! I haven’t been in any fights, honest!”

Joel woke, a scream choked in his throat. He gasped, uncertain where he was or why he was suddenly lying down, but the fresh

mountain air and warm sleeping bag around him soon vanquished the remnants of his nightmare. Checking that he hadn't woken Loraine, he quietly unzipped himself and crept out of the tent.

The sun hadn't yet risen, but the glow on the eastern horizon suggested dawn wasn't far off. He stepped over to the edge of their campsite, finding a comfortable-looking rock on which to perch and relishing the sandstone's cold caress on his bare buttocks.

Below him, in a vista straight out of the travel guides, eucalypt forest gave way to mist-straddled coastal plains stretching out to a distant sea as still as the proverbial mill pond. The lightest of breezes tussled his hair, reminding him of that horrible dream. Running his fingers through each lock, he made sure the phantom barber hadn't snuck into their tent during the night, but all was well. He took another deep breath of the mountain air, letting a grin of pure satisfaction spread across his face. There could be nothing better than this, absolutely nothing.

He turned his head as soft footsteps approached from behind. Loraine, also naked, sat beside him, before putting an arm around his shoulders and kissing him gently on the nose.

"I tried not to wake you," he said.

"It wasn't you; I just needed to watch the dawn."

"It's so beautiful I could sit here forever."

She kissed him again, this time on the cheek.

A kookaburra began its morning serenade, soon joined by several others of its clan.

"Hey, they're laughing at us," Joel said.

"They're just envious, that's all."

"And so they should be."

Away in the distance, the sea burst into orange fire as the sun's disc crept over the horizon. Even the kookaburras stopped their chatter to watch.

Loraine reached across with her other hand, running her finger down the centre of Joel's chest, but he gently stopped her. "You can touch me anywhere you want, but please don't do that."

"Why? What's wrong?"

“Back when we were on Meridian, the female yowie did that with her claw, and I still have nightmares in which my guts spill out and make a horrible mess across the studio floor.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry Joel, I never realised. Is that what woke you this morning?”

“No, it was a different nightmare.”

“Poor Joel.” She wrapped both arms around him, kissing him again on the cheek. “You were so brave the way you stood up to those yowies.”

“I never meant to be; that’s what makes it so scary.”

“I know it’s easy to say and ever so hard to do, but you have to put all that behind you and look to the future. Your life ahead’s going to be fun, exciting and, above all, safe.”

“I know, but my dreams have other ideas.”

“Maybe in the future you’ll be dreaming about this place and the beautiful sunrise we just witnessed.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.” He stood, stretching. “I’ll get breakfast on so we can make an early start, I guess. Do you want me to stoke up the fire for some toast, or will just cereal do?”

“Just cereal, thanks.”

He nodded before rummaging through his backpack to find the plastic bowls and spoons.

“Dry or with milk?”

“Milk thanks.”

“I have mine dry.”

“Yes, I know.”

“The same as yesterday morning, right?”

“Yes, and the morning before too.”

“Predictability is nice.”

“So is variety.”

“Not if it involves soggy cereal.”

Loraine sighed.

“All set?” Joel asked as he pulled on his board shorts.

Loraine zipped up her backpack. “Yep, let’s go.”

Joel was about to start walking when a noise in the undergrowth stopped him. “What’s that?”

As they watched, an echidna waddled out onto the track in front of them, completely oblivious to the two people standing there.

“Look at it,” Loraine said. “It’s so cute.”

“Be careful of the spurs on its back legs; they can give you a nasty jab. Did you know they’re one of only two species of egg-laying mammals?”

“The other one being the platypus, right?”

“Exactly. You know I read somewhere that male echidnas have a four-headed penis.”

“Gosh. All the better to turn on those lady echidnas.”

A puzzled expression crossed Joel’s face. “I guess so.”

“Look, it’s sniffing out that trail of ants.”

“Echidna breakfast.”

“I think I’ll stick to soggy cereal.”

Joel screwed up his face in revulsion. “I’d rather eat ants.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Joel looked back at the echidna as it flashed out its tongue to grab an unsuspecting ant. “We should press on and leave it to dine in peace.”

Loraine hoisted her backpack over her shoulders, sighing as he strode off down the track without waiting for her.

“Joel, look at those beautiful pink wildflowers over there! Aren’t they just gorgeous?”

“Actually, while they look pink to us, they’re really designed to attract insects which can see into the ultraviolet range. To them, they’re probably a sort of super purple, or perhaps some other colour we just can’t comprehend.”

Loraine frowned. “Honestly, Joel, you’re about as romantic as a block of wood.”

Joel giggled.

“What?”

“My dad has a carpenter friend and to him blocks of wood are very romantic.”

“Is there anything that excites you, gives you that special *tingle* inside?”

“You mean like sherbet?”

“Never mind.”

Clambering down a flight of rocky steps, they reached a creek crossing with a large pool just upstream of the ford.

“This must be Dead Cow Creek,” Joel said.

“Inspiring name; that must have taken a lot of thought.”

“It’s probably to discourage tourists, like Sandfly Bay over on the coast.”

Loraine chuckled. “You mean there really aren’t any sandflies there?”

“Not a one, but the locals get to keep their fishing spots all to themselves.”

“Nice one. So, assuming there aren’t really dead cows floating in this creek, do you want to go for a swim? That waterhole looks so inviting!”

“You bet!” Joel said, pulling off his board shorts.

“Hang on, I don’t get it. All summer you’ve worn nothing but those swimming trunks, yet now that we’re going swimming you take them off. How come?”

“I don’t want to be walking in wet clothes afterwards. Besides, skinny-dipping is much more fun, and, um, even romantic.”

Loraine smiled as she started removing her tank top and shorts. “You’re right.”

Joel leapt into the water, the splash sending a flock of startled gulls squawking into the sky. “Me Nature Boy!”

“You are indeed,” she said, easing herself into the water and swimming out to him. He flicked his hand across the surface, splashing her in the face.

“This means war,” she said, splashing him back.

Joel pointed over Loraine’s shoulder. “Look!”

“What?”

As she turned her head, he dived and grabbed her legs, pulling her down. They grappled underwater, each trying to keep the other down until both ran out of air. Surfacing, they looked into each other’s eyes, Loraine’s goofy grin a perfect match for Joel’s.

“Um, Loraine,” Joel said as they lay drying themselves on the sun-warmed rocks. “I was wondering, like, would you, um, do you want to get married?”

“What, to you?”

“Well, yeah, um, if you really want to. Not straight away, of course, but, um –”

Loraine sighed. “Are you sure you really love me, Joel?”

“Of course I do. You and David have been my best friends, well practically my only friends, since we first met, and, um, we get along pretty well, don’t we?”

Loraine put a hand on Joel’s shoulder. “It’s fine for you and David to be best mates and hang out together or go hiking in the mountains to check out the ultraviolet vision of insects, but with me there has to be more. I’m a woman and have different needs; I’m not David’s twin!”

Joel looked confused. “You mean he’s not really your brother?”

If ever there was a moment Loraine wanted to strangle him, this was it. Instead she burst out laughing. “Oh Joel, you moron, you absolutely adorable moron, come here and I’ll show you exactly what I mean.”



“So, um, that was nice,” Joel said.

“Just *nice*?”

“Well, more than nice I guess; it was the nicest thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I should be the surprised one; I never expected you’d be able to, um –”

Joel blushed. “Either did I. So, will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Marry me.”

Loraine placed a hand under Joel’s head while running the other through his hair. “I suppose if it doesn’t work out, I could always

accuse you of killing a baby dolphin so the courts would dissolve our marriage and send you to prison for life.”

“That’s a bit drastic, isn’t it? Couldn’t we just get a divorce?”

“The Delphinidae don’t do divorce.”

“Oh.”

“But, well, hopefully it won’t come to that.”

“I’m not sure, I mean, if that’s the only option –”

Loraine grinned. “I’m just pulling your leg, Joel. Honestly, you’re so gullible.”

“Oh, right.”

She kissed him, not a Delphinidae peck on the nose this time but a full-blown Earthling kiss. “Yes, Joel, I’d be delighted to become your wife.”

“Really, truly?”

“Yes, really truly. Now we’re just going to have to figure out how to explain this to our parents.”

* * *

“You want to do WHAT?” Jack Morison asked.

“I’m getting married,” Joel said.

“To a woman?”

“Yes, Loraine Collins.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jill said. “You’re both far too young.”

“I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks and then you won’t be able to stop me!”

Jill put her hand over her mouth. “You haven’t got her pregnant, have you?”

“Don’t be silly,” Jack said. “He wouldn’t know how to.”

Joel fumed.

“You mark my words, Joel Morison,” Jill said. “It’ll end in tears once that poor girl figures out what you’re really like.”

Joel turned and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

“It looks like that went well,” Loraine said.

“Like having root canal, only worse. Mum said it’ll end in tears when *that poor girl figures out what you’re really like.*”

“As if I haven’t figured that out already.”

Joel stared at her before bursting into laughter. “I am a bit weird, aren’t I?”

“Of course, but marrying someone normal would go against the Collins family tradition.”

“Speaking of which, I guess we should pluck up the courage to see how your parents react.”

“Relax, Joel; they’ll be over the moon, I promise.”

“Do you want me to wait outside?” Joel asked.

“No, you don’t get out of it that easily. *United we stand* and all that.”

Loraine opened the door, pulling Joel through behind her.

“You’re back!” Loraine said, hugging each of them in turn. “Mark, Loraine and Joel are back!”

“Did you have a nice time?” Mark asked as he dashed into the living room.

“Fantastic,” Loraine said. “Look, we have something to tell you.”

“We’re getting married,” Joel said before he could stop himself.

“That’s nice. Did you see any platypuses?”

“No, but an echidna walked out onto the track right in front of us, feasting on a line of ants.”

“Awesome.”

“Hang on, dear,” Loraine said. “Loraine, did Joel just say you two were getting married?”

“Yeah, he proposed to me, sort of, and I accepted.”

“I knew it’d happen! Congratulations!” She gave them each another hug. “I’ll have to start organising everything right away. Mark, go tell your parents and grandparents; they’ll be tickled pink!”

Mark ambled out to the kitchen, beckoning Joel to join him. Joel gulped, giving Loraine a fearful look before following.

“Take a seat, Joel,” Mark said, turning to the refrigerator and grabbing a couple of beers. “Cheers.”

“Thanks. I guess, um, I guess you’re not angry then.”

“Angry? Good heavens, Joel, Loraine and I have known you two were made for each other from the day you met. Do you remember

that stand we had outside the pizza shop when we were promoting the school?”

“How could I forget? I felt like an absolute dork.”

“You didn’t make much of an impression on David, but Loraine was smitten.”

“Gosh. So was I, if the truth be known.”

“I know; I saw your face when she came running up from the beach.”

Joel blushed.

“Of course you know Lorina is still technically the Delphinidae High Priestess, so the wedding will have to be a grand affair with dignitaries aplenty from Bluehaven and Meridian. The Supreme Councillor himself will probably come.”

“Michael Chandler?”

Mark nodded. “You met him during our little adventure a few years back, didn’t you?”

“Yeah; he struck me as being a bit odd.”

“He was a troubled man back then, but Frank says he’s put all that behind him and is doing a fine job.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Um, Mark, will the wedding have to be on Bluehaven or can we have it here?”

“I’m sure you can have it here if that’s what you both want.”

Joel breathed a sigh of relief. “I do, really.”

“And Loraine?”

“I haven’t asked her yet.”

“Make sure you do, and a word of advice, Joel; make sure she thinks it’s her decision.”

“I will, yes.”

“Good.” Mark grinned at him. “Can I get you another beer?”

As he opened the fridge, David wandered in to join them. “I’ll have one too, Dad.”

“You don’t turn eighteen for another six months, but I suppose under the circumstances –”

“Thanks, Dad. So, I hear I’m about to acquire a brother-in-law.”

“Yeah,” Joel said. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Nah, I knew it’d happen eventually.”

“Good; in that case you can be Best Man.”

“Okay, as long as I don’t have to wear a tux.”

Joel looked at Mark, who grinned.

“Getting you to put on any clothes at all would be an achievement, Davie, but I’m sure we can accommodate you. Your grandfather will no doubt be done up in his ceremonial loincloth and body paint, so you can do likewise if you want.”

“Cool.”

“I wish I had Aboriginal blood in me so I could do the same,” Joel said.

Mark grinned again. “You’re still officially a Black Delphinidae acolyte, so your school shorts should pass as formal dress.”

“Great, I never thought of that!”

“Will Damon be conducting the service?” David asked.

“Either him or Pip.”

“Cool. You should get married more often, Joel.”

“Don’t worry, son,” Mark said, “your turn will come soon enough, I’m sure. You’re bound to meet someone nice at the university on Cornipus.”

David chuckled. “I’d rather someone naughty, Dad.”

“Be careful what you wish for, son.” Mark ruffled his hair as Loraine and Lorina came in to join them.

“Have you called your parents and grandparents yet?”

Mark put down his beer, stood and went to the phone.

“They’re all coming around for dinner,” Mark said. “Do you want to stay, Joel?”

“Yeah, sure. I don’t think Mum and Dad want me anywhere near their place tonight.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“They don’t approve of our marriage.”

“Leave it to me,” Lorina said. “I’ll have a talk to Jill and in the meantime you’re welcome to bunk down here.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, Joel,” Mark said, “there’s been a bit of a snag with the organisers for the symposium in Sydney, and I was wondering if you’d mind going down a few days early to help set up.”

“No, that’s fine.”

Joel glanced at Loraine, who shook her head. “I have an appointment on Friday afternoon that I can’t get out of, but you go.”

Joel looked crestfallen. “I, um, no, that’s okay. I can meet you at Sydney airport on Friday night. What gate does your flight arrive at?”

“I have no idea, and they change it all the time anyway, so you’ll just have to check the indicator boards when you get there.”

“Oh, right, yeah sure.”

“It’s settled then?” Mark said. “Excellent. Granddad will arrange your flight booking, Joel, so all you have to do is turn up here on Tuesday morning.”

“No worries, Mark.”

“You’ll have to start calling me *Dad*, Joel.”

Joel gulped, suddenly wondering if he’d bitten off more than he could chew.

A Kindred Spirit

Joel was late. Not that this was anything unusual; his father often told him he'd be late for his own funeral. This time, though, Loraine was waiting for him and that meant he was *seriously* late.

"Oomph!" he said, almost barrelling into an elderly man in a wheelchair as he dashed around the corner towards Terminal Gate 27.

"Whoops-a-daisy," the man said.

"Sorry."

"That's okay; no harm done, but since you're here, I wonder if you could tell me where the Tucker Bag souvenir shop is?"

"Sorry, I'm from Queensland and as much a tourist in Sydney as you are."

The man shrugged. "That's okay; it was worth a try. I'm after something relating to your Aboriginal culture."

"I'm sure someone will know; just wait here and I'll see if I can find out. I'm Joel, by the way."

"Joey Red Wolf. Please don't go to any trouble; you're clearly in a hurry to be somewhere else."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Joey, and no, it's okay, really. I'm so late now another few minutes won't matter. You're, um, American, aren't you?" Joel was immediately sure he'd just stuck his foot straight into his mouth, expecting the man to be Canadian, or, more likely, a Lithuanian speaking with an American accent, but then he noticed the distinctive reddish-brown colouring of the man's skin. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, he thought. "Native American, am I right?"

Joey smiled. "I'm Cheyenne, so yes, you're right."

"Awesome, I mean, it's just that my fiancée is part native Australian, although you'd never know it by looking at her. Her brother, on the other hand, is as black as – oops, sorry."

“Nothing to be sorry about, Joel; I’d love to meet them if I could. My wife and I are here for the symposium on extra-terrestrial links to indigenous cultures and I expect we’ll be meeting quite a few Aboriginal Australians while we’re here.”

Joel’s jaw dropped. “Loraine’s great-grandfather will be giving the keynote address; that’s why we’re in Sydney too!”

“We’ll no doubt bump into each other again, then, although hopefully not quite as literally next time.”

Joel blushed. “Look, if you’re after souvenirs relating to Aboriginal culture, you should give the shops a miss and ask Billy; he has a garage full of stuff he inherited from his father’s farm in Narrabri.”

“Thanks, but I wouldn’t want to impose –”

“He’d welcome it, I’m sure. His wife is always complaining about the amount of clutter he’s accumulated. Anyway, most of the stuff in the shops isn’t genuine; it’s imported from the Antares system.”

“Really?”

“Why it’s cheaper to fly it across five hundred light years than to make it locally is beyond me, but somehow it is.”

“We have the same problem in America, but don’t get me started on that subject or your fiancée will have given up waiting and married someone else. I’d better be getting back to my wife to pass on your advice.”

“Nice meeting you, Joey.”

Joey pushed forward on the wheelchair’s joystick, but nothing happened. “Joel, before you go, would you mind checking the power switch on the back of my chair, as it sometimes trips out.”

“Sure, no worries.” Joel flicked the switch up and down a few times. “Try it now.”

Joey pushed forward again on the stick, but the chair remained stationary.

“Uh oh, there’s a warning message flashing back here saying *subspace power module failure*.”

Joey sighed. “I knew I should’ve had it replaced before I left home. They’re imported from the Antares as well, you know.”

“That figures. Can I give you a push back to your wife?”

“If you’re sure I’m not keeping you –”

“Don’t be silly.” Joel grabbed hold of the handles on the back of the chair. “Which way?”

“She’s over at the clothing store near Gate 17. Speaking of which, I see we share a common taste in footwear, or should I say a lack thereof.”

Joel stared down at his own bare feet before glancing across at Joey’s. “Yeah, I never wear shoes. Just the thought of them makes me queasy.”

“Good for you. Bare feet are part of my calling to our *nature ways* but are quite rare in my country, which is why I noticed yours. I’ve heard they’re much more common in Australia, though.”

“More so up in Queensland where I’m from than here in Sydney, I think, but yeah, I guess so. At home there are always lots of barefoot people about so I never give it much thought; it’s just how I am, I suppose.”

Joey smiled. “I sense something of the *nature ways* in you too, Joel. The *Great Spirit* is strong in your soul, I’m sure.”

“The *Great Spirit*?”

“In our culture, Maheo, the *Great Spirit*, is the creator of all things.”

“At my school they worship dolphins, or at least the Black Dolphin, but Pip said that in truth, all things are the same.”

“That is indeed a universal truth.”

Joel stopped pushing as an elderly woman approached them.

“Ah, here’s my wife so you can dash off now with a clear conscience. Ashley, this helpful young man here is Joel.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Joel,” she said, offering her hand.

“Likewise, I’m sure. I hope you have a nice time in Australia.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks so much for your help,” Joey said, offering his hand, but his expression darkened as they touched.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your soul shines brightly in the spirit realm. Be very careful, Joel, for not all spirits are powers for good.” Joey looked away as if searching for a lost memory. “Once as a child I touched that place and felt the powers of darkness, leaving a deep scar that still sometimes haunts my dreams. I wish you a better fate, my friend.”

“Um, thanks.”

Loraine glared at Joel as he skidded to a halt in front of her. “Where the hell have you been?”

“I, um, I was helping an old man in a wheelchair. He’s a Native American over here for the symposium.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and he was barefoot too. He said he never wears shoes on account of his tradition.”

“I thought they always wore moccasins or something.”

Joel grimaced.

“What?”

“I was just remembering those pink sneakers my mum almost bought me to wear on our trip to Victoria.”

Loraine giggled. “That would’ve been a sight, I’m sure. Poor Joel.” She kissed him on the nose while running her hands through his long shaggy hair. “Your parents really don’t understand you, do they?”

“Not in the slightest. Dad once told me that my conception was unintentional; what he really wanted was a dog.”

“That’s a strange way to go about getting one. I’d have thought a visit to the pet shop would’ve been better.”

Joel blushed. “Not as much fun, though.”

“Speaking of which, have you given any more thought to our honeymoon?”

“Yeah, um, remember that book Mum gave me for my thirteenth birthday?”

“*A Parallel Path*?”

“That’s the one. How would you like to give the Camino a try?”

“All fifteen hundred kilometres of it?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“We’d be barefoot, of course.”

“Of course, just like Nastasha and Dominic.”

Loraine grinned. “You’re on.”

* * *

“Dr Collins?” Joey asked.

“You must be Joey Red Wolf. Please call me Billy.”

“I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“I insist. Anyway, there are three of us here called *Dr Collins* so it would get a bit confusing.”

“Of course, Jason and Jennifer; I’ve heard a lot about them.”

“Don’t say that to Jase; he hates being famous as much as I hate being called *Dr Collins*.”

“What is it I hate, Dad?” Jason asked as he approached them.

“Jase, this is Joey Red Wolf from America.”

“Pleased to meet you, Joey. I enjoyed your presentation this afternoon.”

“Thank you.”

“Say, why don’t you and your wife join us for dinner?”

“We couldn’t possibly impose –”

“Nonsense, we’d love the company. I believe you already know our granddaughter’s fiancé.”

“Joel? Yes, a remarkable young man, I’m sure.”

“Loraine seems to think so anyway.”

Billy nodded. “You should talk to Peter Thorpe about him. He has a pet theory about our nature boy.”

“It’s interesting that you should call him that, as I follow our people’s *nature ways* and sensed something very similar in him.”

“You and Peter must definitely exchange notes. It’s settled, then; you’ll join us tonight?”

“Ashley?”

“That’s fine with me,” Joey’s wife said, “although I hope we don’t have to dress up.”

Billy and Jason both laughed. “With so much autothermia in our family, dressing up is never an option.”

“Where are you staying?” Jason asked.

“We’re in the Kingsgate Hotel.”

“Fine, Jenny and I will pick you up at seven if that’s okay with you.”

“I look forward to it.”

The outdoor seating at the restaurant in Woolloomooloo afforded expansive views across Sydney Harbour, with a light north-easterly sea breeze providing welcome relief from the hot summer's day as the sun set behind the city buildings.

"Glad you could come," Peter said, standing and moving aside seats to allow room for Joey's wheelchair.

"Oh my, I feel positively overdressed," Joey said, contrasting Jason's bare chest and Billy's and Peter's tank tops to his own long-sleeved shirt and jeans.

"Wait till my grandson David arrives," Jason said, chuckling. "It'll be a minor miracle if he's wearing any clothing at all."

Right on cue, David sauntered in, dressed to the nines in a pair of swimming trunks. Jason did the introductions.

"I'm pleased to meet you, David," Ashley said. "Are you also a nature boy?"

"No, he's just lazy," Jenny quipped before David could respond. "A good thing he'll be studying at Apogee University on Cornipus as clothing is optional for students there."

"Gran's right," David said, chuckling. "Clothes just annoy me, that's all, and are pretty useless for someone with my skin colour. Loraine and Joel are the great nature lovers, although I don't mind joining them on the odd hike now and then."

"Ashley and I follow our people's *nature ways*," Joey said. "We live in a humble dwelling deep in the woods, where the natural world provides both our spiritual teaching and our nourishment."

"Joey is a healer," Ashley said, "following on from his grandfather Ben."

"Funny you should say that," Peter said, "for Joel carries many of his grandfather's traits. These things must skip every second generation, it seems."

"For us it's not so simple. Our youngest child, also a follower of the nature ways, has become our community's medicine keeper, although Joey still looks after the Elders and any more difficult cases. A Spirit Healer such as he is quite rare, perhaps appearing just once in every two hundred years."

David nodded. "It's much the same in my birth galaxy. Pip Ingle, Emissary of the Black Dolphin, is the first of his kind in over a

million years, but there were, as they say, extenuating circumstances. We hope it won't be as long a wait for the next one."

"Joel told me that, in truth, all things are the same," Joey said. "I wonder now, given what I sensed in him – did you know his grandfather, Peter?"

"Yes, Cory and I were best friends at high school and during our early years at university, although he studied engineering whereas I did science so we eventually drifted apart. Cory was also a nature boy; he and I often went hiking in Kuring-Gai Chase National Park near where we lived in Avalon, but his real passion was always the ocean. At every opportunity he'd be down at the beach, either swimming or walking around the headlands investigating rock formations and the tiny ecosystems inside tidal pools."

Joey smiled. "That reminds me of my own childhood down at my favourite spot on Beaver Creek. I could sit there for hours watching the wildlife."

"That's where we first found our love for each other," Ashley said. "I'll never forget the beautiful heart he made for me with pebbles; it said so much more to me than words could ever do."

Joey blushed. "I wasn't much good with words back then, so I had to improvise."

Ashley kissed him as a waiter approached their table. "Are you ready to order now?"

"No," Billy said. "There's still two more to come."

"Here they are now," Jenny said as Loraine and Joel dashed towards them.

"Sorry we're late; Joel took a wrong turn and we ended up in La Perouse."

Joel brushed his hair from his eyes before pulling out a chair for Loraine. "Sorry, I must have had the map upside down when I was planning our route."

David rolled his eyes. "Maybe if you had a haircut you'd be able to see where you're going."

"Not you too," Joel said, sighing. "I get enough of that from my dad."

"Do you like wearing your hair long, Joel?" Ashley asked.

“Yeah, I do; I always have for as long as I can remember. Every trip to the barber was an ordeal for me.”

“Having long free-flowing hair is a part of our nature ways, for Joey and myself.”

David smirked. “Joel’s isn’t free-flowing; it’s just a tangled mess.”

“It’s natural and part of who he is,” Loraine said, running her fingers through it and tussling it into an even greater tangle.

“We’re kindred spirits indeed, Joel,” Joey said, smiling. “Just remember what I told you at the airport.”

Joel nodded as the waiter returned to take their orders.

“That was delicious,” Joey said, wiping his mouth with the napkin. “I haven’t had food like that since, well, since Ashley’s last home-cooked meal.” Ashley patted him on the shoulder as he pulled out his wallet. “What do we owe you?”

Billy stood, looking as menacing as a ninety-six-year-old grown-up skinny little kid possibly could. “Put that away. This is our shout.”

“No, I couldn’t –”

“Joey, in this country we have a tradition of shouting, and I don’t mean speaking with a loud voice. You don’t want to buck with tradition, do you?”

Joey smiled. “No, not if you put it like that. You must let me make it up to you some day, though.”

“Of course; perhaps Julia and I could come and see your beautiful Beaver Creek when the opportunity arises.”

“That’d be wonderful,” Ashley said. “Please do.”

“For sure,” Julia said. “Once Loraine and Joel are safely on their honeymoon and David’s off studying, we’ll see what we can do.”

“We’d be honoured to have you as our guests,” Joey said. “And anyone else who wants to come too.”

Jason looked at Jenny. “We wouldn’t mind coming if you have room for two more.”

“A tent will be fine if you don’t,” Jenny said.

Joey nodded. “We have tee-pees aplenty, but I’m sure we can fit you in.”

“When do you head back to the USA?” Julia asked.

“Our flight’s tomorrow morning.”

“Have a safe trip home,” Billy said. “I’ll be in touch.”

* * *

Joel opened the front door of his parents’ house.

“Joel, is that you?” Jill called out from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I hope you’re not still angry with me.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” she said, wrapping him in a hug. “You took us by surprise, that’s all.”

“It’s not that we didn’t mean what we said,” Jack said, “but perhaps we could’ve been a little more diplomatic.”

Jill glared at him. “Pay no attention to your father, Joel. You know what he’s like.”

“Loraine’s parents think it’s wonderful,” Joel said.

“Yes, Loraine called me. Look, sweetie, we didn’t want to bother you while you were down in Sydney, but we have some bad news I’m afraid.”

“What’s happened?”

“Your grandmother died a couple of days ago.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry. I know she’s been sick for a long time, but –
..

“Yes, it’s never easy, son,” Jack said, “but no-one lives forever. The funeral’s tomorrow if you want to go.”

Joel’s blood started to boil. “Of course I want to go. What do you think I am?”

“Take it easy, sweetie,” Jill said. “I know it’s been a terrible shock. Mum always said you were so much like your grandfather when he was young.”

“I, I always thought they didn’t know each other until much later in life. Grandad was, what, forty when you were born, wasn’t he?”

“No, they first met at university, but their careers separated them until by chance they crossed paths again some twenty years later, and lucky for me they did.”

“That’s why I have to marry Loraine now. David’s already going off to Cornipus to study and if I hadn’t asked her, she could, she could go anywhere and I’d never see her again.”

Now Jack bristled. “You mean you’re marrying her to stop her going off on a career of her choosing? That’s a tad selfish, Joel, isn’t it?”

“No Dad, that’s not it at all. Whatever Loraine wants to do, that’s fine with me, but wherever she goes, I have to be there with her. How, how could you possibly think –”

It was all too much. Jill wrapped him in another hug as his tears flowed freely down his cheeks. “I know, sweetie, I know, it’s just that –”

Joel straightened himself up while wiping his face with the crook of his arm. “It’s just what, Mum?”

“There was something about your grandfather, something he inherited, but they never told me much, only that they thought it had passed to you. It’s why you’re like you are; you know, awkward and strange.”

Joel could feel his blood starting to boil again. “What is it you’re not telling me, Mum?”

“I don’t know, honestly. You should talk to Peter Thorpe; he knew your grandfather at school.”

“He what? Why didn’t I ever know any of this?”

“I’m sorry; we’d always hoped it wouldn’t matter, but given Loraine’s heritage, well – that’s why we were so shocked when you said you were marrying her.”

“I see.” Joel gave his face another wipe. “I guess I’m going to have to talk to Peter, then.”

“That’d be best, I’m sure.”

* * *

Joel stepped outside, blinking in the bright sunshine after the gloom of the crematorium chapel. He looked around, scratching his head, until catching sight of Peter Thorpe.

“Um, excuse me, Peter.”

“Oh, hi Joel; I’m so sorry about your grandmother.”

“Thanks. I’ll miss her terribly, but she was pretty old I guess.”

“She was the same age as me!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean –”

“No, that’s okay. What can I do for you?”

“Mum said you knew Granddad at school and that I should talk to you about why I’m like I am.”

Peter placed a hand on his shoulder, nodding in thought. “Joel, I think you’re a singleton.”

“No, I don’t wear singlets.” He lifted his shirt, just to be sure. “My dad does, but I hate them; one layer of clothing is the most I ever wear.”

Loraine squeezed his hand. “If I ever catch you wearing a singlet under your shirt, it’ll be straight to the courts for a Delphinidae-style divorce.”

Joel kissed her on the cheek. “No chance of that, my love.”

Peter laughed. “That’s good to hear, but no, I said *single-ton*, meaning you’re not replicated within time cusps.”

“Huh?”

“Joel, have you ever had second thoughts about something you’ve said or done and found yourself actually going back and doing it better?”

Joel shook his head. “If I did, I wouldn’t be saying goofy stuff all the time.”

“I’m glad you can’t,” Loraine said. “It’s that goofy stuff that makes you so adorable.”

Joel grimaced. “There was one time, though –”

Peter looked into his eyes. “Go on, Joel.”

“It happened when we were on Meridian and the yowies took Mark and that TV presenter hostage. When Rangy said they wanted to talk to me, I, um, I –”

“You don’t have to tell me if it’s too painful for you.”

Joel rubbed his eyes. “No, it’s okay. At first, things happened differently...”

“They want to talk to Joel,” Rangy said to Lorina.

“What?”

“They said they’ll only talk to him.”

“No way; absolutely not!”

Joel hesitated, only for a moment, but it was one moment too many.

“Joel shouldn’t even be here; let me talk to them,” Lorina said, striding into the studio with Rangy dashing along behind her.

With a lead weight growing inside his stomach, Joel stood glued to the floor, unable to do anything but watch as Lorina argued with the yowies, her gesticulations becoming more and more agitated.

“In that case,” one of the yowies yelled, “you give us no choice.”

Before anyone could react, it wrenched its arm back, snapping Mark’s neck.

“I swear that’s how it happened at first,” Joel said, “but in the shock something slipped inside my head, opening up possibilities and giving me a chance to put things right.”

“They want to talk to Joel,” Rangy said to Lorina.

“What?”

“They said they’ll only talk to him.”

“No way; absolutely not!”

“It’s okay, Mrs Collins,” Joel said. “I think I know why they want me.”

Loraine took hold of his hand. “It’s to do with Number Five lying down on your feet, isn’t it?”

“I think so, yes. Number Five defeated their sons then yielded to me. I think it’s highly, um, what’s the word?”

“Symbolic,” David said.

“That’s near enough. I have to do this, truly.”

Loraine glanced back and forth between her father and Joel, before releasing his hand and kissing him on the nose.

“Don’t do anything rash,” David said, hugging him. “You’re the only best mate I’ve got.”

Lorina frowned, shaking her head but making no effort to stop him as Joel walked slowly into the studio.

“Are you sure you didn’t just imagine that first version?” Loraine asked.

“I’m sure he did,” Peter said before Joel could reply, “but I think his mind may have actually created a time cusp in which those events played out.”

“Is that possible?”

“When I was eleven, Elko planted his *Seed of Remembrance* in me, allowing me to recall what happens inside time cusps. When I was with you on Meridian, there was definitely a cusp in which those events played out as Joel described.”

“So I wasn’t a hero after all?”

“Of course you were, Joel, but you tested the options in your mind before choosing the right one.”

“Peter’s right,” Loraine said, kissing him on the nose. “But how is it you have this power?”

“I think I got it from my grandfather,” Joel said. “Is that right, Peter?”

“Yes, Cory inadvertently created such a cusp on the day we first met, and later told me it’d happened on other occasions too.”

“Is there any way I can control it?”

“I don’t know. Cory couldn’t, in spite of a lifetime of trying. He told me it seemed to be completely random.”

“So how is it that my family has this thing?”

“That I’m afraid is one of life’s great mysteries.”

“Oh.”

“There’s one other thing, Joel, but I don’t know whether it’s related or even if I should be saying anything.”

“Please, tell me; I couldn’t be any more blown away than I am now.”

“Cory and I were good friends, mostly because we saw in each other a kindred spirit. We shared a keen interest in science, enjoyed outdoor activities like bushwalking and surfing, but were both socially awkward and felt like fish out of water much of the time. His parents were concerned enough to have him checked by a psychiatrist, who diagnosed Asperger’s syndrome. While I’m no expert, I suspect if you were to be tested, Joel, you’d receive a similar diagnosis.”

“Great, thanks a lot; not only do I have this whacky singlet-on thing, but now I’m a loony as well.”

“That’s not true at all, Joel, in fact Billy, Jason and I probably all have Asperger’s too if the truth be known. Many of our greatest

scientists and engineers had it, and in those professions a positive diagnosis is often seen as badge of honour.”

“But what if I don’t want to be a great scientist or engineer?”

“What do you want to be, Joel?”

“I don’t know; something to do with environmental protection would be nice, though.”

Peter smiled. “Then you’ll be just fine, I’m sure.”

“I’ll make sure you are,” Loraine said.

Nuptials

*Mr & Mrs Mark William Collins
Cordially invite you to attend the wedding ceremony
Of their daughter
Lorraine Melissa Collins
To
Joel Patrick Morison
Son of Mr & Mrs John Henry Morison
At 3pm on Saturday the 30th of May 2071
In the Delphinidae Chapel
Coolum Beach
And afterwards at the
Coolum Beach Surf Lifesaving Club
Dress is optional*

Joel ran his fingers through his hair once more, trying to tame it. He'd considered having it cut for the ceremony but Lorraine wouldn't hear of it, anyway he thought his father would take it as a victory in their ongoing war, one which he wasn't about to concede.

Checking that his Black Delphinidae shorts were set at the right distance below his navel, he took a deep breath before stepping out of the anteroom and joining his Best Man at the podium.

David, as expected, was dressed only in a red loincloth, his black skin painted in the traditional markings of his people. Although Aboriginal traditionalists might have frowned at the loincloth, David had reluctantly agreed to wear it, given the sensitivities to nudity of some of Joel's relations.

The bride's side of the congregation outnumbered the groom's by a considerable margin, with not only a vanguard of Delphinidae dignitaries from Bluehaven but that galaxy's Supreme Councillor and his retinue as well. Frank Halliday, his assistant Anton, police

Superintendent Scott Davies and military commander General Piper had been seconded to the groom's side to help balance the numbers, along with Hamati, Damien, Pip, Cloe, Clem and Mog.

Presiding over the service was Damon Enderling, Brother of the Delphinidae and now principal aide to Pip Ingle, the Black Delphinidae Emissary. In contrast to Joel's shaggy locks, Damon's beard and shoulder-length blonde hair had been neatly trimmed and groomed, making him look almost angelic in his official dress of gold-trimmed white shorts.

A commotion at the door prompted the band to begin playing *Here Comes the Bride*. The ceremonial guards stood aside as Mark led Loraine into the chapel, her traditional white gown trailing behind her.

Damon raised his hands, silencing the congregation. "In the name of Mother Loria, let us begin. Since the days of Martyn and Loria long ago, it's been an unbroken tradition that the daughter of the High Priestess, upon her marriage, becomes the next High Priestess. Loraine presents us with an unprecedented dilemma, however, as she doesn't carry the telepathic empathy that's been synonymous with her people. With the revelation that the spirit of Drago lay behind the collective consciousness of the Dolphins, much has changed in the Delphinidae, culminating in our recent reunification with Pip Ingle's Black Delphinidae, and hence by mutual consent, that tradition ends today."

The bridal side of the congregation erupted in murmuring, until Damon raised his hands again to silence them.

"Loraine, by her own volition, will receive no formal title in the Delphinidae hierarchy, while her mother, High Priestess Lorina, will remain in that role until her death, at which time the position of High Priestess will cease. Likewise, Reverend Mother Lorett will be the last to hold that title, it also being nullified upon her death.

"But enough of politics; today we have gathered to celebrate the union of Loraine, daughter of Lorina, and Joel, son of Jack. Loraine and Joel, you have come before me to be joined in wedlock and to pledge your vows before this congregation. Before we begin, are there any here present who would speak against such a union?"

Joel glanced at his father, fully expecting him to voice his objections, but he remained silent.

Damon turned to face the groom. “Do you Joel, son of Jack, take this woman before you to be your lawful wife, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?”

“I do.”

Joel wiped his brow as Damon turned to face Loraine.

“Do you Loraine, daughter of Lorina, take this man before you to be your lawful husband, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?”

Loraine gave Joel a nervous glance. “I do.”

“The rings please, David.”

“Huh?”

“Do you have the rings, David?”

David grinned while reaching into a hidden pocket in his loincloth. “Oh, yeah, right.”

Joel took the first ring from Damon, placing it on Loraine’s finger. “With this ring I thee wed.”

Loraine took the other ring, repeating the vow while placing it on Joel’s finger.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

The congregation followed as Damon led the bride and groom down the road to the beach, where they entered the water. Even though there were no longer any sentient Dolphins to bless the union, the immersion still remained an integral part of the ceremony, signifying the Delphinidae’s connection to the sea.

Once the bride, groom and celebrant were thoroughly drenched from head to toe, Damon escorted Loraine and Joel back to the shore. “Everyone, please proceed to the surf club forecourt where light refreshments will be served while the newlyweds complete the paperwork.”

David stood, tapping his glass. “On behalf of the bride and groom, I welcome you all this evening. I’ll have a bit more to say later on, but right now I’d like to introduce the father of the bride, one-time supreme ruler of the known universe or whatever, Mark the Bewildered.”

Mark raised his hands to quell the cheering and applause. “You’ll keep, son, but tonight I’m here to talk about the newest member of our family. I recall the day six years ago when Lorina and I had set up a stall outside the shops on the beachfront, trying to entice unsuspecting parents into sending their offspring to our school. It’d been a singularly unsuccessful venture and we were about to pack it in for the day when a long-haired barefoot boy approached. Something resonated, for I saw in him perhaps a reflection of myself; at any rate he wasn’t put off by the sight of me and eagerly joined our college.

“Academically, Joel has been a model student, always going the extra mile in his assignments and eager to help out in class. On the sporting field, though, he’s perhaps less adept; how many first-ball ducks did you say you’ve had?”

Joel blushed. “A hundred and forty-seven.”

“The fact that he can remember them all is an achievement in itself. But his greatest achievement occurred five years ago, when I was taken hostage by the Eridanian yowies on Meridian. In a remarkable act of self-sacrifice, Joel offered to become their pet in exchange for my life and that of a television presenter, and I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for his astounding bravery.”

Mark waited for the applause to die down, while Joel covered his face in embarrassment.

“Lorina and I accept Loraine’s and Joel’s decision to defer their university enrolment for a year while they take an extended honeymoon walking across Europe. We regret not having done something similar ourselves, but now that both our offspring are departing, perhaps we’ll have the chance. I’ve heard wonderful stories about a planet called Shimmel, but no, that can wait.

“So Joel, it gives me the greatest of pleasure to welcome you into our family. I have no doubt you and Loraine will have a long and happy life together, and you may rest assured that Lorina and I will always be there to support you in any way we can. Please be upstanding, then, and raise your glasses to our new son-in-law, Joel.”

Loraine poked Joel in the ribs, prompting him to stand once the toast had been performed. “Thank you so much, Mark; I’m truly honoured. Now, I think Dad might have something to say.”

Jack Morison stood. "Nineteen years ago, Jack and Jill went up the hill. No pails of water were fetched; instead we just wanted a little harmless fun. Certain precautions were forgotten, though, and we've borne the consequences ever since.

"Now, at last, this wonderful young lady here has relieved us of our burden. Loraine, my gratitude will be eternal.

"Joel was always an awkward child, never able to make friends, although our constant moving around perhaps contributed to that, but you and your brother embraced him and took him under your wings. I was initially upset when, a few months ago, he boldly announced his engagement to you, but while I still have reservations, I'm sure that on the whole it'll be for the best.

"It gives Jill and me the greatest of pleasure to welcome you into our family. We've decided, with Joel now safely out of our hands, to fulfil our lifelong ambition and move to Melbourne, so as our wedding gift, we're giving you our house. By the time you return from your honeymoon, it'll be all ready for you to move in and start a family of your own.

"Over the last six years you've been a wonderful friend to my son, and I've no doubt you'll go on to be his wonderful wife and the loving mother of our grandchildren. A toast, then, to our daughter-in-law Loraine."

Loraine and Joel looked at each other in puzzlement as the toast was performed.

"Don't sit down," David said to Joel. "It's your turn now."

"Gosh, what can I say? Thanks, Mum and Dad, that was totally unexpected. Wow, the house, I had no inkling at all, none whatsoever. I'm blown away, really!

"I think I'm supposed to say something about Loraine at this point. I first saw her on that day Mark mentioned, when she came running up from the beach, the water spraying off her hair like a halo in the sunlight. I couldn't imagine anyone more beautiful and that's the truth. We met again a few days later outside the barber shop, where I must have made an utter fool of myself. In spite of that, she stood up for me in the playground amidst all the name-calling, something for which I'm eternally grateful.

“Loraine is everything I could possibly want in a wife and more, much more. I know what a precious gift her love is and will do everything within my power to cherish and defend it. I’m yours forever, my love.”

He wiped his brow. “Is it suddenly hot in here? Before I pass out, I propose a toast to the lovely bridesmaids. Thanks for a fantastic job!”

“The bridesmaids!” everyone shouted as they raised their glasses.

David again stood, an evil grin on his face. “Now it’s my turn. I once said Joel was a git; well more than once, actually. Now that he’s married my sister, perhaps I should stop calling him that. Loraine said she’d kill me if I didn’t, and I know she would too. But Joel, even if that word no longer passes my lips, know that you have been, and always will be, a git.”

“And proud of it!” Joel said.

Everyone clapped and cheered.

“Seriously, though, Joel has time and again shown himself to be brave, loyal, honest, dedicated and trustworthy. Although often clumsy and inarticulate, he has a knack of always being in the right place at the right time when the chips are down.

“I’ve known since the day we met that, if he survived long enough and wasn’t put off by the strange legacies our family carries, he’d eventually become my brother-in-law. Today I welcome him to the Collins clan.”

He picked up a palette of traditional body paint. “Joel, please stand.”

David’s father Mark, grandfather Jason and great-grandfather Billy came forward to join him, each adding their own marks to Joel’s skin.

“Remember this, Joel; you’re now a marked man.”

A chill ran up Joel’s spine, as if there was more to those words than David’s jest. *Be very careful*, Joey Red Wolf had said. *Your soul shines brightly in the spirit realm.*

“What’s wrong?” Loraine asked, staring at him.

“Huh?”

“You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“More like a ghost’s just seen me.”

She shook her head, sighing before standing and clearing her throat. “This is the last speech, I promise. Like Joel, I’m totally blown away by Jack’s and Jill’s gift. Thank you so much; I’d never in a million years have expected something like that.

“Thanks, Mum and Dad, for all you’ve done for me over the years and for giving Joel such a heartfelt welcome into our family. I’m truly blessed to have had such wonderful parents.

“Thanks also to David, for his friendship and loyalty to Joel in spite of his initial misgivings. You’ve been a wonderful brother, mostly, I think, well, perhaps not, but thanks for not carrying out your threat to attend the service completely naked; I’m sure our guests appreciate your sacrifice. Those who’ve visited our house will know clothing and David don’t mix. I hope your studies on Cornipus go well and that when you come back you’ll be the fourth Dr Collins in the family.

“Of course, a wedding would be nothing without such wonderful guests. Thank you all so much for coming and making our day such a fantastic occasion. A special thanks must go to all those from Meridian, Bluehaven and Huntress who’ve come such a long way to join in our celebration.

“Lastly, but certainly not least, I give thanks to Joel for plucking up the courage to propose and for bringing such joy and amusement into my life over the past six years. I’m just so proud to be the new Mrs Morison!”

Joel stood. “Loraine, I’d be honoured if you’d join me for the first dance.”

“This’ll be a sight, I’m sure,” David said, smirking, but to his amazement, Joel didn’t trip over either his own or Loraine’s feet.

As the evening’s revelry wound down, Loraine and Joel made their final round of farewells before descending through a cloud of confetti to the waiting limousine. From the back seat, they watched the lights of the Sunshine Coast disappear behind them. Another chill ran up and down Joel’s spine.

“What’s wrong?”

“Too much champagne, I think.”

At the Brisbane spaceport, a private suborbital cruiser sat waiting for them to board. Six hours later they found themselves on the streets of Arles in southern France, holding their credentials for the *Camino de Santiago*.

The Camino

The horn's blast caused Joel to almost jump out of his skin.

"Watch out!" Loraine cried, grabbing his hand and pulling him back as the car sped by, its horn still blasting.

"Bloody Europeans driving on the wrong side of the road," Joel said, sitting down on the ground as his legs turned to rubber.

"It's not their fault. You must be more careful, Joel; I'm too young to become the dowager widow Morison."

"Sorry." He pulled a couple of muesli bars from his backpack. "Want one?"

"Thanks."

"I didn't expect we'd be criss-crossing so many busy roads."

Loraine opened the Camino app on her phone. "This looks to be about the last one, then it's cross-country to Vauvert."

The respite from the roads wasn't quite what Joel had expected, though, for the red and white markers led them onto a seemingly endless gravel path alongside a canal. "I hope it's not gravel like this all the way to Spain; it has to be worse than the damn pebblecrete footpaths back home."

Loraine skipped on ahead. "What's wrong? Have you become a tender-foot all of a sudden?"

"No way!" Taking a deep breath, he began jogging after her, surprised to find the gravel hurt less running across it than when carefully walking. *Or perhaps the pain's just too short-lived to register*, he mused.

Just as he was beginning to wonder how much more of this punishment his feet could endure, the path crossed the canal at a small bridge before opening onto a dirt track wending its way through orchards and woods.

"I must admit," Loraine said, "this is much nicer."

Joel paused, pulling his water bottle from his pack and taking a long sip while soaking up the countryside. "Yes, much better."

Birds chirped high in the trees as they passed through, while in the distance he could just make out the sound of a tractor pulling a fruit-harvester or something. He wondered what it'd be like spending the rest of his days working on a farm like this, deciding, under the warm summer sun at least, it wouldn't be bad at all.

They rounded a bend to find a middle-aged couple sitting on the side of the track, one, having removed his boot and sock, applying layers of sticking plaster to his blistered heel. "*Bonjour.*"

"G'day," Joel said without thinking.

"You must be Australian," the woman said in heavily-accented English. "That explains your bare feet."

"Yes, we're on our honeymoon."

"So are we."

"That's wonderful. Congratulations!"

"You too! I don't know how you can stand walking barefoot on the rough ground. It must hurt the soles terribly."

"No, not at all, but then neither of us have ever worn shoes."

"Amazing. Are you going all the way to Santiago?"

"We hope so."

"Joel's determined to go the whole way without wearing a shirt either," Loraine said.

"Be careful in this hot sun or you'll burn to a cinder, but you must be used to that in Australia."

"Yes, we are, but I have lots of sunscreen with me."

"I wish you well, then, although the Pyrenees can be very cold, even in summer."

"Does it snow?" Joel had never seen snow before and had no idea how cold it might be.

"Sometimes. Be sure to put a warm cloak in your pack before you get there."

"I will; thanks."

"We mustn't detain you any longer; you both have a good pilgrimage."

"You too."

“Well, will you?” Loraine asked once they were out of earshot.

“Will I what?”

“Wear a cloak through the Pyrenees.”

“Not if I can help it.”

She chuckled. “I didn’t think so. You’ll be the first pilgrim to freeze to death in the middle of summer.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine. I’m Nature Boy, remember.”

She tickled his ribs. “How could I forget?”

The dirt track through the fields abruptly ended at a small bridge over a stream, with Vauvert’s suburbia immediately on the other side.

“Bloody civilisation again,” Joel said, sighing.

“Cheer up; that means food and something cold to drink.”

“Oh, right.”

“I’ll even buy you an ice cream if you’re good.”

Joel poked his tongue out at her.

“This French bread is very nice,” Joel said.

“Yes, but we’ll probably be sick of it by the time we reach Spain.”

“How come?”

“Didn’t you notice? It’s about the *only* thing you can buy in these small towns.”

“You mean there are no fish and chip shops?”

“Not a one, if you don’t count the American hamburger chains.”

“Which I don’t. What about chicken shops?”

“Nup. Just bakeries, bakeries and more bakeries.”

“Oh no, I’ll die of junk food deprivation.”

“I’ll make sure to put that on your headstone. Some Nature Boy you’re turning out to be; you should be living off wild berries and yams.”

Joel poked his tongue out again. “Where to next?”

“Gallargues-le-Montueux, if that’s how you say it.”

“How far?”

“You don’t have sore feet already, do you?”

“Of course not; I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“You’re very curious.”

“Ha ha.”

“All right, it’s about eight kilometres.”

“Easy peasy. Is it roads or fields?”

“Mostly fields by the look of it.”

“Yay!”

“What do you reckon?” Loraine asked as they stood outside a restaurant in Gallargues-le-Montueux.

“This’ll do me.” Joel pulled a tee shirt from his backpack, slipping it on before following Loraine inside.

“You must be the Australian pilgrims,” the maître-d’ said.

“How’d you guess?”

He pointed to their feet.

“I suppose we can expect a lot of this,” Loraine said.

“Would you like to sit inside or out?”

“Outside would be nice, as long as it’s upwind of any smokers.”

“Follow me.”

Their table was in the corner of the courtyard with an overhanging olive tree providing shade from the late afternoon sun. The cool paving stones underfoot provided welcome contrast to the day’s mix of dirt tracks, bitumen and gravel.

“What are you having?” Loraine asked, glancing down the menu.

“Wild berries and yams.”

Now it was her turn to poke her tongue out.

“The polo fettuccine with mushrooms looks nice. What about you?”

“I’ll have the frogs’ legs and snails.”

“Really?”

She watched his face contort as he contemplated what such a meal might taste like.

“You’re joking, right?”

Loraine laughed. “As tempting as it sounds, I think I’ll go for the steak.”

Their orders placed, they sat back, sipping on French wine while soaking up the Mediterranean atmosphere. Across the other side of the courtyard, a blonde-headed man watched them intently.

“We’d better check in for the night,” Loraine said as they left the restaurant.

“Where do we go?”

“It says the youth hostel, which should be a couple of blocks down this way.”

Joel pulled off his shirt, smiling as the cool breeze caressed his chest and back.

Loraine pointed to a two-storey building on their right. “That’s it there.”

“Do you have your credentials?” the woman behind the desk asked. She took them, waving them in front of her credit card pod before returning them.

“Don’t you have to stamp them?”

“We haven’t done that for decades. They put microchips in the credentials now, so all we have to do is scan them and then, when you reach Santiago de Compostela, you swipe them on the machine to get the holographic record of your pilgrimage.”

“Awesome,” Joel said, but Loraine poked him in the ribs. “What?”

“They’ve taken all the romance out of it.”

“Oh, right.”

“I do have the old stamp here somewhere,” the woman said, rummaging through a drawer behind the counter. “Ah, here it is, now if I can just remember where I put the ink pad.”

After a great deal more rummaging, their credentials were eventually stamped, much to Loraine’s delight.

“Will you be staying here tonight?” the woman asked.

“Yes please.”

She removed a microchip key card from the board behind her. “Room seventeen at the top of the stairs.”

“Thanks.”

Joel was about to swipe the card when he noticed the door was already open. Inside were three double bunks, with five pilgrims in various stages of undress playing cards at a table in the corner.

“You can have the top bunk over there,” one of them said, pointing to the opposite side of the room.

“Thanks.”

Joel pulled the double sleeping bag from his pack, spreading it out across the bunk. “It’s going to be a tight squeeze.”

“Nice and cosy,” Loraine said, giggling.

“Do you want to join in the game?” one of the card-players asked.

Joel looked at Loraine, who shook her head. “Nah, we might go and sit outside for a bit.”

“Suit yourselves.”

The air outside was pleasantly cool after the heat of the day. Joel stretched out on the grass, looking at the stars. “They’re all different here, you know.”

“Yes, it’s because we’re in the northern hemisphere.”

“Really?”

Loraine sighed, not knowing whether he was really that naïve or just pulling her leg. Given his high marks in their astronomy class, though, she suspected the latter.

“Is that the constellation they call the big dipper?” she asked instead.

“I guess so, although it looks more like a saucepan to me.”

“That’d be right, always thinking with your stomach.”

“Can we see your home galaxy from here?”

“Nah, it’s too early in the year. Perhaps by the time we reach Santiago we might be able to see it, but we’ll need a really dark sky with no moon.”

“Oh.”

“Look, Joel, a shooting star!”

“Where?”

“You missed it, but I made a wish for you.”

“What did you wish for?”

“If I tell you, it won’t happen.”

“Is that like, um, the observer effect in quantum physics?”

“Yeah, sort of, I suppose.” Loraine sighed again, but Joel gently squeezed her hand.

“I always dreamt we’d be together in a place like this.”

“Me too – ouch!”

“What?”

“A bug just bit me!”

“Where?”

“On the back of my leg.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll kiss it better.”

Loraine closed her eyes as Joel applied his first aid. Before they knew it, they were making love.

By the time they returned to their room, the other pilgrims had gone to bed. As quietly as possible, they climbed onto their bunk and wriggled into their sleeping bag.

“You’re right,” Joel whispered. “This is cosy.”

Joel woke in total darkness, finding himself hanging out over a precipice. In panic, he reached back to grab something solid, which turned out to be Loraine’s arm.

“What the —” she cried, rolling towards him, but in doing so they both tumbled off the bunk, landing on the floor in a tangled mess of arms, legs and sleeping bag.

One of the other pilgrims turned on a light. “Mein Gott! Are you okay?”

“I don’t think I’ve broken anything,” Loraine said. “Joel?”

Joel moaned.

“Joel, are you hurt?”

“I – nah, I don’t think so, not really, but if you could get off me I might have a better idea.”

“Sorry.”

“Jesus, man,” another of the pilgrims said. “Just what were you two *up* to?”

“I – but – no – I just —”

“What time is it?” the third one asked.

“Four thirty.”

“Damn. Too late to go back to sleep but too early to get up.”

“Sorry.”

* * *

“Nothing’s open yet,” Loraine said, looking up and down the main street. “Do you want to wait around for breakfast or hit the road?”

“Let’s go; I’m not hungry anyway.”

“Gosh, are you sure you didn’t hit your head in our fall?”

“Nah – just not hungry.”

Joel plodded along beside her, head bowed low as they followed the red and white markers out of Gallargues.

“The next town’s Vendargues,” she said as they followed a rough stone path through vineyards. “It says to take the bus from there to the centre of Montpellier.”

“Uh huh.”

She stopped walking. “What’s wrong, Joel?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing; I’ve never seen you so sullen before. What is it?”

“I – I’m such a hopeless idiot. Do any other eighteen-year-olds fall out of bed?”

“Oh Joel, it was just unfamiliar surroundings and trying to squeeze two people on a bunk made for one skinny Frenchman. Anyway, it was as much my fault as yours; if I’d rolled away from you instead of towards you when you grabbed my arm –”

“But, but what if we end up in the same room as the others tonight, or any other night?”

“Then I’m sure they’ll let us have the bottom bunk. Don’t worry about them.”

He looked into her eyes. “It was pretty funny, I guess.”

“I wish I’d taken a picture.”

“That poor German guy; he thought it was the end of the world.”

Lorraine’s expression darkened. “It might well have been if you’d gone down head-first and broken your neck. We’ll have to be more careful from now on.”

Joel pulled open his pack, rummaging around before extracting a couple of muesli bars. “Want one?”

“Thanks. Do you reckon we can survive on muesli bars and French bread?”

“Nah. That’s why they have so many cemeteries here.”

“I thought so.”

“We should buy some fruit when we get to the next town.”

“Okay.”

The vineyards gave way to empty fields with occasional pockets of scrubby woodland. Overhead, the summer sun beat down from a cloudless sky, baking the sandy track to a pleasant warmth.

Ahead, a freeway overpass crossed both the track and the approaching river. On the opposite bank, Joel saw a couple of pilgrims following red and white markers in the opposite direction.

"Does the path cross the river further up and loop back?"

Loraine checked the map on her phone. "Yeah, but the crossing isn't for another five kilometres."

He stared at the water. "Do you reckon we could wade across?"

"Yeah, it doesn't look too deep."

Joel glanced around to make sure no-one was watching before removing his board shorts and stuffing them into his pack. "Just in case it's deeper than it looks."

"Good thinking."

The centre of the stream was only waist deep, but as he reached the far bank, Joel's feet slipped out from under him and he went head first into the mud.

"I'm glad my pack's waterproof," he said, spitting out as much as he could.

"We'd better find a shower at the next village," Loraine said, inspecting the mud encasing her feet as she climbed up the slippery bank.

Joel grabbed a handful of mud and painted the letters *NB* on his chest. "You think so?"

"If Nature Boy doesn't wash he can sleep by himself tonight."

They reached the central plaza of Vendargues. An abstract fountain bubbled away in front of them, while to the left stood an empty bus interchange.

"You'd better wash that mud off before the bus comes," Loraine said.

"Where?"

"The fountain's as good a place as any, I guess."

Joel stepped into the water, allowing it to splash over his chest and head. "Hey, this is nice!"

A policeman came running towards him, blowing his whistle. "*Non! Non! Il existe des produits chimiques présents dans l'eau.*"

"Huh?"

"He said there are chemicals in the water," Loraine said.

“Oh, that’s not good, is it?”

“Go over to that toilet block and try to wash off as much as you can, then, um, it says in the guide there are beaches in Montpellier, so we’ll jump on a bus and you can soak in the Mediterranean for a bit.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go; just do it, okay?”

“Okay.”

Joel dashed into the men’s room, using the dribble of water coming out of the hand basin tap to wash his face, arms, chest and feet. A man at the urinal gave him a dirty look before leaving.

Deciding he’d washed as much as possible, Joel returned to the fountain only to find both Loraine and the policeman had gone. He looked around, hoping to see them through the crowds of people milling through the square, but to no avail.

He covered his face, trying to control his rising panic. *Deep breaths*, he told himself. *She can’t have gone far.*

When he thought he might be able to open his eyes without bursting into tears, he took another look around, but Loraine was still nowhere in sight. *Could the policeman have arrested her? But why? And where would he have taken her?*

Convinced she was at this minute being thrown into a dungeon somewhere, or being deported back to Australia, he covered his face again, his lower lip trembling as the urge to wail threatened to overwhelm him. *Was letting your husband wash in a toxic fountain a capital offence? Would she be facing the guillotine? How would he explain it to Mark, Lorina and David?*

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. “*Monsieur?*”

“Huh?”

The man pointed to the other side of the square, where Loraine was jumping up and down alongside a taxi and waving her arms.

“Thanks, *merci beaucoup!*” he said, wiping his eyes before dashing over to her.

“What were you doing?” she asked.

“I, I thought I’d lost you.”

“Oh Joel, I’m sorry. I thought it’d be quickest to get to the beach if I found a taxi.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Giving his damp feet a quick wipe on the pavement, he jumped into the back seat.

“*Aller vite*,” Loraine said to the driver, urging him to go quickly.

Joel leapt from the taxi and sprinted for the breakers as soon as it pulled up at the beach, leaving Loraine to retrieve their backpacks from the boot and pay the driver. She ambled down onto the sand, finding a comfortable spot to sit where she could keep a watchful eye on him.

Under her tuition, Joel’s swimming had improved out of sight, but it was an unfamiliar beach and if there were any rips, he’d be the one to find them. She waved when he looked towards her, prompting him to wave back. *Not waving, drowning*, something in the back of her mind said, or was it the other way around? It had been the name of a band in her great-grandfather’s music collection, she was sure; something out of the 1980s or 1990s. Weird how these things popped into her head.

“*Bonjour*.”

She looked around to find a man with wavy blonde hair sitting on the sand beside her.

“Is that your husband out there?” he asked in English.

“Yes.”

“He’s very good at catching the waves.”

“Back home in Australia we live close to the beach and Joel loves body-surfing.”

“Joel; what a sweet name he has.”

A chill ran up Loraine’s spine. *Who is this creep?*

“Forgive me, I mean it has a musical sound to it, that’s all.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess it does.”

“Does he ride the board also?”

“No, he’s tried a few times but keeps falling off. My brother’s the great board-rider in our family.”

“You must live in a wonderful place. I should visit some day.”

“Yes, you must.”

God, please go away, you’re freaking me out.

“Forgive me, I intrude. I should leave you in, how do you say, pieces, I think. Have a nice pilgrimage.”

“How did you know we were pilgrims?” she started to ask, but the man was already out of earshot.

She almost jumped when a shadow fell across her from the other side, but sighed with relief when its owner turned out to be Joel.

“Who were you talking to?”

“I don’t know. It was creepy; he seemed to know too much about us.”

Joel tried to give her a reassuring look. “I’ll mind our things if you want to go in; the water’s lovely and warm!”

“No, not just now. How about we find a hotel and stay here tonight?”

“Yeah, okay. A proper bed would be nice.”

* * *

The hotel’s dining room was almost full when Joel and Loraine wandered in. The maître d’ gave their bare feet a rebuking look, but said nothing as he led them to a tiny table in the middle of the room.

Joel was glancing down the menu, trying to translate the French descriptions, when the sight of a waiter bringing a plate of snails to the next table caused him to almost throw up. At the same time, the man behind him lit a cigar, blowing a cloud of smoke in his direction.

“Let’s find somewhere else,” Loraine said. Joel didn’t need any convincing.

“Down this way,” he said, turning right as they left the hotel.

“How do you know?”

He stopped walking. “This is weird. For a moment it felt like I’d been here before, but that’s impossible.”

“The French call it *déjà vu*, so I suppose France is a good place for it to happen.”

“But what is it?”

“Exactly what you just experienced. They reckon it’s our short-term and long-term memories getting muddled up.”

“Is it common?”

“Yes, most people experience it on odd occasions.”

“Have you?”

“Once or twice.”

“It’d have to be twice, surely, if you’re experiencing something a second time.”

“All right, smarty pants. Now where’s this restaurant you’re leading us to?”

“Just here,” Joel said without thinking. Loraine stared at him.

The sign in the window identified the establishment as *Le Pèlerin Perdu*.

“Gosh, does that really say what I think it does?”

“Yes, *The Lost Pilgrim*,” Loraine said.

“This is so creepy.”

“The food must be good, though, if you’re remembering it from a past life or something.”

“Can I help you?” the waiter asked from behind them, causing them both to jump.

“You speak English.”

“Yes, I couldn’t help overhearing the end of your conversation. A table for two?”

“Thanks.”

They followed him into the dimly lit tavern, Joel grinning as he saw the *No Smoking* signs plastered all over the walls.

“Can I bring you the wine list?”

“Yes please.”

While they were waiting, Joel scanned the menu, pleased to find there were no snails or leg-of-frog anywhere in sight. There was even *Grilled Barramundi*, making him wonder if they’d slipped through a portal and were back in Australia.

“Take a look at the desserts,” Loraine said. “Fourth one down.”

“*Wild berries and – yams?*”

“I’m so sorry,” the waiter said. “That’s a typo; it should be *wild berries and jams*.”

“Oh, right. Um, why is the menu in English?”

“We have different versions for each nationality.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Here’s the wine list; if you’re at all uncertain, I can recommend the 2065 *cabernet merlot*.”

Loraine looked at Joel, who nodded. "Yes, that sounds nice."

"Thank you. Are you ready to order?"

"I'll have the chicken and mushroom vol-au-vents. Joel?"

"The grilled barramundi looks good to me."

"Some garlic or herb bread while you're waiting?"

"A bit of both, if that's okay."

"Sure. It won't be long."

"Thanks."

"I can't believe this place," Loraine said once the waiter was out of earshot.

"Either can I, but I'm not complaining."

After enjoying his wonderfully-cooked barramundi, out of curiosity Joel ordered the *wild berries and jams* for dessert. Perhaps disappointingly, there were no yams in sight, but the lashings of whipped cream made up for that.

"Coffees, or something stronger?" the waiter asked.

"A short black for me," Loraine said, "and Joel will have a mocha."

Joel glared at her.

"You always have a mocha."

The waiter looked at him. "Yes, a mocha thanks."

"Excellent, one mocha and a short black; they won't be long."

Joel burst out laughing.

"What's wrong?"

"The – the short black won't be LONG – hah!"

"Oh Joel, please, not in public."

"Was everything to your satisfaction?" the waiter asked once they'd finished their coffees.

"Yes, it was delightful," Loraine said.

"Just perfect," Joel added.

The waiter pulled a credit card pod from the pocket of his apron, making a few entries before handing it to Loraine.

"Is that all? Are you sure it's right?"

"Of course."

"Excellent."

She tapped her credit card on the pod, satisfying the various computers that all was in order.

“Thank you so much; I hope to see you again.”

“We’ll certainly be back if we ever return to Montpellier.”

“*Au revoir*,” he said as they left the restaurant to return to the hotel. Across the road, but unseen by them, a man with wavy blonde hair pulled out his phone.

* * *

Joel woke to sunshine on his face. The empty space next to him on the bed caused a shiver of panic, until he registered the sound of running water in the en-suite. He rubbed his eyes, yawning.

Something had troubled his dreams, but all he could remember was lying down somewhere, unable to move, with that Native American, Joey Red Wolf, calling out to him from afar, saying *your soul shines brightly in the spirit realm* over and over again until it almost became a mantra. Another shiver ran up and down his spine.

Loraine emerged from the bathroom. “Did you sleep well?”

“Um, I don’t know. Did you?”

“Like a log. Go and do your ablutions so we can make an early start.”

“Where to today?”

“Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert.”

“That sounds arid.”

“Nah, it was named after some medieval French knight who fought against the Saracens of Spain. We’d call him Saint Guilhem *of the desert*.”

“Like Clancy of the Overflow?”

Loraine rolled her eyes. “I guess so, although I don’t think Clancy was a knight.”

“Yeah, you’re right; otherwise it’d be Sir Clancy of the Overflow, wouldn’t it?”

“Uh huh.”

Joel stared into space for a moment, filing that titbit away for future reference, before sauntering into the bathroom.

Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert

The bus dropped them on the western outskirts of Montpellier, where the red and white markers led them onto a dusty track beside a river. Although the day was hot and sunny, the shady trees made walking pleasant.

After crossing the stream near the small town of Grabbels, the trail passed through a narrow strip of woodland opening onto rolling hills covered with scrubby fields.

“What town’s this?” Joel asked as they approached a collection of ancient buildings intermingled with a few more modern shops and houses.

“Montarnaud. Do you want to stop here for lunch?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Loraine grabbed some croissants while Joel found a fruit-vendor where he bought a collection of apples, bananas and oranges. They found a comfortable spot to sit under a shady tree on the edge of the village.

“Look at the castle up there,” Joel said, pointing to the top of a nearby hill where four round towers protruded above the low trees. “Do you want to go take a look after we’ve eaten?”

“Yeah, sure.” Loraine flicked through the Camino app on her phone, but could find no mention of it.

An overgrown track wound its way up the hill from the road, but before reaching the summit, a rusty fence with a sign saying *Pas Trespassing* blocked their way.

“Oh well,” Joel said, scratching his head. “At least there’s a bit of a view from up here.”

To the north-west lay wooded hills extending to a mountain range in the distance, where fluffy white cumulus clouds had begun forming in response to the hot south-easterly breeze.

“Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert is up in those mountains,” Loraine said. “We have a long walk ahead of us this afternoon.”

Joel looked at the soles of his feet, hoping there wasn’t too much gravel and bitumen. “I’d better eat another banana then.”

Loraine sighed. “Give me one too.”

By mid-afternoon they’d reached the *Pont du Diable* over the L’Herault River.

“The Devil’s Bridge?” Joel asked. “Why does the devil need a bridge? Can’t he swim?”

“Apparently not.”

The original stone arch had been bypassed by a concrete replacement just a little upstream of it. In the other direction, the river broadened into a large pool where small groups of people were splashing about.

“Want to take a dip?” Joel asked.

“Sure, but we’d better not stay too long. There’s a steep climb just ahead of us and I’d prefer to do it in daylight.”

The water was refreshingly cold and crystal clear as it swirled over a bed of colourful pebbles.

“Look,” Joel said. “There are little fish on the bottom.”

Loraine stared at him. “None on your bottom, though.”

“Huh?”

“Those board shorts with the fish on them that you wore on our trip to Victoria.”

“Oh, right, those things. Mum bought them for me.”

“I thought they were cute; maybe I can get you a new pair for Christmas.”

Joel splashed her while trying to think of a suitable retort. “My grandmother used to wear a baggy pink swimsuit with a frilly little skirt around the middle; I’m sure you’d love one of those.”

Loraine poked out her tongue before diving under the water, grabbing him around the legs and pulling him down. They wrestled for as long as they could before coming up for air.

“Truce?” Joel gasped.

“Yeah, truce.”

After their swim, they sat on the bank eating oranges while the hot wind quickly dried their skin.

The road north climbed up the side of the gorge, narrowing as it ascended. On the right, a broad stone parapet separated it from the sheer cliff dropping away to the stream below.

“Bugger this gravelly bitumen,” Loraine said as a car sped by, horn blaring and forcing them to the side. “I’m going to walk on the parapet.”

“Um, do you think that’s wise?”

“Don’t worry; I won’t fall.”

“I’ll stay on the road; I don’t have a head for heights.”

“Yes, I know.”

Joel looked northwards. “Those clouds are thickening up and moving this way. Do you think it might rain?”

“I hope so. I love walking in the rain.”

“Yeah, me too, as long as it doesn’t hail.”

One of the clouds, having broken away from the pack, passed across the sun, plunging them into a gloomy darkness for a moment. At the same time, the wind dropped to almost nothing. Joel shivered in spite of the heat.

“I wouldn’t want to be caught in a hail storm,” Loraine said, “it could be –”

A sudden gust of wind, the leading edge of the cold front moving down from the north-west, hit them, throwing Loraine slightly off balance. She moved her foot onto the edge of the parapet, but the stone, loosened by centuries of weathering, gave way beneath her.

Joel dashed forward, reaching out to grab her hand. For a moment he had hold of her, but another gust hit, causing his fingers to slip off hers. In one terrifying moment, she toppled over, disappearing down into the gorge.

“Loraine!” Joel screamed, clambering onto the parapet and looking over, hoping there was a ledge or something to break her fall, but there wasn’t. Far below, his wife lay spread-eagled over the rocks on the side of the stream, a pool of blood growing beneath her.

Paralysed with shock, his mind turned back just twenty-four hours to when he’d thought he’d lost her in Vendargues, imagining with increasing craziness that she’d been arrested and guillotined for

letting him wash in the fountain. Now, in a totally mindless combination of recklessness, wind and a loose stone, something equally crazy and unimaginable had happened, only this time she was gone for real.

Like a movie on rewind, he saw her lying next to him under the stars in Gallargues-le-Montueux, sitting beside him on the flight from Australia, walking down the aisle on their wedding day, splashing in Dead Cow Creek when he'd proposed to her, and dashing up from the beach on the day they'd first met, the water spraying from her golden hair like a halo in the afternoon sun.

In that moment of joy, she'd rescued him from the loneliness monster of his childhood. He'd thought it banished forever but he was wrong; the monster, hiding here in the mountains of France, had grabbed him again in its icy jaws and swallowed him whole, never to release him from his grief.

"NO!" he wailed, feeling suddenly dizzy. The light around him brightened until all he could see was blinding white. He closed his eyes, while from somewhere far away a car's horn blared...

"Bugger this gravelly bitumen; I'm going to walk on the – Joel, what's wrong?"

Joel opened his eyes, shocked to see Loraine standing beside him. He took hold of her hand, squeezing to make sure she was solid, to make sure she was real.

"What are you doing? You're as white as a ghost."

"D-don't climb onto the parapet. Remember, remember what Peter said about me having that *singlet* thing?"

"You mean being a singleton?"

"Yes, it just happened again. You were walking along the parapet when a sudden wind gust knocked you off balance. You'd have been okay, except you stepped on a loose stone which gave way under you, and, and –"

"Oh Joel," she said, wrapping him in a hug. "I'm sure it's just your imagination running away with you, or perhaps a little heat-stroke, but if it makes you happy I'll stay down here."

"Th-thanks."

“Look,” she said, “the clouds are coming closer. I think it might rain soon.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. I love walking in the rain.”

“Me too, as long as it doesn’t hail. I wouldn’t want to be caught in a hail storm, it could be –”

Right on cue, the wind gust hit.

“Oh Joel, you were right.”

Joel ran on a little further before climbing onto the parapet. “You stepped on this stone here, which gave way.”

As he wiggled it, the mortar crumbled. With a crack, the stone plummeted down into the gorge, crashing onto the rocks below. “See?”

He turned around to see Loraine tottering in a dead faint.

“Drink this,” Joel said, holding the water bottle to her lips.

“What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“Oh, yeah. Gosh. Did I, did I really go over the side?”

“In that time cusp, yes.”

She wrapped her arms around him while easing herself back onto her feet. Another car sped by.

“Are you okay to keep walking? We can’t really stay here.”

“Yes, I think so.”

She took a few tentative steps forward, still holding onto Joel’s hand. “Bugger this gravelly bitumen.”

Joel laughed. “Come on, there’s not too much further to go.”

Some fifty paces behind them, but staying out of sight, the blonde-headed man again pulled out his phone.

* * *

It was raining hard by the time they reached Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert, but so far there’d been no hail. The temperature had also plummeted, but Joel didn’t mind; the averted tragedy had given him new strength and resilience.

The narrow cobblestone road into town was deserted, with the adjoining houses all closed against the weather. As lightning flashed

overhead, they entered the town square, with the imposing abbey immediately on their left.

“*Bonjour*,” a man in a cassock called out from the steps. “Are you with the American party?”

“Who, us?” Loraine said. “No, we’re Australian.”

“You didn’t see any Americans coming up the road, did you? I’m supposed to conduct a guided tour for them.”

“No, we didn’t see anyone else, only people in cars.”

At that moment his phone rang. He ducked back inside before emerging a few moments later. “The Americans have cancelled on account of the weather, but if you like, I can give you the tour.”

“We’re a bit wet,” Joel said.

“Come on inside; you’ll soon dry off.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you like a coffee before we start?”

“Yes please, if it’s no trouble.”

He led them over to a cafeteria in what was once an anteroom, where Loraine ordered a short black for herself and a mocha for Joel. No-one seemed to mind the growing puddles of water around their feet.

Once they’d finished and were sufficiently dried, their guide led them through into the nave.

“This abbey is a Benedictine foundation dedicated to Saint Sauveur, and was founded in 804 by Guilhem of Orange, Duke of Aquitaine and second Count of Toulouse, later known as Saint Guilhem. It became a staging point for pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela and was rebuilt in the eleventh century by the increasingly wealthy monks.

“It declined in later centuries, though, particularly during the Wars of Religion at the time of the Reformation. During the French Revolution it was sold to a stone mason, with various businesses established in the cloister, including a tannery. The cloister itself was even used as a stone quarry, and some of its columns dating from before 1206 were sold to a museum in New York.”

“Gosh,” Joel said. “It’s like the London Bridge all over again.”

“Indeed. Restoration began in 1960 and, since the end of the 70s, a community of monks from Carmel Saint Joseph has made the abbey

their home. In 1998, the United Nations classified it as a World Heritage site as part of the Paths of Saint James.”

He led them through a heavy wooden door on the right and down a flight of stone steps. “Even so, the monks are few in number and such a large building is expensive to maintain and restore. We were indeed fortunate when an international business consortium approached us, making us an offer that was too good to refuse.”

“What was that?” Loraine asked.

“In return for the private use of some of our smaller rooms, they have provided sufficient funding to secure our future here.”

Joel felt a growing chill as they were led down a narrow stone passageway. “Um, what are they called?”

“I doubt you’d have heard of them, but their name is Tivinel Holdings.” The guide stopped before another large wooden door. “Come through here and perhaps all will be made clear.”

Joel felt an insane urge to turn on his heels and run, but didn’t. Instead, he and Loraine followed the guide into the dimly-lit room.

“And here we meet at last,” said the blonde-headed man standing before them. “It is Joel, is it not? Your name is music to my ears.”

“It’s you!” Loraine said, trying to take a step back, but another man emerged from the shadows to block her escape.

“Don’t be alarmed, for we wish only for your assistance in a small matter. You have heard of us, perhaps?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Loraine said, but Joel furrowed his brow.

“You, you had something to do with Huntress, didn’t you?”

“Oh, very good, you amaze us yet again, young Joel. Now, shall we get down to business?”

“What is it you want?” Loraine asked.

“From you, Madame, nothing, our interest lies only with your husband.”

At the nod of his head, the man behind Loraine took hold of her arm and turned her towards the door.

“Don’t do anything stupid or heroic, Joel!” she shouted as the man led her out of the room. “Go with the flow, just *go with the flow*.”

“Where are you taking her?” Joel asked. “Don’t hurt her, please!”

“Fear not, for she’ll be released unharmed once we’ve secured your cooperation.”

“What is it you want?”

“You have a certain talent, I believe, one which will benefit our cause.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your wife has just narrowly escaped a deadly fall, has she not?” He lifted a glowing orb from a table in the corner. “The time line in which she perished is not extinct and may yet become the dominant one.”

“That’s one of those Eridanian things, isn’t it?”

“Yes, such a clever people to invent this. Now if I was to but change one of the parameters here —”

“No, you couldn’t, you wouldn’t!”

He shrugged. “Perhaps her fall was how it was meant to play out, who can tell?”

Joel covered his face. “What is it you want?”

“You must come with us.”

“Where?”

“You will know soon enough. This way, please, Joel.”

He opened a door in the back of the room, leading Joel into another narrow corridor ending in a long flight of stairs. At the top, a door led out onto the roof of one of the abbey’s towers.

“A magnificent view, don’t you think?”

Joel wasn’t interested in the view, though, his attention instead being riveted onto the small subspace cruiser parked in front of him.

“You should take a good look, Joel, for it may well be the last time you see this world.”

Joel glanced around at the picturesque mountains surrounding him, before his vision blurred with tears. Taking a deep breath as the man led him into the cruiser, he vowed that, by whatever means, he’d return to this place and complete his pilgrimage with Loraine.

* * *

Loraine paced back and forth across the locked room, before suddenly remembering she had a phone in her pack. She pulled it out.

No signal.

“Damn!” She almost threw it across the room before deciding it might come in handy later.

She was about to start pacing again when she heard the bolt on the door being pulled back. Grabbing her pack, she stood next to the doorway, ready to swing it at her captor the moment he entered, but he didn’t.

After waiting another minute, she pulled open the door to find herself in an empty corridor.

“Joel, where are you?” she yelled. “Joel!”

She dashed back to the room where the blonde-headed man had been, but as she feared, it was empty. Making her way up to the nave, she emerged to find an elderly monk kneeling in prayer before the altar. He looked up as she approached.

“Excuse me, monsignor, but my husband’s just been abducted!”

“Abducted, good gracious! By whom?”

“I don’t know their names, but they were the business people who are using the rooms downstairs.”

“Business people?”

“The tour guide said they provided funding in return for use of your rooms.”

“We have no tour guide here.”

“He was a young monk, by the look of him.”

The monsignor shook his head. “It would be best, I think, for you to speak with the police.”

“Yes, I will. Where are they?”

“The nearest station is in Montpellier, but the postmaster operates an agency. Go back through the village towards the main road and you’ll find the post office on the right hand side.”

Loraine joined the end of the queue waiting to see the postmaster, muttering to herself as those in front paid utility accounts, traffic infringements and insurance premiums. As far as she could tell, no-one actually posted anything. Finally she reached the counter.

“My husband’s been abducted!”

“Your number?”

“Number?”

“You must take a numbered ticket from the machine by the door.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, Mademoiselle, until you present me with the number, my ears are sealed.”

“I’m NOT a mademoiselle! Didn’t you hear me? My *husband’s* been abducted.”

“I’m sorry Madame, but you must still have the number.”

Loraine turned away, grumbling as she made her way back to the ticket machine. By now another dozen people were in front of her in the queue. She gritted her teeth to stop herself screaming.

“You have the number now, *Madame?*” the postmaster asked as she finally reached the counter again.

Loraine almost threw the ticket at him. “My husband’s been abducted in the abbey!”

“Abducted? By whom?”

“I don’t know; some people who claimed to be financial supporters of the abbey, but probably weren’t.”

“Are you a pilgrim?”

“Yes, Joel and I were walking the Way of Saint James for our honeymoon.”

“Honeymoon, you say?” The postmaster shook his head. “Perhaps your husband, he has second thoughts and decides to make his escape, no?”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. Most missing husbands turn up in the bars and brothels; perhaps that is where you should begin your search.”

“Begin *my* search? Isn’t that your job?”

“I cannot lodge a missing person report with the station in Montpellier until twenty-four hours have elapsed. If you have still not found him by this time tomorrow, I will do what I can. Do you have your identification?”

She pulled out her passport.

“You are not French? But you speak our language so well.”

“I’m Australian.”

“Your husband, he is also Australian?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should contact your embassy, for there is nothing more I can do for you, unless of course you will be continuing your pilgrimage alone, in which case I can log your credential.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then there is nothing more I can do for you, Madame. Next please.”

Lorraine stood her ground until the person behind pushed her aside. Glaring at him, she turned away and returned to the street, pulling out her phone to call her parents.

Aftershocks

The ringing telephone woke Mark from a deep sleep.

“Lorraine?” he asked. “What’s wrong? It’s four o’clock in the morning here in case you don’t know, so it’d better be good.”

“Oh Dad, Joel’s been abducted.”

“He’s what?”

“Abducted. Some men pretending to be financial backers of the abbey at Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert lured us down into the basement where they, they kidnapped him.”

“Oh my God! Look, is there anywhere nearby you can stay in safety?”

“The youth hostel is about the only place, but the kidnappers let me go so I don’t think I’m in any danger now.”

“All right, but go there right away and tell the operators what happened. Your mother and I will arrange a flight there as soon as we can; I’m sure your great-grandfather can pull enough strings to get us there sometime tomorrow your time.”

“Thanks Dad.”

“Have you contacted the police?”

“There’s no police station here, but the postmaster runs an agency and told me to contact the embassy. Should I do that or wait for you?”

“Leave it with me; it’ll be easier to cut through the red tape from this end, I’m sure. Did they give any indication of why they wanted him? He hardly seems like a ransom target.”

“No, they just said their interest lies with him, whatever that means. But I think they’ve been following us since we arrived in France.”

“All right; it’s best you try to get some rest now. We’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

Mark ended the call as Lorina stepped over to him. “What’s wrong?”

“That was Loraine. Someone’s kidnapped Joel.”

“Joel? But, but how, why?”

“I don’t know, but we need to arrange transport to France as soon as possible.”

“I’ll start making calls.”

Noon saw most of the Collins family gathered at the Coolum Beach College, along with Joel’s parents, Peter Thorpe and the Smith family. An Eridanian shuttle, piloted by Norrie Harrish, gently touched down in front of them.

“This wouldn’t have happened if that stupid boy hadn’t married your daughter,” Jack Morison said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jill said. She turned to Peter. “Do you think it could have something to do with what he inherited from Cory?”

Peter shrugged. “Perhaps, but I’m sure we’ll have a clearer picture once we reach France.”

“Gosh, Jack and I have always wanted to go there; but not like this of course. I was so excited when Joel said he was going there on his –” She covered her face as tears began to flow.

“I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

Norrie opened the hatch. “I’m so sorry about what’s happened. Aunt Elissi and Uncle Todd send their best wishes.”

“Thanks Norrie,” Lorina said as she led everyone on board. “I really appreciate the effort you’ve made to come here.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

“Um,” Aaron said, glancing around at the other passengers. “Without wanting to sound immodest, shooting down this vessel would create a sizeable dent in our galaxy’s astrophysics talent pool.”

“Do you think Joel’s abduction could have been to force us all together like this?” Norrie asked.

Aaron shrugged. “Who knows? It’s just a thought, that’s all.”

“As soon as we’re high enough, I’ll jump to subspace to minimise the time window for anyone taking pot shots at us.”

“No offence to Jill and Jack,” Peter said, “but if that were the case, they’d have surely taken Loraine rather than Joel, wouldn’t they?”

“From what Loraine told me,” Mark said, “they were clearly targeting Joel.”

“Perhaps it’s an extortion attempt on the bank I work at,” Jack said, “or even just a payback. As a branch manager I’ve made many enemies over the years.”

Jill thumped him on the shoulder. “Do be quiet, Jack, unless you have something intelligent to say.”

“No, Jack’s idea is just as plausible as mine,” Aaron said. “When it all boils down, we really have no idea of what’s behind it.”

Norrie engaged the real-space drive. “Just to be on the safe side, I’ll make the ascent as quick as possible. Everyone hold onto your seats.”

The shuttle lurched skywards, buffeted at first by the sea breeze until settling down as it entered the stratosphere.

“No sign of anyone following us on this side,” Jason said as he peered out the window.

“Nothing over here either,” Aaron said. “Perhaps they’ll be waiting for us in France.”

Everything outside flashed blue before turning to black as Norrie initiated the jump to subspace. “We’ll know soon enough, but I’ll make sure we’re over the mountains north of Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert before re-entering real space. We’ll come in low and find a secluded landing spot on the outskirts of the town.”

The first light of dawn glowed in the east as they touched down in a field just to the north of Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert. In spite of Aaron’s concerns, there’d been no attempt to intercept them.

“Which way?” Jack asked as they climbed through a wire fence onto the road.

“Left; the town’s only a few hundred metres away.”

“Good, I don’t do hiking.”

Loraine was already up and waiting on the steps as they reached the hostel. Loraine dashed forward, wrapping her in a hug. “Did you manage to get any sleep?”

“A little, Mum.”

Mark wrapped his arms around them both. “Let’s see if we can find somewhere to have breakfast, then you can tell us everything that happened.”

“We have to find him, Dad.”

“Of course, and we will, but running off like headless chooks won’t help.”

“Your father’s right,” Jason said, joining them. “We need to figure out who they are, what they want and where they’ve taken him.”

As luck would have it, the café opposite was just opening for the day. The proprietor thought all his Christmases had come at once when he saw the size of the party descending on him.

Across the street, a man spoke briefly into his phone before following them inside.

They were in the middle of placing their breakfast orders when the man interrupted them. “Excuse me, but is there a Dr Collins amongst this party?”

“Yes,” said Billy, Jason and Jennifer in unison.

“Dr Billy Collins, I should say.”

“That’s me.”

“I’m Inspector le Grange of the *Brigade Criminelle*, attached to the Australian embassy on secondment. I believe you have a missing person.”

“Yes we do; the husband of my great-granddaughter.”

“That’s me,” Loraine said. “Do you have any news?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I’m here to begin the investigation, but please, complete your breakfast before we get underway. May I join you?”

“Of course.”

He sat himself down next to Loraine. “Do you have a photo of your husband?”

She pulled out her phone, scanning through her albums to pick the most appropriate one. “Will this do?”

“Perfect. Let me just upload it and we’ll get it out to all the airports and spaceports.”

The waiter took their orders while he was doing that.

The inspector pulled out his notebook. "So Loraine, tell me what brought you to Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert."

"Joel and I were doing the Camino walk for our honeymoon. We started in Arles and were heading for Santiago de Compostela."

"That's a long walk."

"Yes, I know."

"So what happened when you arrived here?"

"It was raining pretty hard, and the monk outside the abbey asked us if we'd like to take his guided tour as the Americans he was supposed to meet had cancelled because of the weather."

"He showed us around the nave, then took us downstairs while telling us about a financial consortium that was providing funding in return for use of some of their rooms. He led us into one where the abductors were waiting."

"Can you describe them?"

"Their leader was tall and thin, probably aged in his thirties, and had wavy blonde hair."

"What was he wearing?"

"A white long-sleeved shirt and dark blue jeans."

"I see. What about the others?"

"I didn't get a good look at them, but they were big and well-muscled, like the bouncers you see in some places."

"So what happened then?"

"The leader said something about Joel's name being music to his ears and that they needed his help in a small matter. That's when the big man grabbed me from behind and took me to another room, which they kept locked for about ten minutes or so. When I heard them unlock it, I waited a minute in case they were coming in, but they didn't and when I went out, the place was deserted."

"I see. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Yes, I saw their leader a couple of days earlier when we were on the beach in Montpellier. He came up to me and started asking questions about Joel. It was just trivial stuff about surfing and where we were from, but he felt creepy and when he said that thing about Joel's name being musical, I thought he might be one of those perverts."

"Are you sure it was the same man?"

“Oh yes, he even mentioned our previous meeting when we saw him here.”

“Was there anything else?”

“Yes, um, the name of the financial company meant something to Joel; he said it had to do with Huntress.”

“With what?”

“Huntress; it’s a planet in the Triangulum Galaxy.”

“I see. What was their name, do you remember?”

“Something *Holdings*; it’s on the tip of my tongue – tin – tingle – something like that I think.”

“All right, let me know if you remember it. Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Loraine furrowed her brow. “No, I don’t think so.”

Lorina stared at her. “Honey, there’s something else; I can sense it.”

“I, um, you promise you won’t get mad?”

“Of course I won’t. We’re all here to help find Joel and if there’s anything that might be relevant, you must tell us.”

Loraine glanced at Peter Thorpe. “A few months back, Peter told Joel he was a singleton, something he’d inherited from his grandfather. He said it had to do with time cusps.”

“Yes,” Peter said. “Singletons aren’t replicated in cusps; instead they experience them sequentially, like Mark did many years ago in that twenty-year cusp I was trapped in. Cory could sometimes create a cusp when he was under great stress, but he had no control over it, and I think Joel is the same.”

“That’s right. Joel had a singleton moment as we were coming up the road to here. He said I’d started walking on the parapet to avoid being forced onto the gravel by passing cars, but a wind gust knocked me off balance and I stepped on a loose rock which gave way under me, causing me to fall. I don’t remember any of it, as it didn’t really happen, but the wind gust and the loose rock were real.”

“Do you think the abductors knew about Joel’s ability?” the inspector asked.

“It’s possible, I suppose, although I don’t know how they could use it. It wasn’t something he could consciously control.”

“Of course. Is there anything else about him that the abductors might have wanted?”

“No, that’s what makes it so crazy. If it was me or David I could understand it, given our parents’ standing in the other galaxy, but why Joel?”

Jack caught the inspector’s attention. “I’m a bank manager back in Australia, so it could be an extortion attempt or even payback for a loan application I turned down.”

“I’m sorry, but who are you?”

“Jack Morison, Joel’s father.”

“I see, well thank you for that suggestion, Mr Morison; I’ll add it to my list of possible motives, but if that were the case, why did it happen here in France?”

Jack shrugged, while Norrie stood and wandered over to the counter to get some more orange juice. Loraine stared at him, her jaw dropping.

“What is it, honey?” Loraine asked.

“That man, the blonde man, he had Eridanian feet!”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Yes. He was wearing shoes on the beach – perhaps that’s why he seemed so creepy – but when he met us in the abbey he was barefoot. I guess at the time it didn’t register as odd, as my concerns were elsewhere and I’ve seen enough Eridanians lately, but –”

“What’s all this?” Norrie asked as he returned to the table.

“Loraine thinks the abductor was Eridanian.”

He pulled out his phone. “If you could give me that photo of Joel, I’ll make sure the authorities on Eridani keep a lookout for him.”

Loraine handed him her phone before turning back to the inspector. “What do we do now?”

“As soon as you’ve all finished your breakfast, we should visit the abbey and see what we can learn there. I want to seal off that room and call in our forensics people, since if the abductor was barefoot there may be traces of DNA on the floor.”

“But Joel and I were also barefoot.”

“That’s okay, we can easily exclude you and I’m sure you have enough things Joel has handled to be able to exclude him too.”

“Then what?” Billy asked.

“We should go to Montpellier and see if the abductor appears in any of the security recordings around the beach area.”

“Thank you so much,” Loraine said, tears now running down her cheeks. “I was afraid you wouldn’t believe me and just tell me to go look in the bars and brothels.”

The inspector smiled at her. “Meeting you and your family, and hearing you speak of him, makes me certain those are places Joel would never visit. Am I right?”

Loraine took a deep breath. “Absolutely. Joel is a nature boy at heart and places like that freak him out, and me too if the truth be known.”

“I know. See how good a detective I am? Now let’s go do some detecting.”

“Thank you for seeing us at this early hour, Father Abbot,” the inspector said as they entered the presbytery.

“I’m happy to do what I can, although I’m not sure if I can be of much help.”

“Loraine said that the men who abducted her husband claimed to be businessmen using your rooms in the basement in return for financial support of the abbey.”

The abbot raised his palms. “There is no such arrangement; the rooms in our basement are either for storage or are unused.”

“Loraine, can you describe the monk who took you down there?”

“He was young, probably mid-twenties I’d guess, although he was wearing a dark robe with a cowl covering much of his head so it was difficult to tell. He told us he was supposed to be giving a guided tour to a group of Americans but they cancelled due to the wet weather.”

“I’m sorry but everyone in our order is a good deal older – our youngest monk would be in his late fifties – and as for Americans, well if you know the history of the abbey’s cloisters, we most certainly would not be giving them guided tours.”

Everyone turned to the door as an elderly monk knocked and entered the room. “Excuse me, Father Abbot.”

“Brother Julien, please come in. Do you have something for the inspector?”

“Yes, I understand you’re asking about the rooms in the basement; it’s just that there were some repairmen working down there yesterday morning. They said they were trying to fix a leak.”

“Could you take us down there?” the inspector asked.

Brother Julien looked at the abbot, who nodded.

“Follow me.”

“Can you describe those men?” the inspector asked as they passed through the nave.

“They were tall, well-muscled and wearing blue overalls and heavy work boots.”

“Did you see a blonde-headed man amongst them?”

“No, but, there was a man like that somewhere in the abbey, I’m sure.”

He opened the heavy wooden door leading down into the basement.

“The rooms down here are cold, damp and poorly ventilated, which is why we don’t use them except for storage. I believe in the middle ages they housed acolytes.”

“It was this one here,” Loraine said, standing before a closed door. Brother Julien opened it, but the inspector held out his hand as he was about step inside.

“We’ll need to do a forensic examination so I’d appreciate it if no-one entered the room.”

“Of course, Inspector.”

“You don’t keep these rooms locked?”

“No; as I said, they’re unused.”

It was indeed bare, except for a heavy wooden desk in the far corner.

The inspector pointed to the door on the other side of the room. “Where does that go?”

“There’s a passageway leading up to the roof of the tower.”

“Is there another way we can use without going through this room?”

“Yes, follow me.”

The inspector paused, pulling a roll of *Crime Scene* tape from his pocket and sticking it across the doorway before following the others further into the basement.

The monk opened a door at the end of the passageway. "This is the other corridor and the stairs on the left go straight up to the tower."

"Let's take a look, shall we?"

The inspector put his hand out to stop anyone going onto the roof. The loose gravel covering it had been scuffed by people moving about, while further across were long straight depressions that looked suspiciously like the skids of a small subspace cruiser. "I'm pretty sure this is where they went. I'll seal it off and get forensics to take a look here as well."

Lorraine looked crestfallen. "That means he could be just about anywhere by now."

"Don't give up hope just yet; if we can identify the people or the vessel we still stand a good chance of finding him."

* * *

The beach at Montpellier was almost deserted under an overcast sky, with a chilly wind blowing intermittent showers across from the north-west. It took Lorraine a little while to identify the spot where she'd been sitting two days ago watching Joel body-surfing.

"This is it, I'm sure. Joel was just so happy out there in the surf; I still can't believe he's gone."

"From what I've seen, it appears the abduction was planned well in advance and clearly targeted at him, which means it's very unlikely they intend harming him." The inspector looked back towards the street. "I can see three or four security cameras, so I'll note their numbers and locations. We have direct access to all the video storage from the station."

"How much video surveillance is there in this city?" Billy asked.

"Most of the main roads are covered."

"So if you do spot him, will you be able to back-track to find where he came from and go forward to see where he went?"

"To a degree, yes, but in practice there are too many blind spots to effectively track someone, particularly if they don't want to be tracked."

"Oh, I see."

The inspector turned back to Loraine. “Did anything else unusual occur while you were here?”

“No, I don’t think so, except, um, except perhaps for the restaurant.”

“What restaurant?”

“It’s called *Le Pèlerin Perdu*, which means –”

“*The Lost Pilgrim*, yes. I’m not familiar with it; do you know the address?”

“The address, no, but I can lead you to it. It’s just a few blocks up the road.”

“What was wrong with it?” Loraine asked.

“Nothing, actually; more that there were too many things right with it. The menu was in English with all our favourite foods, the prices were ridiculously low and, um, there was something really weird in the desserts.”

“What was it?”

“It started when Joel was bemoaning the lack of fish and chip shops here and I told him that, if he was a true nature boy, he should be living off wild berries and yams. From there it became something of a standing joke between us, until, well, in the dessert menu they had *Wild Berries and Yams*.”

“Seriously?”

“The waiter reckoned it was a misprint and should have been *Wild Berries and Jams*, and when Joel ordered it that’s what he got, but even so –”

“Too many coincidences,” the inspector said.

“That’s right.”

Loraine led them past the hotel where they’d stayed, counting the number of shops before coming to a halt in front of the restaurant. Except it wasn’t; instead before them was an empty shell with a fading *For Lease* sign in the window.

“This isn’t possible; it was here, I swear.”

The inspector pulled out a small torch, using it to examine the glass. “Look, there’s an adhesive residue here, spelling out a name by the look of it – yes, *Le Pèlerin Perdu*.”

“But – but how, why?”

“I think they were playing games with you, which means this whole business is a lot bigger and much more pre-planned than we thought.”

Loraine covered her face as her tears began to flow. “Why is this happening to us?”

The inspector led them through the front entrance of the police station to a room at the back of the building, where he turned on an ultranet terminal and keyed in his authorisation codes. “You said you saw the man on the beach about mid-afternoon, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

He stepped through several selections before bringing up the recordings from one of the street cameras. “Let’s sit back and see what unfolds, shall we?”

After about ten minutes Loraine pointed at the screen. “There goes Joel running down onto the sand!”

“Where are you?” Loraine asked.

“I was paying the taxi driver, so I came down a bit behind him – yes, there I am now.”

“A pity the camera doesn’t look out over the beach itself,” Billy said. “We might have seen him approaching Loraine.”

“We should be grateful we have this much,” the inspector said as crowds of people walked across the camera’s field of view.

“That’s him!” Loraine said, pointing to a blonde-headed man walking towards the camera. As he passed under it, he looked up and waved.

“Aha! He knew we’d be checking the recordings. That means they’re very brazen and sure of themselves, which will work to our advantage. What is it you say?”

“*Pride goes before a fall*,” Jason said.

“Exactly. Loraine, how did you pay for your meal at the restaurant?”

“On my credit card, of course.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. Can you log into your bank and see who the payment went to?”

“Sure.”

After going through the motions, Loraine scrolled down the list of recent transactions. “There it is; Tivinel Holdings – that’s the name of the company who was supposedly leasing those rooms in the abbey!”

“Does it show an address?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Never mind, I can find out from the bank, I’m sure.”

Jason flicked his fingers as the inspector went to make a phone call. “Tivinel, of course; Joel was right! When Drago took over David’s body on Huntress, he kept asking for his Tivinel and then Pip took him into Sheol to find them.”

“But who are they?”

“I don’t know for sure, but Drago’s servants by the sound of it.”

“I have Pip’s private number,” Lorina said. “I’ll call him now.”

“Just a moment Pip, I’ll put you on speaker.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about what happened to Joel. Lorina asked me to tell you what I know about the Tivinel, so here goes. According to the Barungi, they cohabitated Huntress with them before the apocalypse, and although they were technically a different species, they were closely related and could cross-breed. Most such offspring lacked their telepathic powers and became the Gomerai, their working class who later went on to colonise what are now the principal worlds of our galaxy. The surviving Tivinel reputedly fled into Sheol, where they built the City of Towers and lived there for a while before opening a portal to their distant planet of exile and setting up a colony.

“Many centuries later the Barefooters followed, with the resulting conflict leading to the slaughter of all the Tivinel. Their spirits lingered, trapped on that world, until I led Drago there, at which point they created a vortex which consumed them all.”

“Do you know what they looked like?”

“They were tall and slender with blonde hair and fair skin, much like the people of Bluehaven. The Barungi reckoned we were created in their image through the Dolphins’ gift to Lorna.”

“Do you know if any are still alive?”

“No, according to Damien they were all wiped out.”

“Okay, thanks Pip.”

“Keep me posted on any developments and I hope you find him safe and well.”

“Will do.”

“So,” Mark said after Lorina had terminated the call, “if the Tivinel are all dead, who are this *Tivinel Holdings* mob?”

Loraine turned pale. “At the wedding reception when David, Granddad Jason and Great-Granddad Billy were painting Joel’s body, he looked like he’d just seen a ghost, but when I asked him what was wrong he said it was more like a ghost had just seen him.”

“Do you think that might have been a Tivinel ghost?”

“Maybe, but the men who kidnapped him certainly weren’t ghosts.”

“This is just getting more and more confusing. If it was these Tivinel people, dead or alive, where does the Eridanian connection come in?”

“I’ll call Aunt Elissi,” Norrie said. “If anyone on Eridani knows anything about Tivinel, it’d be her.”

The inspector turned back to them as Norrie moved to one side to make his call. “I’ve circulated the blonde man’s picture to all the relevant authorities here, but if there’s extraterrestrial involvement we’ll need to contact the galactic council on Eridani.”

Lorina pulled out her phone again. “These are the contacts I have for Superintendent Davies and General Piper in my galaxy. You should brief them as well.”

“Thanks, I will. Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“What?”

“These Tivinel Holdings people *want* to be found.”

Loraine covered her face again, it all becoming too much for her. Lorina wrapped her in a hug as Norrie stepped back over to them.

“Aunt Elissi wants us all to go to Eridani. She said it’s time for confession.”

Confessions

Jack turned to Norrie as he boarded the shuttle. “So, did this aunt of yours who kidnapped Joel say why she did it?”

“Sorry?”

“And who’s the blonde guy? Another relation?”

“I doubt Elissi is about to confess to the abduction,” Billy said. “More likely she knows something of what’s behind it.”

“No offence to Norrie here, but I’ve just about had it with these goddamned holier-than-thou Eridanians.”

Norrie stared at him. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Jack. I’m just trying to help.”

“Jack, how is that not offensive to Norrie?” Jill yelled. “Honestly, if I were him I’d throw you overboard.”

Jack turned back to Norrie. “Go on, make my day.”

“That’s enough, everybody,” Mark said. “I know our nerves are on edge, but we have to focus on what’s important here.”

“Thanks Dad,” Loraine said, hugging him.

Jack grumbled before taking a seat in the back corner of the shuttle.

Norrie closed the hatch. “It’s only about thirty minutes to Eridani, so I’m afraid there won’t be any mid-flight refreshments. As soon as I have clearance from Orbital Control we’ll be on our way.”

All Jack’s grumpiness disappeared as the shuttle descended towards the town of Renwick in Eridani’s southern hemisphere. Located behind a sandy beach amongst a system of coastal lakes, its tree-lined streets and parklands looked straight out of a real estate picture book. He imagined a bank manager could live quite well on the housing loan commissions from such a place.

Norrie set them down outside a modest bungalow adjoining the beach, where an elderly couple stood waiting to greet them.

Billy was the first to embrace them. “Elissi, Todd, you’re both looking well.”

“Not half as well as you,” Todd laughed. “With your Emu blood you’re sure to outlive us all by a good stretch.”

“Good to see you both again,” Peter said, “although I wish it were under less traumatic circumstances.”

“Yes, it’s a terrible thing to have happened, particularly to such a selfless boy as Joel. Come on in for some refreshments.”

“Are you still the High Councillor here?” Jill asked Elissi.

“No, old age caught up with me soon after that bunyip business. Todd and I have now well and truly retired here in Renwick.”

“It sure is a beautiful place. Joel once told me the whole southern hemisphere was once a desert. Is that true?”

“Yes; you can thank Billy and Peter for initiating the transformation and Norrie for making it all happen.”

“Gosh, I never knew that.”

“Eridani owes the Collins and Thorpe families a huge debt of gratitude, which is why we’re so eager to help find your son.”

“Thank you, I’m sure.”

Elissi turned to the others as they entered the living room. “There’s Eridanian tea and Earth coffee as well as plenty of nibblies, so help yourselves.”

Once everyone had settled, Elissi turned to Peter. “I’ve been dreading this moment since I was fourteen years old, but now that it’s arrived, I’m really not sure what to say.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think back to the time just after your encounter with the yowie in the Blue Mountains, when the bullies at your school were teasing you about being *Little Boy Lost*.”

“What? There were no bullies at the school in Avalon; it was a happy place for me and my friends.”

“No, it was before you moved to Avalon.”

“You mean in Brisbane? There were no bullies there either, and in any case that was before I became lost.”

“You really don’t remember, do you?”

“Remember what?”

“You were living in Eastwood and had just received news of the death of one of your friends from Brisbane.”

Peter furrowed his brow. “Not Danny, no; he died only a few years ago.”

“It was Danny’s brother.”

“Brother?” Again Peter’s brow furrowed. “Steve? But, but I – oh my God!”

“He died in a road accident and you were quite distraught when I met you.”

“You? You mean you’re – you’re Ellie?”

“Yes, Peter, I was Ellie.”

He ran his hands over his face. “Yes, of course, but –”

“I betrayed you, Peter, in the worst possible way, and have been living with that guilt all my life.”

Todd went to comfort her as she began to cry, but Peter beat him to it. “Until now I’d completely forgotten everything that happened back then. We went to the beach at Manly, didn’t we? Gosh, I remember you were so embarrassed about your feet – Eridanian feet, of course!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Afterwards you invited me up to your unit where someone was waiting for me, someone unpleasant, I think.”

“Barrad.”

“Yes, Barrad; he touched the spirit of Raphus I was carrying at the time. Then someone else came in, someone who looked just like me – Pedro!”

“Yes, Pedro and I had been caught up in a Barradhim plot to kidnap and murder you. I was to befriend you and lead you to Barrad, which I did –”

She again covered her face, trying to regain her composure.

“I remember it all now,” Peter said. “Pedro put a knife to your throat, saying something about a change of plan and how he was going to take my place, before leading me into the bathroom to swap clothes. Except he didn’t; as soon as he closed the door, he told me how you and he were trying to save me from Barrad and that I’d have to pretend to be him taking my place. I was petrified, but I did what

he said and escaped. You have nothing to feel guilty about, Elissi, nothing at all.”

“But there’s more,” Elissi said. “They brought Pedro and me back here to Eridani where they executed him with a crossbow. If, if it hadn’t been for his selfless bravery, it would have been you who’d died that day, and in any case, I was still responsible for his death.”

“You did everything you possibly could, I’m sure.”

“No, I didn’t. Just before he died, Pedro gave me two messages to pass on to Elko. One was to have you moved to Avalon, which I conveyed, but the other, well, I’m afraid that with everything that was happening, I forgot what it was about.”

“Do you remember now?”

“Yes, and I’m so afraid my oversight may have led to Joel’s kidnapping. Pedro wanted me to tell Elko that the Barradhim had been infiltrated by an alien race, a people he called the Tivinel.”

“Tivinel!” Loraine said, almost spilling her coffee.

“Yes, Pedro said he’d observed telepathy amongst members of the family in charge of the Barradhim operatives in Angust, meaning they couldn’t be Eridanian, and from that he somehow deduced they were Tivinel. At the time it all sounded too far-fetched to be plausible, but now, after what Norrie told me –”

“Are any of them still alive?” Peter asked.

“Only one that I know of, a man in Angust named Jameed.”

“Wasn’t he one of the people we saw when we were looking for Jim Hamilton a couple of decades ago?”

“Yes, he’d been an accountant with the Barradhim before joining the taxation department. He and I were school friends back at the time Pedro turned up, but after the execution we avoided each other as much as possible.”

Inspector le Grange pulled out the photo of Joel’s abductor. “Do you recognise this man?”

Elissi stared at it for a good while. “No, I’m afraid not.”

Loraine let out an audible groan, but the inspector hushed her.

“We must go and see this Jameed person. Do you know his address?”

“Todd and I rarely travel these days, but we’ll take you to him.”

“Hello Jameed,” Elissi said as he answered the door. “It’s been a long time.”

“Oh, so you do remember me, do you?”

“How could I ever forget you?”

“What’s this *committee* you’ve brought here?”

“These are friends from Earth who’ve come seeking your help.”

“I hope they have deep pockets.”

Jack pushed forward, raising his fists. “What have you done with my son, you bastard?”

“My dear Elissi,” Jameed said without flinching. “Please tell this overgrown primate that I don’t speak his language and that my price has now doubled.”

Billy and Peter stepped forward, each taking hold of one of Jack’s arms and pulling him back.

“I make no apology for him,” Inspector le Grange said in perfect Eridanian, “as his son has been kidnapped by one of your kin.”

“One of my *what*? Are you saying an Eridanian took that troglodyte’s child which somehow makes it *my* fault?”

Loraine pushed forward. “Joel isn’t a child, he’s my husband.”

“Quite right,” the inspector said, “and I believe he was taken by a Tivinel, one of your kin.”

Jameed laughed. “Oh my dear fellow, you’ve been reading too many comic books, yes, way too many.”

“No,” Elissi said. “Remember when you fell out of the tree and broke your arm?”

“What of it?”

“At the time, Pedro was with your mother and saw her sense your pain; he saw your telepathy.”

“Poppycock.”

“At first I thought so too, but looking back on that day through adult eyes, it can be the only explanation. I was with you the whole time and saw her leading everyone down the hill to your aid.”

“Someone else told her, of course.”

“No, there was no-one else in the forest; just you and me, Jameed.”

“That was eighty years ago, Elissi, when we were just children. How can you possibly remember what really happened? I’m *not* telepathic; not then, not now.”

“I’m sorry,” Lorina said, “but you are; you’re radiating fear like a goddamned beacon.”

“What are you afraid of, Jameed?” Elissi asked.

Jameed’s shoulders slumped as he took a step backwards and collapsed onto a sofa. “I’m too old for this. Elissi, be a good lass and make me a cup of tea, then I’ll tell you everything I know.”

She nodded before stepping out to the kitchen, while Mark wrapped his arms around Loraine, holding her tightly against his chest. Inspector le Grange pulled out his notebook, flicking through it before adding a new entry. Jill took hold of Jack’s hand, trying to forestall any more outbursts of anger. Billy and Peter exchanged glances, passing some wordless understanding, while Aaron gazed around the room, taking a mental inventory of the furniture and fittings. Jason scratched his head in confusion as Jenny squeezed his other hand.

Elissi handed Jameed his steaming cup. He took a sip, sighing and staring into it before taking a longer one.

“Before I begin, you must understand one thing. Even though we are few in number, the Tivinel aren’t all the same. There’s as much diversity amongst us as there is within the people of any worlds. Do not assume I have sympathy for the actions or beliefs of my kin, but by the same token, do not assume that I don’t.”

“You talk in riddles,” Elissi said.

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black,” Julia said. Billy squeezed her hand.

“You have a good memory, Julia. You accused me of doing the same thing the first time we met.”

“Let him speak, please,” Loraine said.

“Thank you. It is as Elissi said; I am a Tivinel, as of course were my parents and grandparents. My father told me we were the master race, but over the years I’ve come to realise we were masters of nothing.

“I’d always been told we were the original Eridanians, but I’ve since found out through my contacts in the other galaxy that we were

refugees from Huntress, one of several pockets of survivors from the apocalypse of Drago. We melded with the native hunter-gathers of this world's northern hemisphere while genetically modifying them to be more like us.

"When Barrad arrived seeking to create his empire, my ancestors saw it as a way to broaden their power base and became the Eridanian Barradhim. Were they aware of Barrad's real intention to destroy this world? Perhaps, or perhaps not, I don't know. We were Barrad's puppets but too blinded with power to see it."

"How many Tivinel live on Eridani?" Peter asked.

"Barrad was careful not to allow us to become too prolific, giving us dangerous and, dare I say it, suicidal missions if our numbers became too great for his liking. There are few of us left, maybe a dozen at most, and I'm the last of my family line."

"Do you recognise this person?" the inspector asked, showing him the photo of the blonde-headed man.

"Oh yes, I know who he is, but you won't find him on Eridani. Tell me, have you ever come across an organisation on Earth called Tivinel Holdings?"

"They were the ones behind Joel's kidnapping!" Loraine said.

"They are a joke, literally, a testimony to the effectiveness of *hiding in plain sight*. I'd heard rumours of them during my time with the Barradhim, but didn't twig to which planet they were on until soon after you all turned up on my doorstep some twenty years ago. They're a front for the various Tivinel enclaves on Earth, but when your technology developed to the point where contact with other planets became likely, they ingratiated themselves into your AusScience organisation."

"What?"

"AusScience thought they were keeping watch on a group of extra-terrestrial infiltrators, but it was really the other way around. Their leader was a ferocious woman named Rebbi, although on Earth she used a slightly different name, Rebecca or something."

"Not Rebecca Gosling?" Peter asked.

"Yes, that's her. She concocted a wild scheme to create an alternative time line in which Earth was ruled by Tivinel overlords, but someone figured out what she was up to and put a stop to it."

“That was us and it almost cost us our lives and our sanity.”

“Really? That was you lot? I’d always imagined you’d look more heroic.”

“Don’t let appearances fool you,” Jason said. “Peter is one of the most heroic people I know.”

“So who is our mysterious blonde-headed man?” the inspector asked.

“Rebbi’s grandson.”

Aaron broke the stunned silence that followed. “Do you think Joel’s abduction might have been revenge for what we did to his grandmother?”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, surely,” Lorina said.

“And it doesn’t explain why he said they needed Joel for something,” Lorraine said. “If it was revenge, why him and not me?”

“To make you suffer?”

“If that’s the case, it’s certainly working.”

“No, there’s another connection,” Peter said, “something that links Rebecca Gosling directly to Joel.”

Everyone stared at him.

Peter cleared his throat. “It happened just after we moved to Avalon in Sydney, at a time in my life that I’d completely forgotten until just recently. My friend Cory’s father worked at AusScience, although in a different section to my father. One Saturday morning he took us to the Sydney Observatory open day but called in at his office to pick up some papers he was working on.

“While we were there, we encountered Rebecca Gosling, firstly in a time cusp where she recognised me as the Dodo carrier, but Cory’s singleton ability came to the rescue as, after the cusp, he pushed me out of sight when she caught us in the lobby. She sensed his singleton nature though, taking an interest in him which he later told me continued right through his university days.

“Now we arrive two generations on. Joel is Cory’s grandson and carries his singleton trait, while his abductor it seems is Rebecca’s grandson. This can’t be coincidence, can it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Jameed said. “The Tivinel are a people in exile, condemned to living in the shadows for thousands of millennia

because of the actions of their stupid ruler on Huntress. There's a very good reason some of us have a keen interest in time cusps, for they would like nothing more than to create the greatest cusp of all."

"What do you mean?" Elissi asked, but Peter had already turned white.

"They mean to go back in time and prevent Drago from becoming Pasha, don't they?"

Jameed nodded. "Yes, and if they achieved that, none of the advanced civilisations in either of our galaxies would have arisen, or if they did, they'd have an entirely different form. If they succeed, everything we know will be gone and in all likelihood the people of Eridani and Earth will still be hunter-gatherers."

Billy wrapped his arms around Loraine. "So that's why they kidnapped Joel; his ability must be a key element in their plan."

Jameed stood, raising his arms as everything grew silent. The room around them turned grainy, its colours fading like an old photograph that had been left too long in the sun. In the darkness spreading from within their minds, the universe wavered out of existence and was gone.

Foreboding

Billy woke to the sound of a kookaburra; except his name wasn't Billy, it was *Warrain*, and the bird that woke him was a *gugurrgaagaa*. Easing himself up, he stepped from the cave, his ancient bones creaking under the strain. Below him stretched the misty valley, its broad river hidden amongst the forest of *yarraan*, the trees his still-dreaming mind insisted were called *eucalypts*.

In his dream it had been a place of many people, a place they called Narrabri, meaning *big creek* in his language. He'd been an Elder amongst them, much as he was to the *Kamilaroi* nation, and with them he'd travelled to the stars and beyond.

Daku, his great-grandson, handed him some wild berries and a piece of *gubiyaay*, the sweet yam that was their favourite breakfast treat.

"I had the strangest dream last night, Warrain."

"Tell me."

"In a far-away place by the great water, I lived amongst many pale-skinned people, one of whom was my twin sister. We spoke a strange tongue and travelled to the stars and beyond."

Warrain stroked his beard. *"It was more than just a dream, Daku, for a great change has befallen us and all that once was has been lost."*

* * *

On an island on the other side of the world, an elderly pale-skinned man, *Pryderi*, lay dreaming within a circle of standing stones built long ago by his people, the Celts. In a dream spanning a lifetime, he'd been called *Peter* and had travelled to the stars and beyond. *But now a great darkness has descended*, he thought as the dream dissolved away, *and all that once was has been lost.*

* * *

In yet another land, separated from both Warrain and Pryderi by the great water, *White Thunder Hawk Red Wolf* stirred uneasily in his tee-pee.

"What's wrong?" his wife *Two Rivers* asked.

"I'm sorry, Ash –"

For a moment he'd almost called her *Ashley*, a name which made no sense at all and yet echoed through his mind like the spirit voices.

"I fear a great change has come over the world and all that once was has been lost."

"What's happened?"

"Joel has been taken by the skin-walkers."

* * *

Jameed lowered his hands as the universe around them coalesced again.

"What was all that about?" Jack asked. "And who were the old dudes in the wigwam?"

"Jack!"

"What?"

Jill shook her head, glaring at him.

"We met Joey Red Wolf at the symposium," Billy said. "He's a highly respected Cheyenne healer."

"What was it he said about skin-walkers? Who are they?"

"Could they be Barefooters?" Julia asked.

"That'd make Joel a skin-walker since he never wears shoes," Jack said, scratching his head. "Does that mean he's been taken by himself?"

Jill again shook her head.

"Joey gave me his number," Billy said, pulling out his wallet. "I'll give him a call once I figure out what time it is in America."

At that moment, Inspector le Grange's phone rang. He stepped aside while speaking rapidly in French.

“That was my sergeant,” he said after closing the call. “He traced Loraine’s credit card transaction and has an address for Tivinel Holdings.”

“Where?”

“Australia; North Sydney to be precise.”

Jameed grinned. “Good luck; I hope you find your lost boy.”

Elissi grabbed him by the arm. “You’re coming with us; I know you’re up to your eyeballs in this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Don’t be stubborn; you have no say in the matter.”

Jameed sighed as she led him outside and into the shuttle.

Billy opened a communications channel once they emerged from subspace into the transfer orbit around Earth. “Joey, it’s Billy Collins here. I hope I haven’t caught you at an inconvenient time.”

“No, Ashley and I have just finished breakfast. What can I do for you?”

“Does the phrase *skin-walker* mean anything to you?”

Joey was silent for so long that Billy thought the call might have dropped out. *“In the legends of my people, the skin-walkers were evil sorcerers who practised necromancy. There was one we called the Spider – I’m sorry, but even after all these years it still terrifies me.”*

“What happened?”

“In a cave near my childhood home, I experienced a vision of people dying – no, I can say no more.”

“Could Joel have been taken by them?”

Again Joey paused. *“If that’s so, he’s in grave danger. His soul shines brightly in the spirit realm.”*

“Thanks, Joey; we’re doing our best to find him.”

“Please let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Whoopie doo,” Jack said. “So now we have necromancers to deal with. Perhaps we should get Bilbo Baggins and the Seven Dwarves to help.”

“There were thirteen,” Aaron said.

“Thirteen what?”

“Thirteen dwarves in *The Hobbit*: Balin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur –”

“All right, I get the picture.”

A man walked up to them as they emerged from *Immigration* at the Sydney spaceport. “I’m Inspector Kent; the *Brigade Criminelle* in Montpellier briefed me on your case.”

“Claude le Grange,” his French counterpart said, stepping forward and shaking his hand. “Thanks for meeting us. Do you know where the *Tivinel Holdings* office is?”

“Yes, the address your people gave me puts them in the AusScience complex in North Sydney.”

“That makes sense,” Billy said. “Jameed, do you know the name of the person we’re looking for?”

“He calls himself Tristan Gosling, in honour of his grandmother. I don’t know what his true family name is.”

“There’s something more,” Inspector Kent said. “My grandfather was the desk sergeant at Katoomba Police Station back in the 1980s and had a strange encounter with your *Tivinel Holdings*. The case was never resolved to his satisfaction and he left me his notes.”

He pulled a folder from his briefcase.

“Given what we now know about other civilisations in our galaxy, it seems he stumbled across some Eridanians who might have been involved in child smuggling.”

“May I see that?” le Grange asked.

“Certainly.”

He skimmed through the collection of notes and photographs, nodding to himself. “Jameed, do you know of any Barradhim operatives who were using the name Grant?”

“Alvin and Melany, yes. They were reporting to my father at the time I first became involved.”

“Were they Tivinel too?”

“No, just regular Eridanians. My family were the only Tivinel in our unit.”

“Who were these Grant people?” Billy asked.

“They tried to abduct Peter by the sound of it,” le Grange said.

“I remember there were two Eridanians with Ellie – I mean Elissi,” Peter said.

“Yes, they were there,” Elissi said.

“You introduced them as your parents. Were they?”

“No, that was a lie. I couldn’t have told you who they really were, could I?”

“I guess not.”

“So they were connected with Tivinel Holdings back then.”

“As I told you,” Jameed said, “Tivinel Holdings was a cover for the Barradhim on Earth. AusScience thought they were watching over them, but it was really the other way around.”

“Is that still the case?”

“It would seem the answer is *yes*.”

“Take the lift up to the seventh floor, turn left and go to the red door right at the end of the corridor,” the receptionist at AusScience headquarters said.

“That’s the same directions they gave my grandfather,” Inspector Kent said, “but this can’t be the same building, surely. That was eighty years ago.”

“Eridanians don’t like change,” Elissi said. “I guess when they built the new building they kept the layout the same.”

“Amazing.”

The red door opened onto another reception area, its walls covered with photographs of the various inhabited planets in both this galaxy and beyond.

“It looks like nothing’s changed up here either.”

“Can I help you?” the young man behind the counter asked.

“I’m Inspector Kent; I believe you have a Tristan Gosling working here.”

“Yes, but I’m afraid Dr Gosling is away at present.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“No, I’m sorry, and he didn’t give any indication of when he’d return. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Where’s my son?” Jack said, pushing forward and again raising his fists.

“Please, sir,” Kent said, “let me handle this.” He turned back to the man behind the counter. “Where’s his son?”

“Son? I don’t know who you mean.”

“We believe your Dr Gosling abducted Joel Morison in France. Do you have any idea where he might have taken him?”

“Abducted? You must surely be mistaken –”

“Who’s in charge here?”

“With Dr Gosling away, I am.”

“Your name?”

“I’m not at liberty to say –”

“I have a warrant to tear this place apart if I have to. Now please tell me your name and show me some identification, sir.”

At that moment the door burst open as a large man in a suit barged in. “What’s going on, Alan? Who are these people?”

“Who are you?” Kent asked, showing his warrant card.

“Stan?” Aaron said, staring at him.

“Aaron! I haven’t seen you in years.”

“Everyone, this is Stan Olson, the Director of AusScience. We worked together back around the time Rebecca Gosling abducted Billy and Julia.”

“*The sins of the fathers*,” Peter said, “or should I say *grandmothers* in this case.”

“Dr Thorpe, well I never!” Stan pumped his hand until Peter had to pull it away. “What were you saying?”

“Are you aware you’ve had an intergalactic terrorist operating right under your nose?”

“What do you mean? Tivinel Holdings are just a group of Eridanian academics looking into ancient visits to Earth by extra-terrestrials.”

“Last century they were a cover for the Barradhim, who we’ve now discovered were a cover for a bunch of Huntress refugees hell-bent on changing the course of history. Has AusScience learnt nothing?”

“I assure you, Dr Thorpe, had we had the slightest inkling –”

“This is getting us nowhere,” Kent said. “Does anyone in this place know where Tristan Gosling is?”

Stan scratched his head. “He requisitioned an intergalactic cruiser a few weeks back. He said he needed to compare some artefacts with those in the Triangulum Galaxy.”

“Do you have its registration number?”

“Alan?”

The man behind the counter turned to the terminal on his desk. “Yes, here it is.”

Everyone watched in anticipation as Kent called the orbital traffic control centre.

“Yesterday that vessel left Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert in France and entered the subspace transfer orbit,” he said after concluding the call. “I’m afraid that’s the last time it was seen, as it appears Tristan turned off the transponder at that point.”

“Damn.”

Lorraine burst into tears. “N-now we’ll never find him.”

“I’m sorry,” Inspector Kent said. He turned to Stan. “I’ll have uniform turn this place inside out and if there’s anything you’re hiding –”

“There’s nothing, I swear.”

Elissi turned to see Jameed studying one of the photos on the wall. “What are you looking at?”

“Me? Nothing – I was just wondering why anyone would want to live on a hell-hole like that.”

Through a hazy atmosphere, the image revealed an arid landscape pockmarked with volcanos, many oozing red-hot lava or belching clouds of smoke and ash. Fixed below it, a single word label identified the planet: *Ignus*.

Part Three

The Fires of Ignus



Training

Joel woke to find himself lying on a hard bunk in an otherwise empty room. Thinking it was rather odd for a hotel or youth hostel, it took him a moment before his memory of what had happened to him resurfaced.

He tried to sit up but immediately felt his head spin and flopped back down again. His last recollection was of being offered some water, which must have been drugged. He put his hands behind his head, trying to make sense of what had happened, when the door opened.

“Excellent, you’re still alive,” said the blonde-headed man as he entered the room.

“Huh?”

“We had to sedate you, but were unsure of the correct dose.”

“You could’ve just asked me to be quiet and go to sleep.”

“Really? I never thought of that. So would you?”

“Would I what?”

“Be quiet and go to sleep if I asked you.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“You are truly amazing. Did you base that on a trial of alternative realities?”

“Huh? No, it’s just that there’s only one of me and I’m not very big or strong, so resistance would be futile, I guess. I find it’s easier to just go with the flow.”

“I see some work is still required but never mind, all in good time. I’m Tristan, by the way. Can I get you anything? Some wild berries and yams perhaps?”

“Just water, thanks, and without the sleeping potion this time.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Tristan stepped from the room, locking the door behind him. Joel looked around, taking closer stock of his surroundings. In the ceiling

at opposite corners were air vents, but they looked too small to crawl through even if he could find a way to climb up the wall or levitate himself. Resigned to his captivity, he sat back on the bunk and ran his fingers through his hair.

A short time later, Tristan returned holding two cups of water. “I’m giving you a choice: one of these contains another dose of sedative and the other doesn’t. Try to use your powers to pick the right one.”

“Powers? What powers?”

“Do what you did when your lovely wife fell off the wall; test the options and choose the correct one.”

“But I can’t control it, it just happens randomly.”

“*Can’t* isn’t a word we use here, and neither is *random*. Choose or go without.”

Joel closed his eyes, trying to imagine taking first one cup and then the other, but nothing came to him.

“I’ll take the one in your right hand.”

Tristan sighed as Joel gulped it down. “Sweet dreams.”

The room swam as he felt himself falling back onto the bunk.

Joel opened his eyes again to find nothing had changed, until realising his bladder was close to bursting. He leapt from the bunk, only to almost topple over with dizziness before reaching the door. Finding, perhaps not surprisingly, that it was locked, he started banging on it, hoping someone would hear before he disgraced himself on the floor.

Tristan eventually opened the door. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to go to the loo.”

“Oh, of course, follow me.”

Joel was about to do so when he realised he was naked. “Um, where are my board shorts?”

“We disposed of them, along with all your cards and documents. We wouldn’t want you being inadvertently identified, would we?”

“But –”

“You won’t need clothing where you’re going.”

“What? In the loo?”

“No, after that.”

“Oh right. Are we going to Cornipus then?”

“What makes you say that?”

“My brother-in-law is studying there and he doesn’t wear any clothes.”

“An interesting train of thought, but no, we’re not going there, although it’s in the right general vicinity. You’ll need a great deal of training before we arrive, though, and for that it’s best you remain naked and defenceless.”

Joel shrugged. “I don’t mind being naked; after years of hanging out with David, I’m used to it.”

Tristan laughed. “Hanging out, indeed! You’re such a wit, Joel, such a wit.”

“Um, I don’t get it.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would.” Tristan pushed open a door on the right. “Now go and do what you must, and don’t be too long.”

“Since we can’t coax you with clothing,” Tristan said once Joel had completed his ablutions, “perhaps we need to employ a different strategy. They say hunger sharpens the mind, so I think we’ll withhold food from you until such time as you can use your ability at will.”

“I’m not hungry anyway.”

“Don’t worry, you will be; be it days, weeks or months is immaterial. If in the end you starve to death, you’d have been of no use to us anyway.”

Joel grimaced.

“But perhaps it won’t come to that; I have every faith in your abilities, Joel, every faith.”

Tristan led Joel into the ship’s dining room. On the large table in the centre were two ornate metal food covers, with a single setting of knife, fork and napkin at the end.

“Beneath one of the covers is a roast chicken prepared by our French chef, without any frogs’ legs or snails I hasten to add. Under the other is nothing. Your task is simple; choose the one covering the food and it’s all yours to eat, but choose the other and you go hungry for another day.”

“But –”

“Use your ability to test each scenario. I know you can do it, Joel, and so do you. Just focus your mind and let your imagination go to work.”

Joel closed his eyes, trying to visualise himself lifting each of the covers, then either feasting on the mouth-watering chicken or lying in his cell with a growing emptiness inside him. Once more nothing happened.

“Time’s up; you must choose now.”

He was about to try *eenie, meenie, miny, moe* but thought it’d give too much of his uncertainty away. Instead he reached out and confidently lifted the left cover, revealing an empty plate underneath.

Tristan shook his head. “*C’est la vie*, Joel. You must really try harder.”

He lifted the other cover, moved the overflowing plate of roast chicken over to the setting, sat and carefully placed the napkin on his lap. Joel had no option but to stand in the corner and watch him eat.

“Tomorrow there’ll be three plates to choose from, then four, five and so forth on each successive day. Unless you develop your skill, your odds of avoiding starvation by chance will progressively diminish.”

Joel shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

* * *

A whole week had passed. By chance alone, the odds against him scoring at least one meal were seven-to-one, but he hadn’t. After the third day, his hunger pangs had faded to a not-altogether-unpleasant feeling of hollowness, but far worse was the boredom of his confinement. He’d tried counting to ten-thousand, then doing it backwards, or singing songs or imagining he was watching his favourite movies, but his mind kept turning back to Loraine. *Where was she now? What was she doing? Was she okay?*

He’d at least succeeded in avoiding any contemplation of his own fate. By some miracle or unexpected genetic trait, his subconscious had simply accepted that it was beyond his control and blocked it out. If he just had a book to read or some games to play, he thought he

could perhaps endure his captivity in relative comfort, until the lack of food made him too weak to do anything.

Once more he was led into the dining room. Before him on the table were eight covered plates.

“Today we have one of your favourites; grilled barramundi with a lime-lemon sauce, then some wild berries and yams – oops, that should be jams – for dessert. Is that enough to make you try just a little bit harder?”

He closed his eyes, trying to let his mind wander without consciously thinking of anything at all. Almost without noticing it, a chill ran up his spine as goose-bumps appeared on his arms and back.

Just as he opened his eyes, there was a loud thump as the ship lurched sideways. The lights flickered for a moment as the door burst open and a crewman dashed in. “We’ve hit something!”

“What?”

“Probably a small asteroid.”

Joel followed as Tristan dashed out of the room with the crewman.

“Why didn’t the proximity alarm detect it?”

Another crewman dashed down the corridor to meet them. “It did, but nobody noticed.”

“What? How?”

Before he could answer, the ship lurched again as a loud cracking noise came from somewhere behind them, followed by a growing whistling.

“The hull’s been breached! We’re losing pressure.”

“Can we seal it?”

“No.”

Joel felt his ears pop as the whistling grew louder, while his hair flapped in the breeze from the air at the front of the ship making its way to the hole at the back.

“How long have we got?”

“Just minutes. Quickly, to the loading bay; there are pressure suits there!”

As Joel took a step to follow, the breeze became a gale as the sound of wrenching metal came from ahead. His eardrums burst in an explosion of pain, while a violent belch seared his throat as the air in his lungs and stomach escaped. In the sudden terrifying silence his

vision sparkled and went out, to be replaced by a blinding white light...

“Joel, time’s up; you must decide.”

He opened his eyes, shocked to see the eight covers sitting on the table before him.

“Something’s wrong,” he said, running his fingers through his hair. “The ship’s about to hit an asteroid!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We have collision avoidance radar that’ll give us plenty of warning from even the fastest objects that could do any damage.”

“No, the alarm isn’t working! Please, listen to me, I had another singlet moment!”

“All right, Joel,” Tristan said, opening the door. “Follow me, but if you’re making this up you’ll get no food for a month.”

“I’m not, I swear. Please hurry!”

Even before they reached the cockpit, they could hear the alarm beeping. Tristan burst in, glaring at the helmsman who was stretched back listening to loud music through his headphones.

“What?” he said as Tristan wrenched them from his head.

“Can’t you hear that alarm? Move us out of harm’s way, you idiot!”

The helmsman grabbed the controls, shifting their orbit to a safer position. The alarm stopped.

“Come to my quarters when you’ve thought of a good reason why I shouldn’t eject you from the airlock.”

Tristan turned to Joel, ushering him back to the dining room.

“Thank you. So tell me, was the impact fatal?”

Joel took a deep breath, trying to stop himself from passing out as his heart-rate began to drop. “Not immediately, but the hull was breached and soon gave way completely. There was no time to reach the pressure suits in the loading bay.”

Tristan scratched his chin. “You’re quite remarkable, I’ll give you that. There’s no way you could know about the pressure suits in the loading bay unless you were telling the truth. Now, you were about to choose a plate, weren’t you?”

“What? I thought after that I might have earned a free meal.”

“No, I think not. Your *singlet* moment, as you called it, was involuntary, although I’d be fascinated to know what triggered it. Your reward for saving us is that you remain alive, although given how little meat was on your bones to begin with, I doubt that’ll be for much longer unless you learn to control your ability. Now choose a plate or forfeit this round.”

Joel glared at him before dropping his gaze and lifting the third cover from the left. The plate beneath was empty.

Tristan lifted the one next to it, revealing the grilled fish and dessert of wild berries and jams. “This does look delicious, I must say. Now go stand in the corner.”

Joel covered his face, silently weeping for the first time since his abduction.

* * *

Another three weeks had passed. Even though the odds were now twenty-seven to one against him not scoring a single meal by chance in all that time, that was precisely what had happened.

After suffering a great weakness early in his second week of deprivation, Joel had gained his second wind and had been managing fairly comfortably until just a couple of days ago. Now, he spent most of the time lying on the bunk in a semi-conscious daze, unsure whether he was awake or asleep and not having the energy to think about anything.

Tristan wandered in. “Time for round twenty-eight, Joel. You know you’ll soon present us with a problem as we’re almost out of plate-covers, although by the look of you I’d say our little game is almost over.”

Joel eased himself off the bunk, but in a wave of dizziness he collapsed back onto it again. Laboriously taking shallow breaths, he tried again, this time making it onto his feet. In spite of his weakness, he felt so light he thought he could almost float out of the room.

Making it to the dining room without falling over, Joel leaned against the edge of the table, staring at the twenty-eight covered plates before him and wondering if he’d even have the energy to eat anything if he chanced the correct one.

“I must say it’s quite remarkable that you’ve gone four weeks without once picking the correct plate,” Tristan said, “and I’m beginning to wonder if you might be using your talent to deliberately avoid food.”

“No – no way,” Joel said, his voice now little more than a rasping whisper. “Why would I do that?”

“You tell me. Perhaps you fear greater torment should your control of your ability be revealed, but no, I can assure you that is not the case. Tonight our chef has prepared a special offering for you to mark the end of your fourth week; a genuine Australian meat pie made from the finest beef and topped with lashings of tomato sauce. Is that not tempting?”

“I – if you say so. Can’t think anymore.”

“Then put your ability to work and choose the correct plate, otherwise I doubt you’ll have the strength to participate any further in our little game and I’ll have to leave you to suffer the final stages of your death by starvation in the confines of your cell.”

Joel stared at the covers but his vision began to waver. Tristan grabbed him by the shoulders, holding him upright as his legs tried to buckle beneath him.

“Time’s up, Joel. Use your blessed gift and end this game, or your life will be forfeit. Now choose your plate.”

With the last of his energy, Joel lifted the cover from the nearest plate, knowing it would be empty. He wasn’t wrong.

“So be it,” Tristan said, lifting the cover of the second one along to reveal the pie. “If by some miracle you’re able to join me tomorrow, we’ll try for twenty-nine, but I really think, Joel, this is the end. I’m so disappointed in you, after all the effort we made to bring you here. Perhaps we should have starved your lovely wife instead and made you watch her suffering.”

“Leave – Loraine – out – this.”

Joel’s vision sparkled as the room seemed to spin around him. He was unconscious by the time his body hit the floor.

* * *

Joel opened his eyes, finding himself back on his bunk. Taking a few deep breaths, he turned his head towards the door only to see a familiar fourteen-year-old boy sitting on the floor and staring back at him.

“Pedro? I thought you were dead, or does this mean I’m dead too?”

“Neither, I hope. Do I look dead?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“My, but you look a right mess. What’s happened?”

“No food for a month. You, you don’t have anything to eat, do you?”

“I’m afraid not, and I don’t think I’m flesh and bones enough to get anything for you.”

“You mean I’m just imagining you?”

“I suppose so, but that doesn’t mean I’m not real. I’ve been here since you passed out in the dining room, hoping you’d regain consciousness. Can you reach your water jug?”

“I’ll try.”

Pedro stepped over, wrapping his arms around Joel and trying his best to help him sit up sufficiently to reach the jug. Almost passing out from exhaustion, Joel eventually managed to fill his cup.

“Drink it slowly,” Pedro said. “You’re probably suffering more from dehydration than lack of food. Most foods are ninety percent water so you have to drink a lot more when not eating.”

“Oh, right, I didn’t realise.”

Joel finished his cup, then, taking a few more deep breaths, managed to reach up and pour another one.

“Slowly now or you’ll barf it all back up.”

Joel smiled for the first time since his abduction. “I’m starting to feel better already.”

“Good, for there’s something you have to do.”

“What?”

“Tristan thinks you’re at death’s door so he didn’t bother locking this one when he brought you in.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. It’s going to be tricky, particularly with you being so weak, but there’s a way for you to escape. You’ll need to do exactly as I say, though, is that clear?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. Now just lie back down for a bit and let that water go to work, then we’ll see what we can do if we put our collective minds to it.”

Joel had dozed a little but now felt fully awake. He glanced over towards the door, making sure Pedro was still there. “I think I’m ready now.”

“Good. Now slowly ease yourself up; I’ll help as best I can but I can’t support your weight, as little as that might be.”

“Okay.”

With a lot of huffing and strain, Joel finally made it to his feet.

“Drink a bit more water before we go.”

He poured another cup, sipping it slowly before refilling it.

“That should be enough for now. Where are your clothes?”

“I was only wearing board shorts when they took me and they destroyed those.”

“Oh, this’ll be interesting then. Are you right to go?”

“As right as I’ll ever be. Which way?”

“You need to find the loading bay.”

“I think I know roughly where that is.”

Joel grabbed the door knob, half expecting it to still be locked, but it wasn’t.

“Quiet now. Tristan and most of his crew should be sleeping, but there’ll be someone on watch in the cockpit.”

“Down this way I think,” Joel said, turning to the right.

At the end of the corridor, an open door led into a large room with numerous hatches set into the walls.

“This looks like it.”

“You need to find the hatch to the shuttle craft.”

“How do I do that?”

“See those gauges? They indicate whether the other side is pressurised or not.”

“Oh, right.”

Joel crept around the room, checking each of the gauges before finding one that looked promising.

“Now see if you can open the hatch.”

He pulled on the handle as hard as he could, but it refused to move.

“Try the other way.”

Joel almost fell over as the handle spun around with a loud clunk.

“Quiet now.”

“Sorry.”

He pulled open the door, only to find himself facing another hatch.

“Good, that’s the outer hatch of the shuttle. See if you can open it without waking the dead this time.”

Straining himself to the limits, Joel eventually gained access to the shuttle.

“Now you have to close and secure both hatches behind you. Can you do that?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“That’s the spirit.”

His task completed, Joel collapsed into the pilot’s seat. “Now I just have to figure out how to fly this thing, don’t I?”

“That’s the easy part. Flick that switch over there, then press the big red button on your left. As soon as you do, the people on the ship will know something’s up, so you won’t have much time.”

“Okay.”

After taking a few deep breaths, Joel flicked the switch and pressed the button. A loud clang rang out as the shuttle lurched sideways.

“We’re clear of the ship, now take hold of the joystick.”

“This thing here?”

“Yes. Pull it back towards you and squeeze on the activator at the end.”

Through the window he could see them drop away from the ship.

“Now comes the tricky part – we have to enter the atmosphere without burning up or bouncing off.”

“How do I do that?”

“Let me sit on your lap and I’ll guide your hands.”

“Okay.”

Joel felt a tingling like an electrical charge where Pedro's body touched his, but tried his best to ignore it and concentrate on what they were doing.

"Press down gently on that pedal with your left foot."

"Like this?"

"Yes, but not quite as hard."

The craft dipped towards the planet before beginning to decelerate, while Pedro glanced back and forth at the various instruments, nodding to himself.

"You're doing well; press down a little harder now."

Joel was almost blinded when the sun suddenly appeared from behind the limb of the planet. "Ouch!"

"Yeah, I should've warned you about that. Try not to look at it."

By now he could hear the air brushing against the hull and feel some turbulence starting to build.

"Push forward on the joystick a little – that's right, now hold it there."

"Do you know what planet this is? It's not Earth or Eridani, I know that much, and I don't think it's Cornipus or Meridian either."

"They call this one Ignus."

"That's where the mines are, right?"

"Yep, and that's where you're going. Now pull the stick a little to the left and press down with your right foot."

"So, um, the miners will help me get back home, will they?"

"I think that's unlikely, but at least they'll feed you. Once you regain your strength, there's a task for you to perform."

"What is it?"

"Best you not find out until you're ready."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"It's better than what awaited you back on that ship."

"Oh, okay. Will I be helping people or hurting them?"

"You really have hit the nail on the head, Joel. You'll be helping them, I hope, perhaps offering them the greatest help they've had in millennia."

The craft broke through the bottom of the cloud bank, revealing a desolate landscape. Far to their right, a volcano erupted, with glowing lava flowing down its side and black smoke belching into the

atmosphere. Ahead was a lake in what looked like the crater of another volcano, while on the left, snow-capped mountains lined the horizon.

“The settlement’s just the other side of the lake. Ease off with your left foot now and pull back on the joystick.”

The craft gradually slowed before coming to a halt about a hundred metres above a small landing pad.

“Ease it down now.”

“How do I do that?”

“Loosen your grip on the actuator – easy now; you don’t want to smash into the ground after coming this far.”

With a bump and a shake, the craft came to a shuddering halt.

“Turn off the main switch and you’re done.”

Joel flicked the switch to the off position before slumping back in the seat, unconscious.

Pedro sighed. “I hope you were right about this, Charon.”

The Sorting Room

Joel woke to find himself in a hospital bed with an intravenous drip attached to his left arm. An elderly man in a white coat stood staring at the assorted instruments surrounding him.

“Ah, you’re awake, excellent,” the doctor said in the Meridian common tongue. He held up his hand. “How many fingers?”

“Um, three.”

“Good boy! Now who’s the Supreme Councillor?”

“Michael Chandler.”

“Well done. It looks like you have no obvious brain damage and your major organs should recover with no lasting impairment, but another week or two and it’d have been a different story. So why were you fasting for so long? Was it a religious atonement, a dare or just a death wish?”

“No, none of those. I was abducted and they were withholding food as part of their training.”

“Good gracious! Who would do such a thing?”

“I don’t know who they were, but the man in charge looked Eridanian.”

“Eridanian, you say? Well you’re safe here but your recovery will take some time. Your digestive organs have completely shut down so we’ll be starting you off on a very light broth.”

“That’s okay; I don’t feel hungry at all, just very weak.”

“Your hunger won’t return until your body’s ready to accept food, but we don’t want to overdo things or it’ll just make you worse.”

Joel glanced around the ward. “Where’s Pedro?”

“Who?”

“The boy who was with me on the shuttle.”

“There was no-one with you on that shuttle; you were found alone and unconscious immediately after landing.”

“Oh, so I did imagine him then.”

"I suppose you must have. The mind does strange things when staring death in the face."

"Gosh."

"I'm amazed you were able to fly and land it, given the state you were in."

"So am I. I may have only imagined Pedro, but I couldn't have done it without him. Jim would've been proud of him."

Across the room, but unseen by either of them, Pedro grinned.

* * *

Joel looked up as the doctor and another man approached.

"Joel, you've now recovered sufficiently for me to discharge you. This is Dougall who'll look after your accommodation and placement in the workforce."

"Oh, hi, that's nice, but, um, if I'm okay to go, I really need to get back to my wife on Earth."

"Leave?" Dougall said as he led Joel down the corridor. "Nobody leaves Ignus unless they have an authorised visitor's visa and a booking with an accredited carrier. I understand you have neither."

"No I don't, but I'm not a prisoner or anything."

"None of us are prisoners. Some came voluntarily, but most are like you; we were in the wrong place at the wrong time and caught the eye of the overlords."

"But surely they can't just *take* people like this."

"*Can't* isn't a word we use here, Joel. They used to say the prison colony on Huntress was a cruel place, and perhaps it was, but some of the inmates won their appeals, gained parole or were released after serving their time. That doesn't happen here; once you arrive you work until you're recycled."

"Recycled?"

"Thrown into one of the volcanos to return your constituents to the core. Everything is recycled here, be it machinery, buildings or people; it's how we maintain sustainable mining over the millennia."

"Gosh, I never thought of it like that."

“You’d have been immediately recycled given the state you were in, only I was curious as to the manner of your arrival. The overlords usually don’t send people down unaccompanied.”

“I’d been kidnapped but managed to escape.”

“Yes, we figured that out, but now we have to decide what to do with you.” Dougall ran his fingers through his beard. “You’re nothing but skin and bone so you won’t be much use swinging a pick or sledge-hammer.”

“I was never very strong even before this all happened.”

“Perhaps we could start you in the sorting room. Old Bert’s about due for recycling so we’ll need another hand.”

“You’re going to just kill him because he’s old?”

“That’s the way it works here. This is a tough world and mining is very competitive, so we simply can’t afford to carry anyone who can’t pull their weight. Of course we’ll give him a proper send-off; he’s quite looking forward to it.”

Joel shook his head.

“I’ll start you off as his assistant. Are you familiar with the six grades of fractal ore?”

“The six what?”

Dougall sighed. “I thought as much. Maybe we should just recycle you now and be done with it.”

“No, I can learn, can’t I? I’m a good learner; the teachers at school all said that, really.”

“Very well, I’ll give you four weeks to learn the ropes. If you’re not up to it by the time of Bert’s send-off, you can go with him.”

Joel gulped. “I’ll do my best, I promise.”

Dougall led him into a room on the left, filled with net hammocks suspended one above the other. “This is the dormitory. You’re light and nimble so I’ll put you up the top in the corner over there.”

To Joel it looked a long way up, bringing back memories of the top bunk in Gallargues-le-Montueux, but he thought it best not to say anything. *Go with the flow*, Loraine’s voice whispered from the back of his mind.

“You don’t have any belongings, I see, so that makes it easy. Come and I’ll show you the dining hall.”

Rickety trestle tables with packing cases for seats filled the room at the end of the corridor. The grimy servery along one wall gave off a pervading smell of burnt oil and rotting fruit.

“Don’t let the appearance and smells put you off, Joel, it’s been some years now since anyone’s died from food poisoning.”

“Oh, okay.” He wondered if perhaps there was a nearby forest where he could forage for wild berries and yams.

“This world’s day is eighteen standard hours which we divide into two nine-hour shifts. The servery opens at each change of shift and the food’s quite nutritious even if it tastes like it’s been dug out of a swamp. Any questions?”

“Um, where’s the bathroom?”

“You mean the bog? It’s outside around to the left of the building; just follow your nose and you can’t miss it. Use the lake if you need to bathe, but stay out of the water around sunrise and sunset if you don’t want to be eaten.”

Joel sighed, now wondering if he’d have been better off staying on Tristan’s ship and starving to death.

“I’ll take you to the sorting room now so you can start earning your keep.”

Dougall led him outside, where the air was hot with a tang of sulphur and ash. Clouds of volcanic smoke cast a reddish haze over the lake and its surrounding mountains of barren rock, with Joel’s hoped-for forests of wild berries and yams nowhere to be seen.

“Nice day,” Dougall said, taking a deep breath. “It seems almost civilised when the weather’s this good.”

Joel sighed again as he followed him along the gravel pathway leading to a huge metal shed.

“Before I take you in,” Dougall said, pausing at the door, “I should really give you some gist of what we do. Have you had any ideas on the six grades of ore?”

“Um, I do know that extra-galactic ships need a special type of fractal crystal, since they use the higher order resonances in the lattice to enter that subspace.”

Dougall laughed. “You amaze me, Joel, you really do. So what do you think the other grades might be used for?”

“Well there are the normal intra-galactic ships, of course, and energy receptors, but, um, that’s only three.”

“That’s right, but in those two classes there are subgrades. Think about who might use them.”

“Ah, right, I get it. The military, I suppose, always want something a bit better than everyone else, then there’d be the heavy industrial users, like the bulk transport carriers, and then I suppose there’d be the ordinary commercial grade.”

“Spot on. What about the energy receptors?”

“I would’ve said the same, but that’d make a total of seven, wouldn’t it?”

Dougall again laughed. “The military use their crystals for both transport and energy, so there are only two subgrades in the energy class, industrial and domestic.”

“Oh, right. But, um, why can’t you use machines to separate the grades? Wouldn’t that be more efficient?”

“Long ago they did that, but it was a complicated process. The ore had to be broken down in acidic baths and the fractal crystals separated out and grown before they could be tested. It was cumbersome and time-consuming; not good for business.”

Joel nodded. “So what happened?”

“Some of the testers developed the knack of picking the grade from the unprocessed ore and over time refined their art until they were just as accurate as the machines and a lot quicker.”

“Gosh. Something similar happened on Earth when they first developed the telegraph. They had inking machines that printed out the dots and dashes, which then had to be read and decoded into letters and numbers, but the operators found they could read the code just from the sound of the machines. In the end they got rid of the printers and just used the sounds.”

“You have a sharp mind, Joel, but be careful; there are some here who won’t like that.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Come on in and I’ll introduce you to Bert.”

The noise inside the shed almost overwhelmed Joel as he followed Dougall inside. At one end, clanking conveyor belts fed piles of ore

towards rows of benches where the sorters sat amid a haze of purple light, while chutes led the sorted ore towards huge hoppers on the opposite side.

“Everyone listen up!” Dougall shouted over the din. “This is Joel who’ll be joining you as Bert’s apprentice. Please show him the same welcome you received yourselves.”

A few chuckles arose from the nearest benches before they all went back to work. Dougall led Joel to the far corner where the largest man he’d ever seen sat perched upon a stool that looked in imminent danger of collapse.

Bert turned towards them. “Is *this* going to be my replacement? You’re joking, surely. What is he, Cornipean?”

“I’m from Earth,” Joel said.

“No such place, but never mind. What makes you think you can be a sorter?”

“I, um –”

Dougall cut him off before Joel could think of a reason. “He’s too puny to work at the face so it’s either sorting or recycling.”

Bert’s whole body quivered like jelly as he laughed. “Don’t worry, boy, they say the recycling’s pretty painless and who knows, you might come back as something useful.”

“He has a good grasp of the basics and a sharp mind, so give him a chance.”

“All right.” Bert handed Joel an ore sample. “What do you make of this?”

Joel shrugged while turning it over in his hands. “What am I looking for?”

Bert sighed, taking it back from him while starting the grinding wheel mounted on the corner of the bench. “First we create a clean face, like this.”

“Okay.”

He pulled down an illuminated magnifying glass. “It has a nice even crystal structure, which means it’s not rubbish.”

Joel took a look, trying to see what he meant. “Um, do you have a rubbish one that I can compare it with?”

Bert smiled. “A quick mind, yes. Just a moment.”

He pulled out a drawer on his right, rummaging through it before removing a sample. "Take a look at this one."

"Oh right, yes, I get it. So the rubbish one –"

"Domestic energy receptors; that's why they fail so often."

Joel chanced a grin. "So how do you grade the good ones?"

Bert switched on a light with a soft purple glow. "We check it under ultraviolet to see if it fluoresces."

He passed the sample to Joel, who rotated it slowly under the light. "What am I looking for?"

"See any flashes?"

"A few, yes, mostly blue although occasionally there's a green one."

"You still have good eyes then. The ultra-violet destroys them, you know, which is why I'm being recycled."

Joel gulped. "H-how long have you been here?"

"Ten standard years."

"Um, couldn't you wear protective goggles or something?"

Bert shook his head. "Even if I could, after ten years of this job I welcome the recycling."

"I see. So what do those coloured flashes mean?"

"The blue ones are good but the green ones are bad. If there are no green ones at all, it's military grade, mostly blue is industrial transport, fifty-fifty is commercial transport and the rest goes into industrial power. There are a few other tricks I'll show you, but that's the gist of it."

"What about inter-galactic grade?"

Bert leaned over close to him, his breath smelling of rotting meat. "I doubt you'll ever see any of that, not in this mine at any rate, but if it glows orange you've hit the jackpot."

"Okay, right. So having identified the ore, what do I do with it?"

Bert pointed to five chutes at the back of the bench. "Rubbish on the left, then industrial power, commercial transport, industrial transport and military. Be doubly sure of anything you class as military, though, as they have torture chambers for anyone who makes a mistake."

"Really?"

"Just ask young Willy over there if you don't believe me."

Joel turned to where a one-armed man sat facing away from him, the skin on his back covered in long red welts.

“They whipped him?”

“Flogged is a better description, but yes, and cut off his arm for good measure.”

Joel covered his mouth as his gorge started to rise.

“If a battle were to be lost because a crystal fractured at the wrong moment – well, you don’t want to think about it. Don’t make a mistake, Joel; if you have any doubt at all, it’s industrial transport grade.”

“So what if I just always err on the side of caution?”

“Don’t even think about that, as we have minimum quotas on each category. Miss a quota and it’s off to the flogging room for a shift.”

“Oh. So, um, there’s no sixth chute; what do I do with anything that glows orange?”

Bert leaned over to him again, causing Joel to almost gag. “Stick it somewhere safe then take it to Dougall at the change of shift. That’ll be your key to going home.”

“Gosh.”

Bert stood, causing his stool to heave a sigh of relief. “Right, let’s see how you go.”

“Bert, what do you make of this?” Joel asked. He’d sorted a dozen ore samples with little difficulty, but the thirteenth one had him scratching his head.

“What’s wrong?”

“This one looks all blue and I was about to classify it as military grade, but there’s something not quite right. The blue is slightly different to the others.”

Bert took the sample, holding it under the light and squinting while turning it over in his hands. “It looks okay to me, but let’s be sure, shall we?”

He pulled open his drawer and removed two transparent plates.

“What are they?”

“Polarising filters.” He fitted one to the ultraviolet light. “Take a look now.”

Joel rotated the sample back and forth under the light, his brow furrowed. "It looks like a pure blue now."

"Try the other filter."

"Hey, it's gone green!"

"Well done, Joel, you've found a twister."

"A what?"

"Do you know about the two forms of fractal molecule?"

"Yes, they're optical isomers with a left-handed or right-handed twist."

"That's right. In nature, there's always an even mix of the two types, but occasionally a piece of ore shows up with predominantly one or the other."

"That's impossible, isn't it, unless –"

Bert grinned as Joel's face screwed up in concentration.

"You said everything in this galaxy's been recycled through the volcanoes for a million years, so, um, could a right-handed or left-handed fractal crystal retain its polarisation after going in and being mined again?"

"It's a long shot, but it's the only explanation anyone's been able to come up with."

"Gosh. So what do I do with it?"

Bert pulled a white marker pen from his drawer and drew a circle with an arrow on it. "Make sure the direction matches the filter that shows it as blue. The military don't like them, but the industrial transport manufacturers pay a good price as it saves on refining costs."

"Why don't the military like them?"

"If I told you I'd have to kill you."

"Oh."

Bert grinned. "I have no idea, really, but I suppose it messes up their procedures and requires someone to think."

A siren sounded, causing Joel to almost jump out of his skin. "What was that?"

"Change of shift. Come and get some dinner; you look like you could do with a good feed."

Joel joined the end of the queue to the servery immediately behind Willy. Trying not to stare at the short stump that remained of his left arm, he instead looked down at the floor but almost yelped at what he saw.

“Um, excuse me, Willy, but, but are you Eridanian?”

“Me? What’s an *Eridanian*?”

“You know, from the planet Eridani in my home galaxy.”

Willy scratched his chin. “I’m sorry, but no. I was born here on Ignus.”

“But you have Eridanian feet.”

“Do I? Come and join me at the table once you have your food and I’ll tell you a little about my people.”

“Great, thanks.”

Willy took his plate from the man behind the counter and disappeared, leaving Joel to ponder what he should ask for. Before he could open his mouth, though, the server handed him a plate containing a slab of meat covered in an orange sauce and a pile of mashed vegetables.

“Um, thanks.”

The man glared at him before turning to the next in line, leaving Joel to ponder how thanking someone could earn him such disdain.

“Could you do me a favour, Joel?” Willy asked as he sat beside him.

“Sure.”

“If you could cut my meat up into bite-sized pieces it’ll make it a lot easier for me. I could do it with my feet, but it can get a little messy that way.”

Joel took the offered knife and fork, carefully dissecting the slab into equal-sized morsels with the precision of a surgeon.

“Thank you so much; I sure do appreciate it.”

“No worries, mate.”

Willy stared at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, it’s just that friendship’s a rare commodity here, very rare, especially for someone of my race.”

“Gosh.”

“Even Old Bert seems friendly enough, until, well –”

“Well what?”

“Never mind. We should eat this stuff before it goes cold or congeals, then I’ll tell you a little about my people if you’ll tell me about yours.”

“Sure.”

Joel took a tentative bite, having no idea what to expect, but was pleasantly surprised by the taste. He quickly cleaned his plate.

“You can get seconds if you hurry,” Willy said. “A satisfied customer really makes their day.”

Joel dashed back over to the server. “That was really nice; can I please have a little more?”

Without saying a word or even batting an eyelid, the man took his plate, refilled it and handed it back.

“Thanks so much; I really appreciate it.”

Once more the man scowled at him. Joel quickly turned away, his face screwed up in confusion. *What was it about this place?*

From the corner of his eye he thought he saw Pedro grinning at him, but when he turned there were only the scowling miners picking at their food. *Something’s wrong here, something very wrong.*

He returned to Willy who was still working his way through his meal. “Do you need any more help?”

“No, I guess I’m not as hungry as you. Dig in while I collect my thoughts.”

“The people who kidnapped me starved me for a month, so I guess I still have some catching up to do.”

Willy ran his finger up and down Joel’s prominent ribcage. “Indeed; you’re still nothing but skin and bones.”

“I was little more than that even before this all happened.”

“Eat, then, while I talk.”

“Okay.” Joel shovelled a sizeable portion into his mouth and began chewing.

“My people live in a valley not far from here. They’re farmers, mostly, although the soil is poor and little of any value grows there. Like my brothers and cousins, I was sold to the mines on my fifteenth birthday.”

“Gosh.”

“If I could just find some orange ore, I could –” Willy stopped talking, staring instead at something over Joel’s shoulder. Joel turned to find himself looking into Bert’s navel.

“A word please, Joel, in private.”

Joel followed him outside. “What’s wrong?”

Bert put his enormous hand on Joel’s shoulder. “It doesn’t matter to me, but there are some here who’d take a dim view of you speaking with the likes of Willy.”

“I – but – why?”

“They say his kind are telepathic and can read or control our minds. Total hogwash, if you ask me, but –”

“Who are *they*?”

“You saw them over by the servery; the miners who looked like they’d just eaten something putrid.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t want to cross them, not unless you’d like to be recycled during the night.”

“So what is Willy’s kind?”

“They call themselves Tivinel, just like the overlords, only the latter treat them as scum. I don’t know why – maybe it’s some ancient tribal feud or something.”

Joel’s jaw dropped. “The blonde-headed man who kidnapped me, I thought he was Eridanian, but, was he really –”

“Yes, they all have blonde hair and those misshapen feet.”

Joel grimaced. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“That’s probably a good thing. Now go and get some sleep before the next change of shift.”

“Thanks Bert.”

Bert shook his head, sighing before walking around the back to the bog.

Joel stared into space before wandering down to the edge of the lake. The red glow of the volcano reflecting off the low cloud made the water shimmer as if laced with fire, but when he stuck a toe in, it was pleasantly cool. After looking around to make sure he was unobserved, he lowered himself into the water, hoping it’d wash away his growing unease. After swimming far enough out from the shore,

he floated on his back and closed his eyes, taking long slow breaths as the tension melted from his arms and legs.

Something brushed against his foot, making him almost leap out of the water. His thoughts immediately turned to the warning Dougall had given him – *stay out of the water around sunrise and sunset if you don't want to be eaten* – even though the sun had set two hours ago. *What monsters lurked in the depths of this lake?*

“Sorry Joel,” Pedro whispered in his ear. “*Just making sure I can still grab your attention.*”

“L-loud and clear.”

“*You should go to bed soon if you don't want to be falling asleep on the job tomorrow. I'll wake you if there's any danger.*”

“Danger? To me?”

“*Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Sweet dreams.*”

“But – Pedro?”

When there was no response, Joel paddled back to shore, letting the hot wind dry him before going inside.

Servants of the Core

Daku handed his great-grandfather some wild berries and a piece of gubiyaay, the sweet yam that was their favourite breakfast treat.

"I had the strangest dream last night, Warrain."

"Tell me."

"In a far-away place by the great water, I lived amongst many pale-skinned people, one of whom was my twin sister. We spoke a strange tongue and travelled to the stars and beyond."

Warrain stroked his beard. "It was more than just a dream, Daku, for a great change has befallen us and all that once was has been lost."

David woke to find himself drenched in sweat, his heart still pounding from the nightmare.

Something terrible had happened, something that had erased all human history from the universe. Shivering as a cold clamminess enveloped him, he climbed off his bed and padded outside onto the balcony. The orange glow in the east told him dawn would soon arrive, banishing the nightmare monsters back into the closet.

"What's wrong, Davo?" his room-mate asked, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Was it the dream again?"

"Yeah. Episode six, if I haven't lost count; all of them the same, with me and my great-grandfather having breakfast on a primitive version of Earth."

"All that once was has been lost."

"Yep." Another shiver ran through him.

"Maybe you should see the campus psychologist."

"Don't be daft, Cam."

"Well perhaps the excursion will help clear your head."

"What excursion?"

"Haven't you heard?"

“Obviously not.”

“We’re going to Ignus to see the fractal crystal mines.”

Another shiver ran up and down David’s spine.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know; another dream perhaps, or maybe a part of the same one that I can’t remember. It’s just, well, something about Ignus.” He ran his hands through his hair before stretching and rubbing his back against the balcony railing. “When do we go?”

“Thursday.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“At least you’ll be in your element; I’ve heard all the miners are naked.”

David grinned. “Really?”

“It’s a hot world and it saves on laundry, I suppose. They say most are slaves, unsuspecting peasants captured by the overlords.”

“Does the government allow that?”

“No, but they don’t stop it either. Too much at risk if the supply of fractal ore were to suddenly dry up.”

David shivered again. “We’re all too cosy to worry about a few enslaved peasants.”

“Amber and Sontar are almost as bad, although your dad made some inroads on those worlds while he was running the place. Ignus, though – *out of sight, out of mind.*”

“We should do something.”

“We? You mean – just you and me?”

David grinned. “Why not?”

Cam shook his head. “You really do need to see the psychologist.”

* * *

Joel put down the ore sample he was studying as Dougall approached.

“Carry on Joel; I just need to borrow Bert for a bit.”

“Oh, right.”

He watched as they left the room before returning to his work, confirming that the sample he held was indeed consumer-grade rubbish. He picked up another piece and started the grinding wheel.

“So how’s he going, Bert?” Dougall asked as they stepped outside.

“Joel? He’s a smart lad, perhaps a bit too smart for a place like this, but he has the sorting pretty much down pat. He could do it in his sleep now, I reckon.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m thinking of holding your send-off tonight.”

“Tonight? What can I say, you’re full of surprises!”

“You’re ready to go then?”

“I’ve been ready for months. My peepers are just about clapped out and if Joel hadn’t turned up, I’d have been making a lot of mistakes by now.”

Dougall nodded. “You haven’t changed your mind about becoming a supervisor?”

“Nah, I don’t have the fortitude for it; too much of a softie at heart, I’m afraid.”

“Right, then, I’ll let the servery people know to start preparing; it’ll be a feast to remember, I’m sure.” Dougall’s smile faltered. “And, um, that other matter we discussed?”

“I haven’t forgotten; leave it with me and I’ll take care of it before I go.”

“Okay.”

“What’s happening?” Joel asked as Bert returned with an unusual grin on his face.

“It’s my send-off tonight.”

“Tonight? But – but no, you can’t!”

“Hush, Joel. You’ve known all along this was happening and now my time has come. This is a happy occasion for me; it’s my chance to move on and make a fresh start.”

“But Bert, surely you don’t really believe –”

“Recycling and rebirth is real, Joel; you’ve seen the evidence yourself.”

“I’ve what?”

“The twister; you said yourself it could only happen if a previously refined crystal retained its polarisation through recycling.”

“But that’s just a crystal, not a person – not a soul. It’s totally different!”

“It’s not different at all, not one iota. *In truth all things are the same.*”

Joel’s jaw dropped. “In truth – all things are – the same?”

“Exactly. You see now how it works?”

“I – yes – no – but?”

“There is no *but*, Joel. We either follow our beliefs or fall by the wayside; there is no other way.”

Joel ran his hands through his hair, pulling it down over his eyes and then brushing it aside as if that’d make everything clear.

“I – how long does it take before you come back?”

“It could be a week or million years; nobody knows.”

“Are you – like – awake all that time, inside the volcano?”

“I don’t think so. It’s supposed to be just like a long peaceful sleep.”

“I – I suppose that’s all right, then.” He wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’ll miss you, Bert.”

“And I’ll miss you too, Joel, more than you’ll ever know. Now back to work before the overlords start noticing the empty conveyors.”

Dougall walked into the dining hall just as Joel was finishing his dessert. “I hope you’ve all enjoyed tonight’s feast.”

Everyone cheered, even the surly miners sitting next to the servery.

“Tonight we bid farewell to someone who has truly become an icon of our community. Joining us ten years ago when he couldn’t tell a fractal ore sample from a lump of granite, he progressed to become our most accurate and efficient sorter, until failing vision led him to tonight’s formalities. Gentlemen, I give you Bert!”

Bert stood to more cheering and applause. “As most of you know, I began life as a pick-pocket in the Azarath markets on Meridian. Believe it or not, I was a skinny little runt back then, much like young Joel here, able to weave in and out of the stalls relieving wealthy bargain-hunters of their wallets. All was well, comparatively speaking, until I had the misfortune to pick the pocket of an overlord. The next thing I knew I was swinging a pick at the mine face here.

“A couple of years of that did my back in, so they moved me into the sorting room where I threw down roots and expanded my girth.” He patted his enormous stomach, making it quiver like jelly. “Now my peepers are giving out, so it’s time to move on once more, this time for my next revolution on the cycle of life.

“Thank you, one and all, for making my time here bearable, perhaps even enjoyable, and I hope to see you next time around.”

Dougall waited for everyone to stand before leading the singing of Ignus’s version of *For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow*. Joel joined in as best he could, even though he didn’t know the words.

“It’s time now for Bert’s final journey. I need four strong volunteers to carry the litter.”

Everyone looked around the room, hoping someone else would volunteer, until four of the surly miners stood in unison. The others clapped half-heartedly.

Once outside, Bert climbed onto the sedan chair parked next to the door. With a grunt, the four miners lifted it onto their shoulders like pall-bearers, adjusting the weight for a moment before setting off.

Their path illuminated by volcanic glow reflected off the low cloud cover, the procession walked steadily uphill along the well-worn road to the crater rim, where the bearers lowered Bert’s litter to the ground in front of a flight of black stone steps. At the top stood a cable car, its cable extending across the crater to a similar anchor point on the other side.

Several hundred metres below, at the floor of the crater, a lake of molten rock ebbed and surged, its dull red shimmer occasionally punctuated by showers of yellow and orange sparks as bubbles of hot gas broke the surface. Joel considered it fortunate that the breeze was blowing from behind them across the crater, otherwise the fumes and heat would have been overwhelming.

As if suddenly appearing out of the shadows, four creatures approached the litter. At first Joel thought they were yowies, before realising they were men dressed in animal skins. A deep chill ran through him, recalling the moment at his wedding reception when David, Mark, Jason and Billy had painted his body in the traditional markings of their people.

“What’s wrong?” *Loraine had asked.*

“Huh?”

“You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“More like a ghost’s just seen me.”

That feeling of being watched from the inside out came over him again, causing his skin to erupt in goose-bumps in spite of the volcano’s radiant heat.

“They’re the skin-walkers,” Willy whispered to him. “Creepy, aren’t they?”

The four men approached Bert as he sat on the litter, each taking hold of one hand or foot.

“What are they doing?”

“Our palms and soles are portals to our spiritual essence, or so they say. They’re anointing his soul for the next stage of his journey.”

Again a deep shiver ran up and down Joel’s spine, causing more goose-bumps to erupt.

Your soul shines brightly in the spirit realm, Joey Red Wolf had said. *Be very careful, Joel, for not all spirits are powers for good.* Joel knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that the ritual he was witnessing was evil to its core.

“Dark magic indeed,” Willy said, as if reading his thoughts. Joel looked at him, remembering what Bert had once said: *they say his kind are telepathic and can read or control our minds.* Was that really true?

Bert stood, allowing the skin-walkers to escort him up the steps to the cable car. Before entering, he turned to face the miners, his expression glazed and vacant.

“As Servants of the Core we return Bert’s body and soul to you,” the skin-walkers chanted in unison. “From lava was he made and from lava will he be reborn. Take his flesh and spirit and reforge them anew!”

“To the Core! To the Core!” the onlookers chanted in response. Joel felt his stomach start to churn and had to turn away. When next he looked, the car had begun its slow journey across the crater.

Around him everyone hushed as it came to a stop halfway across. Willy placed his hand on Joel’s shoulder.

The car’s door opened, revealing Bert standing on the threshold, his skin glowing red in the light from below. A moment later he

leaned forward and fell, dropping in what seemed like slow motion into the lake of molten rock. A brilliant shower of white sparks erupted as he broke the surface and disappeared.

All around, everyone clapped and cheered. It was all too much; Joel dashed to the side of the crater and regurgitated his dinner over the edge, retching repeatedly until there was nothing left to come out. The fumes and heat overwhelming him, he passed into oblivion as Joey's words echoed over and over in his mind.

* * *

Joel woke to the siren denoting the change of shifts, unsure how he'd come to be back in his hammock but with vague recollections of Willy helping him down from the volcano.

Etched in his mind was the terrible image of Bert tumbling out of the cable car to his death. Although too far away to have seen, Joel was sure his eyes would have shown the same empty stare that he'd witnessed on the steps; those skin-walkers had done something to him, he was sure.

What was it Willy had said? *Our palms and soles are portals to our spiritual essence. They're anointing his soul for the next stage of his journey.* His soul hadn't been anointed, Joel was sure; it'd been suppressed or even stolen. *Dark magic indeed.*

His body still on autopilot, he found himself standing at the servery with his breakfast tray in hand. Although not hungry, he grabbed some cereal and fruit juice before turning to his usual table in the far corner of the room. As he passed the surly miners, one of them stuck out his foot, causing Joel to trip and scatter his breakfast all over the floor.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the man behind the servery counter yelled. "Go and get a mop to clean that up."

Head down, Joel plodded to the cleaner's closet while the miners snickered behind his back. "Useless bloody wimp; the skin-walkers will be after him next, mark my words."

Joel climbed onto Bert's stool in the sorting room. The workbench in front of him looked twice as big, as if he'd shrunk to the size of a

five-year-old. He sure felt like one, lost and abandoned on a world without hope.

He grabbed a piece of ore from the hopper, hoping it'd take his mind off everything that had happened. *Rubbish*, he thought, rolling it over in his hands, but turned on the grinding wheel just to be sure.

It might have been the sound of the motor, or perhaps the smell of hot lubricant, but again it was all too much. Before he could put the ore against the wheel, his vision blurred with tears, and all he could do was sit there, gripping onto that piece of rock like a drowning man to a straw.

He'd only met Bert a few short weeks ago, yet had come to know and love him better than he had his own father. After his nightmare with Tristan, Bert had been a safe harbour, a bubble of normality in this ocean of horrors. Now that bubble had burst, leaving him floundering once more.

He tried to think of Loraine but struggled now to even remember what she looked like. Too much had happened, way too much, and every time he closed his eyes he'd see Bert tumbling out of the cable car and the shower of sparks when he hit the lava.

"Joel, walk with me," Dougall said from behind him, causing him to almost fall off the stool.

Joel followed him outside to the edge of the lake.

"I know you and Bert had become close friends," Dougall said, squatting down on the rock next to Joel. "He had that effect on practically everyone here, and none are sorrier to see him go than I."

Joel sniffled.

"But life moves on, the wheel turning in its relentless cycles, and we must go with the flow or turn to ash."

The phrase *go with the flow* snapped Joel out of his introspection. In a muted flash, for a moment he felt a connection to something greater than himself, but as soon as he turned to that thought, it vanished.

"In spite of appearances," Dougall continued, "Bert had a deeply fulfilling life here, much more than he'd have had as a thief on Meridian. He was a good man, through and through, and will no doubt be rewarded on his next turn of the wheel."

Joel sniffled again. “Do – do you really believe that recycling stuff?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t; I’d like to, for sure, but deep inside something doesn’t ring true. Those Servants of the Core, they –”

“Hush, we don’t speak of them here.”

“But why?”

“There is no *why*.”

Joel stared at his feet. “Those miners next to the servery said I’d be the next to go.”

“Don’t listen to them, Joel, they’re the scum of the scum.”

“But –”

“There’s no *but* here either. Take the rest of the shift off, as you’ll be of no use to us in your present state. Go for a swim or walk around the lake, anything to take your mind off things.”

“Th-thanks.”

Dougall patted him on the shoulder. “You’ll do fine if you keep your wits about you, I’m sure.”

Before Joel could say anything more, he was gone.

* * *

Joel eased himself into the water after having walked halfway around the lake, putting himself as far from the sorting room as possible. A wind change had cleared the cloud cover, letting some smoky sunlight through, but it had also brought with it the sulphurous fumes of one of the nearby volcanoes, making his eyes water.

After diving down to wash away the fumes, he floated on his back, letting the lake’s strange eddy currents carry him round in circles.

Yet another of this world’s mysteries, he thought, before feeling a now familiar tug on his foot.

“Pedro?”

“*Sorry about your friend, Joel.*”

“Thanks.”

“*There was nothing you could’ve done.*”

“Huh?”

“Your singleton powers couldn’t have saved him; there was no plausible alternative reality.”

“I, um, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned it then, but I didn’t want you feeling unnecessary guilt.”

“Who are the skin-walkers, Pedro?”

“Evil men with a foot in both this reality and Sheol.”

“I should’ve guessed.”

“Now that the ogres and Dolphins have gone, Sheol has become something of a free-for-all. Be very careful, Joel; don’t let them sense your presence.”

A chill ran up Joel’s spine as he remembered the feeling of being watched from the inside. “I think they already have.”

“Hopefully that won’t matter. You must come with me, quickly!”

“Where?”

“The space pad.”

“What’s happening?”

“You’ll see. We have visitors arriving.”

“How can I follow you if I can’t see you?”

“You know where to go; just run or you’ll miss them!”

Joel reached the space pad where a large shuttle had just landed, with groups of young people descending the stairs onto the tarmac. He wondered at first who they were, before an older man resplendent in the fine academic robes of Cornipus appeared amongst them. *Students, of course*, he thought, although he wondered how the overlords would allow such a visit.

He leaned against a tree on the edge of the tarmac, wondering what it’d be like to be studying at one of the great universities instead of grinding rocks in the sorting room, when he spied a student with darker skin than the others. In easing forward to get a better look, the branch he was holding snapped, causing him to fall to the ground.

The student, seeing the sudden movement out the corner of his eye, turned, staring open-mouthed at what he saw. “Joel?”

“H-huh?” It had been so long since anyone had said his name in English, Joel almost didn’t recognise it.

“What the hell?”

“David?”

In an instant David had his arms tightly around him, making sure he was real. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, but I’m a slave working in the fractal ore sorting room.” Joel pulled him back into the undergrowth and out of sight of those on the tarmac. “H-how’s Loraine?”

Anger momentarily flashed in David’s eyes, before he realised Joel hadn’t been responsible for what had happened. “Heart-broken, naturally, but coping.” He smiled. “I expect she’ll be pleased to know I’ve found you.”

Joel’s two months of captivity, starvation, enslavement, torment and loss burst out in an eruption to rival any of the volcanoes on Ignus. He wrapped his arms around his brother-in-law and best mate, shaking and softly wailing in a flood of tears as David gently patted him on the back.

“It’s all right, Joel, it’s all right; I’m here now.”

Joel’s crying gradually eased. He looked up, staring into David’s eyes, still unsure how any of this could be real. David kissed him gently on the forehead while running his fingers through Joel’s tangled locks.

“Your dad’ll go ballistic when he sees how long your hair is.”

Joel chuckled, but a rustle of leaves caused them both to jump around.

“What’s all this, Davo? If I’d known you were –”

“Cam, it’s not what you think,” David said, his look of fright turning into a grin. “This is my brother-in-law Joel.”

“The one who was kidnapped?”

“How many brothers-in-law named Joel do you think I have?”

“Gosh.”

“Joel, meet my room-mate Cam.”

Joel just stared at him, unable to speak.

“So, um, what do we do now?” Cam said. “We can hardly smuggle him back to Cornipus in our luggage.”

David stared into space for a moment. “Cam, give me your phone.”

Cam pulled it from his backpack.

“Drat, no signal.”

“I think subspace communications are blocked here,” Joel said. “But hang on; can I make a recording on that?”

“Recording? Yeah, sure.”

Cam grabbed it back from David, setting it up before pointing the camera towards Joel. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Joel took a deep breath. “I’m Joel Morison; two months ago I was kidnapped from Earth by a man named Tristan. At first I thought he was Eridanian but he’s actually a Tivinel, one of the overlords here on Ignus, I think, or at least in league with them. They kidnap people from all over the galaxy and make them slaves in the mines. But it’s worse; in this galaxy all waste is recycled through the volcanos here, it’s how they keep their mining sustainable, but they do it with people too. It’s like a cult; there are evil men in animal skins calling themselves Servants of the Core, but everyone just refers to them as the skin-walkers, and they – they stole Bert’s soul, I’m sure. You have to stop them, please, you have to.”

“Who’s Bert?” David asked.

“He was my mentor in the sorting room, but his eyes were giving out because of the ultraviolet light we have to use, so, um, so he was recycled last night.”

“But how?”

“They led him up to the edge of a volcano where the skin-walkers were waiting. They stole his soul before putting him on a cable car which carried him out over the lava, where the door opened and, and _”

Joel wiped his eyes.

“The worst part is, Bert believed it all and thought he was going to be reborn into a better life.”

Cam frowned. “But surely it’s his right to believe whatever he wants, isn’t it?”

“I, I guess, but I don’t think it was free choice. It’s like those suicide cults that pop up on Earth from time to time.”

“David! Cam!” someone bellowed from over near the shuttle.

“That’s Professor Hicks; we have to go,” David said. “Can you hang tight for a couple of days until we get back to Cornipus?”

“I, I guess so.”

“We’ll send someone to rescue you, I promise.” David hugged him again.

“Send the recording to Pip; he’ll know what to do.”

“Gotcha.”

Cam stood for a moment before turning back and hugging him too.

“Keep cool, Joel, and stay out of the volcanoes.”

Rescue Mission

Joel wrapped his arms around her, shaking and softly wailing in a flood of tears as she gently patted him on the back.

“It’s all right, Joel, it’s all right; I’m here now.”

Joel’s crying gradually eased. He looked up, staring into her eyes, as if unsure how any of this could be real. She kissed him gently on the forehead while running her fingers through his tangled locks.

“Your dad’ll go ballistic when he sees how long your hair is.”

Joel chuckled, but a rustle of leaves caused them both to jump around.

Loraine woke with a start, looking around for the intruder rustling the leaves, but found herself snugly in her bed with not a leaf in sight. Outside the sky was already lightening.

This wasn’t the first time she’d dreamt about Joel, indeed it was more uncommon for her not to dream about him, but this one had seemed so close, so real, leaving her feeling surprisingly peaceful and calm.

Rubbing her eyes, she wandered out to the kitchen where Mark was making some coffee. “Good morning, Dad.”

He gave her a hug. “Did you sleep well?”

“Surprisingly yes. I dreamt about Joel again, but this time it was different.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know, it was just different. For some reason it left me feeling really good.”

“I don’t suppose – no.”

“What?”

“Nothing, really. David should be just about back from his excursion to Ignus. I expect we’ll hear all about it shortly.”

Lorraine sighed. “Ignus smignus – what’s there to look at? Only boring volcanoes and mines.”

“Don’t let Davie hear you say that.”

“He already has.”

“Oh.”

Mark took a sip of coffee just as the telephone rang.

“Hello?”

“Dad, it’s me.”

“Speak of the devil.”

“Is Lorraine there?”

“What’s up?”

“Could you put her on please?”

“Yeah, sure.” He passed the handset to Lorraine, giving her a puzzled look. “It’s your brother, but he sounds a bit odd.”

Lorraine twirled her finger next to her ear. “David?”

“Oh, hi. Guess what?”

“What?”

“I’ve found Joel.”

“You’ve what?”

“I found him on Ignus. He’s a slave working in the mines.”

“Can I speak to him?”

“It’s not that simple. I had to leave him there.”

“David, if this is one of your stupid pranks –”

“No, really. There was no way we could’ve gotten him out through customs, but I’m about to go and see Pip about organising a rescue mission.”

Lorraine felt her head starting to spin. “This – I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t faint on me yet, please. He made a recording to give Pip, but I’ll send it through to you too. Are you ready to receive an encrypted transfer?”

She glanced across at the ultranet terminal. “Yep, send away.”

“He looked to be in good health and was in no immediate danger, so everything’s going to be sweet, I promise.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I must go or I’ll miss my flight to Huntress. I’ll call you back after I’ve seen Pip, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks; thanks heaps. I love you.”

“Me too. Bye.”

“What was that all about?” Mark asked.

Loraine took a deep breath, sure she’d faint at any moment. “He’s found Joel.”

“What? Where?”

“On Ignus in one of the mines. He’s a slave.”

“Good heavens! Is he okay now?”

She took another deep breath as her eyes began filling with tears. “He – he had to leave him there, but he’s going to see Pip about arranging a – a rescue mission.”

She collapsed into his arms as her legs gave way, just as Lorina came out to join them.

“What’s wrong?”

“David found Joel,” Mark said. “We have to get to Ignus.”

“Ignus?”

“He’s a slave in a mine there, apparently.”

Lorina turned pale.

“What’s wrong?”

She glanced at Loraine. “Nothing; just the shock, I guess.”

The ultranet terminal chimed, prompting Loraine to straighten herself up and dash over to it. Lorina led Mark out of the kitchen.

“What is it?”

“Please don’t say anything in front of Loraine, but common wisdom back home is that *no-one* ever escapes from Ignus.”

Mark ran his hands over his face. “We’ll just have to make sure this is the first time, then. As soon as Loraine’s finished on the terminal, I’ll see if I can arrange a flight there.”

“That’s the other thing; unless you’re a contractor or have some other official business on that world, you won’t get clearance to land.”

“So how did David’s class get in?”

“I imagine someone in the university pulled strings.”

“I see. So, um, how come I was Supreme Councillor for ten years and don’t know any of this?”

“Oh Mark, you’re so naïve.”

“Mum! Dad!” Loraine called out. “You need to see this!”

She pressed *play* as soon as they joined her in the kitchen, causing Joel's face to appear on the screen. "*I'm Joel Morison; two months ago I was kidnapped from Earth by a man named Tristan...*"

* * *

Pip put his hands behind his head as the recording ended.

"Gosh. You did the right thing bringing this to me."

David and Cam both nodded. "Joel said you'd know what to do."

Pip turned to Damien. "Does this ring any bells with you?"

"Not really; my only contact with the Tivinel was in our brief confrontation on the planet of exile, but, now hang on, I do recall the word they used for us Barefooters translated literally as *skin-walkers*."

"Are you saying those cult leaders on Ignus are Barefooters?"

"No, I think it was meant as an insult, even though it kind of fits with us walking on the skin of our feet."

Pip looked around the room. "We all do that."

"And Joel too," David said. "He's never worn shoes in his life."

Damien shrugged. "Perhaps Hamati might know more as he was living alongside the Tivinel prior to the apocalypse."

Pip made a quick phone call. "He said he'd come over straight away."

David started to fidget. "That's all well and good, but how are we going to rescue Joel?"

Pip again put his hands behind his head. "As you know, access to Ignus is tightly controlled, so private or rental spacecraft are out of the question. Even the military can find it a bit tricky, but General Piper has pulled a few favours and obtained clearance. He'll be sending a shuttle for us later today."

David grinned. "Thanks Pip; you're a legend!"

"Save your praise until we have Joel safely away from there. I don't expect those running the mine will appreciate having one of their slaves taken from them, even if it's by a Special Operations general."

“Especially if it’s by a Special Operations general,” Damien said. “I’ve heard the relationship between the mining companies and the military is shaky at best.”

“Come and we’ll grab some lunch before Hamati arrives. I expect we have a busy afternoon ahead of us.”

Hamati arrived just as they were finishing.

“That was quick,” Pip said.

“When Emissary call, Hamati run.”

“There was no need for that, really.”

“From what Hamati sense, there was every need. What is it you seek?”

“Back before Drago, when you were living with the Tivinel, did you ever come across people called the skin-walkers who might have been taking people’s souls?”

“In our tongue, they had different name, but very bad people, no?”

Pip nodded. “Joel thinks they’re luring people in with talk of reincarnation into a better life.”

“Some say they could change into animals, but Hamati know that not possible.”

“Is there anything more you can tell us about them?”

“Not tell, but can show place in mountains where they had temple. Bad place once, but safe now. Hamati take you.”

“We can use my shuttle,” Pip said, leading them out through the courtyard.

“Good; is long way to run, especially for Gomerat.”

“He means us,” David said in response to Cam’s puzzled look.

Following Hamati’s directions, Pip took the shuttle high into the mountains west of the Black Delphinidae seminary, where a huge stone fortress crumbled amongst a craggy outcrop of basalt and granite. Even though there was little left but ruins, from the air it still looked spooky and evil.

After circling a couple of times, he landed on a reasonably flat rock shelf some fifty metres from the structure. From there, a narrow spur led to a crumbling archway framed between two rocky spires disappearing into the mist of passing clouds.

“Is it safe to go in?” Pip asked.

“Safer than flying in your machine,” Hamati said. “Any rocks that want to fall would have already done so.”

“I’ve been in worse ruins than this,” Damien said.

Pip sighed. “I was just worried about David and his friend, that’s all.”

“We’ll be fine, won’t we, Cam?” David said.

Cam nodded half-heartedly while glancing back at the ruins. “And to think I was worried that rooming with you would be boring.”

Beyond the arch, eroded steps led down into what must have been a small amphitheatre, with the remains of stone benches arrayed on either side. A huge rusty wheel stood at the bottom, held on an axle that could pivot around from front to back. A jagged edge on the axle’s far end suggested it might once have held a counterweight, but below where it had been was a seemingly bottomless fissure in the rock.

“What do you think this is?” Pip asked.

“Victim was tied to wheel,” Hamati said, “then it rotate over hole and drop him in.”

“Charming what those people did for entertainment,” David said.

“All part of ritual of recycling and rebirth. For them, was honour to ride wheel.”

Cam peered down into the abyss while scratching his head. “But didn’t Joel say they threw their victims into a volcano?”

“Long time ago this was part of volcano. After apocalypse, volcano stop.”

“So it’s definitely the same cult,” Pip said.

David walked over to a flight of steps hiding in the shadows to the left of the altar. “What do you reckon’s down there?”

“Only one way to find out,” Damien said. “Wait here until I’ve checked it.”

At the base of the steps a large metal door hung ajar. Damien stepped around it into the darkness.

“Did anyone bring a light?”

Hamati dashed down to join him while pulling one from his backpack. “Hamati always prepared for dark places.”

“This is amazing,” Damien said. “You’d all better come down.”

“What is it?” Pip asked as he passed through the doorway, but stopped as he saw what stood before him. “This can’t be ancient, can it?”

“Not by a long shot.”

Arrayed before them were racks of electronic equipment, most with flashing indicator lights and panels, while in the far corner stood a metal ring some three metres high and enclosing a disc of absolute blackness. Pip felt the hairs on the back of his neck start to rise.

“I know what that is,” David said, his voice barely more than a whisper. “My grandfather encountered the same thing in Morgoth’s palace when rescuing my parents and Chris from Farley.”

“A portal into another time line,” Damien said.

“Yes, but one on the verge of extinction. The blackness means that time has ceased to flow on the other side.”

“So what are all the whiz-bang gizmos?” Cam asked, gazing around the room.

“That’s what maintains the connection to the other time line; Peter reckons such things are inherently unstable and require lots of finely-balanced energy to keep open.”

“Don’t bump any controls,” Pip said, pulling out a camera to record the scene.

Cam turned back to the portal. “That thing’s so black it hurts to look at it. What do you think it’s for?”

A loud squeal from behind caused them all to jump around just in time to see the heavy steel door slam shut.

* * *

“Seminary, Damon speaking.”

“Damon, it’s Mark Collins here.”

“Hi Mark! How are you? It’s great news about Joel, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I’m calling about. Is Pip available?”

“No, he, Damien and Hamati took David and Cam to look at an ancient temple in the mountains west of here. They reckon it might be tied to those skin-walkers on Ignus.”

“Oh, okay. We were just wondering what’s happening with the rescue mission and whether there’s any point in us travelling to your galaxy.”

“I’m not really sure – let me try to reach Pip in his shuttle.”

Mark strummed his fingers on the kitchen bench while listening to the seminary’s music on hold.

“What’s happening, Dad?” Loraine asked.

“Damon’s trying to reach Pip. They’ve all gone exploring in the mountains for some reason.”

“What? Why?”

“Are you there, Mark?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“There’s no answer on Pip’s phone but the shuttle’s transponder puts it on the ground about fifty kilometres west of here. I guess they’re all out of earshot.”

“Could you keep trying and ask him to call me as soon as possible?”

“Sure Mark.”

“Thanks Damon. Everyone here sends their love.”

“Likewise. I’ll make sure Pip calls you the moment I get hold of him.”

“Bye.”

“Well?” Loraine asked, looking like she was about to explode.

“He couldn’t reach Pip, but will get him to call us as soon as he can.”

“I still don’t see why we can’t just jump on a flight now. It’ll take us two days to get there anyway.”

“Ignus is a dangerous place and if we tried to land without the correct paperwork we’d be likely to wind up as slaves ourselves.”

Loraine fumed.

“I’m sure Pip and Damien have everything under control,” Loraine said, hugging her. “Best we not get in their way.”

“But, but why are they out hiking in the mountains instead of rescuing Joel?”

“Knowing Pip, I’m sure he has his reasons.”

Mark grabbed the phone as it started ringing. “Hello Pip?”

“No, it’s Inspector le Grange here. We’ve just had something of a breakthrough.”

“What’s happened?”

“The police on Meridian have caught a momentary ping from the transponder on Triston’s ship, which put it on the surface of Huntress about fifty kilometres west of the Black Delphinidae seminary.”

“What? But that’s where Pip’s taken David!”

“I see. The police have dispatched a patrol so I’ll let them know there could be complications.”

“You, you don’t think they’ve been taken hostage, do you?”

“I couldn’t say, but I think it’s unlikely. Is there any way he’d have known Pip was going there?”

“No, not unless – no, he couldn’t have, I’m sure.”

“I’ll call you back as soon as I have any news. Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re fine.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Hold tight, Mark; we’re all doing our best, I promise.”

“Yes, I know, and we appreciate everything you’re doing.”

“Thanks. Goodbye.”

* * *

General Piper stepped into the seminary office. “Hi Damon, is everyone ready for the rescue mission?”

“I – no. Pip, Damien and David have gone with Hamati to look at an ancient temple in the mountains they think might have something to do with the skin-walkers. I’ve been trying to reach them without any luck and I’m starting to worry as it’s been several hours now.”

“Do you have their location?”

Damon called up the transponder display.

“No problem, we’ll meet them out there.”

“When you see Pip, tell him to call Mark Collins urgently.”

“Will do.”

Colonel Gallagher cleared his throat as Piper prepared to land alongside Pip’s shuttle. “Don’t look now, sir, but there’s another craft approaching our position.”

“One of ours?”

“No, it’s the civilian police. What the devil do they want?”

“Leave them to me, Gallagher. I don’t want you starting a war.”

“Who, me?”

As soon as he’d landed, Piper stepped over to Pip’s shuttle, peeling off the hand-written note taped to the hatch.

To whom it may concern,

Please tell the Barungi that this is Tivinel land and to keep their grubby feet off it. The people you seek are unharmed, although perhaps inconvenienced. You’ll find them below the altar. Don’t interfere with any of my equipment as doing so may trigger a temporal implosion.

Do not return to this place under any circumstances.

Love, Tristan.

P.S. Kindly return Joel to me, along with the shuttle he stole, or FACE THE CONSEQUENCES. Just leave him tied in a sack at the front door and I’ll collect him next time I visit.

“Is this a joke?” Gallagher asked, reading through it a second time.

“If the police presence is anything to go by, I’d say not.”

“Well, what have we here?” the police sergeant said as he sauntered towards them.

“General Piper from Special Operations; I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“A ship belonging to a suspected criminal was recorded as being at this location a few hours ago.”

“Someone named Tristan?”

“Yes, how’d you know?”

Piper handed him the note.

“Who are the *people* he refers to?”

“That’ll be Pip Ingle and his associates, which is why we’re here.”

“We’d best go find them then.”

“After you.”

“What’s that thing?” the sergeant asked, staring at the wheel.

“Beats me,” Gallagher said, “but I bet it wasn’t for playing *ring-a-ring o’ rosie*.”

“This place gives me the willies,” Piper said.

“You’re not wrong there. Where do you think Pip and the others are?”

“Down here,” the sergeant said, pulling out a torch as he descended the stairs. He tugged on the door, but it wouldn’t budge. “It’s locked, but look, here’s another note.”

You’ll find the key in the broken end of the wheel’s axle. Have fun getting it out and don’t drop it in the abyss otherwise your friends will really be in a spot of bother.

T.

“This isn’t good,” Piper said, staring at the end of the axle and down into the abyss below it.

“Can we swing it around?”

“With the amount of rust on it, I don’t like our chances.”

The three of them pulled on the wheel, but nothing would make it budge.

“I guess someone’s going to have to climb out there,” the sergeant said.

Gallagher grunted. “Wusses. Leave it to me.”

Before anyone could say anything, he swung himself onto the axle and crawled out along it.

“Got it!” he said, pulling the key out, but at that moment, a crack opened in the axle and, with a screech of tearing metal, he began descending into the abyss. “Oh shit.”

“Give me your hand!” Piper shouted to the sergeant, before leaning out over the edge and extending his other hand towards Gallagher.

Piper stretched while Gallagher reached, but they only managed to touch fingertips.

“Again,” Piper said.

Piper managed to wrap his fingers around Gallagher’s palm, but as soon as he tried to pull, it slipped out of his grasp, throwing Gallagher off balance. He grabbed at the rocks as the axle sagged lower with the sound of more tearing metal.

“Don’t you dare fall, Gallagher, and that’s an order!”

“Hold tight for a second,” the sergeant said, pulling the belt from his trousers and using it to lash his feet to the wheel. “I can lower you down a bit further now.”

Piper crawled over the edge, his right hand securely wrapped around the sergeant’s wrist. “Try again.”

Gallagher took a deep breath, steadying himself before thrusting his free arm up as far as he could. His fingers wrapped around Piper’s wrist while Piper grasped his.

“See if you can find a foothold in the edge,” Piper said.

“Gotcha.”

“Now the other foot.”

“Damn boots; this’d be much easier if I could actually feel where my toes are going.”

“I’ll mention it in my report to Walker. Now try easing yourself up.”

With much grunting and swearing, Gallagher made it back to the top.

“You didn’t drop the key, did you?” the sergeant asked while rebelted his trousers.

“What do you take me for? A civilian?” Scrambling to his feet, Gallagher marched down the stairs to the door. “I need some light to find the damn keyhole!”

“Hello, help!” someone called from the other side.

“Hold your water; now give me some light.”

With the sergeant providing illumination, Gallagher inserted the key and turned it, half expecting it to break or jam, but the door unlocked and swung open.

“Thank you,” Pip said.

“At your service, your holiness. Just what the hell were you up to?”

“Take a look.”

Gallagher grabbed the torch off the sergeant before striding into the room. “What is this shit?”

“David reckons it’s a portal to another time line, one on the verge of extinction. Farley had something similar in Morgoth’s palace.”

“Yes, I remember. Bad karma; we should nuke it.”

“Now wait just a minute,” the sergeant said, pulling a roll of police tape from his pocket. “This is evidence and potentially a crime scene.”

“Come on,” Piper said. “I believe we have someone on Ignus who needs rescuing.”

* * *

Loraine grabbed the phone as soon as it started ringing.

“Hello?”

“Hi Loraine, it’s Pip here. Your father wanted me to call him urgently.”

“Pip? Are you okay? Is David okay?”

“Yes, we’re all fine, but Tristan has resurfaced and locked us in the dungeon of an ancient Tivinel temple.”

“But weren’t you supposed to be rescuing Joel?”

“We’re on our way now and should be on Ignus in a couple of hours.”

“Do you want us to come over there?”

“No, General Piper has it all arranged and you’d only risk being captured and enslaved if you came. Damon will take Joel back to Earth on the Renewal as soon as we’ve rescued him.”

“Okay then, I guess. Call me as soon as you have him on board.”

“I’m sure he’ll insist on making that call himself.”

“Thanks Pip. We all appreciate the effort you’re making.”

“It’s the least we can do. David wants to speak to you; I’ll put him on.”

“Thanks.”

“Hi Loraine. Guess what we found on Huntress?”

“I have no idea, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“Remember Dad telling us about that portal Farley had in Morgoth’s palace?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Your friend Tristan has one too.”

“What?”

“You’d better get Granddad, Great-granddad and Peter to put their heads together. I think he’s playing with time cusps.”

“Jameed said the Tivinel are trying to create the mother of all cusps and stop Drago from originally becoming Pasha. He reckons if they succeed, all our civilisations will cease to exist.”

“I – I had a dream about that, well more than just one; it became almost a nightly occurrence. My name was Daku and I was living near Narrabri with Great-granddad, only his name was Warrain. He kept saying that a great change had befallen us and all that once was had been lost.”

“You’d better come back with Joel. We all need to talk.”

“I hate to say it, but I think you’re right.”

Bert's Legacy

Joel barely slept, his mind constantly replaying his conversation with David, while every time he closed his eyes he'd see Loraine being dragged away by the thug in the abbey.

He'd skipped breakfast, instead going for a walk along the edge of the lake and a quick swim in the shallows. Now, as his shift began, he could hardly keep his eyes open.

He grabbed the first sample from the hopper, flicked on the grinding wheel and prepared the test surface. *Definitely not rubbish*, he thought, his mind slipping into work mode.

Under the ultraviolet light, it was blue, but of the slightly different hue he'd seen once before. *A twister, damn it*. More memories of Bert flooded back as he grabbed the polarising filters from the top drawer. *Recycled crystals or recycled souls – was there really any difference? In truth, all things are the same.*

The filters confirmed his suspicion; a right-handed twister. He rummaged through the drawers to find the marker pen, but as he did he noticed something odd. *The second drawer wasn't as deep as the others*. He tried to pull it all the way out but couldn't; something was jamming it.

Glancing around to make sure no-one was watching, he knelt to take a closer look. At the very back of the drawer was a small metal tag which he pulled firstly one way and then the other. Something clicked, releasing the drawer and revealing a secret compartment in its back.

Upon opening it, he found an ore sample and a folded sheet of paper. Something about the sample caused a tingle to run up his spine, before realising it was Pedro's finger.

"Put it under the light, Joel."

He almost replied before catching himself; the others in the room mightn't be watching, but they'd sure as hell notice if he started a

one-sided conversation with an invisible friend. Instead he pushed the drawer back in, climbed onto his stool and held the sample under the light.

Orange.

“What do I do with anything that glows orange?” he remembered asking Bert on his first day in the sorting room.

“Stick it somewhere safe then take it to Dougall at the change of shift. That’ll be your key to going home.”

He glanced around again, half expecting a circle of surly miners closing in on him, but all was quiet. Facing the corner, he unfolded the sheet of paper as quietly as he could. On it was a roughly drawn map, showing the buildings and the lake, with a small X at the far corner. Next to it, in tiny writing, were words saying *you’ll know what to do, Joel.*

Refolding the sheet, he put both it and the sample back in the drawer while pondering the ramifications. *Was this his ticket to freedom? What was on the other side of the lake? But did he need it after his meeting with David? Should he tell Dougall?*

“What should I do, Pedro?” he whispered, lowering his eyes as the sorter at the next bench turned around.

“Follow your heart and your instincts,” Pedro said.

Joel sighed, picked up the twister and resumed his hunt for the marking pen, which he found in the third drawer. The sample marked and placed in the correct chute, he grabbed the next one awaiting his inspection.

Just before the end of shift, when everyone else had their minds on dinner, Joel sauntered over to Willy with the orange ore sample.

“What do you make of this?”

Willy held it under the magnifier for a moment. “It looks okay to me.”

“Try the light.”

Willy’s jaw dropped. “Where’d you find this? It wasn’t in the hopper, was it?”

Joel leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Bert had it hidden in a secret compartment at the back of one of his drawers, and I think there may be more on the other side of the lake.”

“So you’ll be going home then, that’s fantastic! I bet you can’t wait to be back with your wife.”

“No, I want you to have it.”

Willy looked shocked. “No way!”

“Shush! Take it and hide it away, then meet me by the lake after dinner.”

Before Willy could say any more, Joel had dashed back to his bench. Once satisfied no-one was watching, he pulled out the map, staring at it and memorising every detail before tearing it into tiny pieces and eating it.

“What’s going on?” Willy asked as Joel approached him on the edge of the lake.

“Can you swim?”

“Yes, but with only one arm I’m not very fast.”

“That’s okay, just come into the water; I don’t want anyone sneaking up and overhearing us.”

“Okay.”

“This’ll do,” Joel said after swimming about fifty metres from shore. “Did you know a group of students visited the mine yesterday?”

“Yes, I heard something about that. I have no idea how they obtained clearance from the overlords; usually they’re very strict about visitors.”

“Someone in the university must have pulled some important strings. Anyway, my brother-in-law was one of the students and I was able to talk with him for a few minutes. He’s going to send someone to rescue me as soon as he’s back on Cornipus.”

“That won’t be easy, Joel. There’s a planetary defence system set to destroy any unauthorised craft dropping below the subspace transfer orbit.”

“His mother is the Delphinidae High Priestess and his father is the former Supreme Councillor. They’re also good friends with Pip Ingle, the Black Delphinidae Emissary, and General Piper, the head of Special Operations. I’m sure between them they’ll figure something out.”

“I never realised you were so well connected. At the very least, the general will have clearance by rank alone.”

“So you see, I’ll be going home in a few days without needing any orange ore, whereas you told me that, if you ever found any, you’d be able to help your family.”

“Gosh, Joel, I don’t know what to say.”

“When I get out, I’ll be using my connections to try to bring an end to the overlords and the skin-walkers. I’d like you to help me from this end.”

“Of course. My family and the rest of their village will be right behind whatever you do.”

Joel looked around. “Do you think you can swim to that rocky point over there?”

“Yeah, easy.”

“Before nightfall I’d like to see what Bert left hidden around the back of the lake.”

Joel looked back across the water to the buildings, trying to establish his bearings. “I think we go inland from here.”

“Where’s the map?”

“I memorised and ate it. It was all I could think of doing to keep it safe.”

“I hope you have a good memory.”

“So do I.”

Beyond the lake, thick scrub lined the shore, reminding Joel of some of the walks he’d done in the Sunshine Coast hinterland on Earth. His mind wandering back to those happy times, he didn’t pay much attention to where he was going until suddenly emerging onto a sandstone shelf backed by a volcanic upthrust honeycombed with small caves.

“This looks like a good place to hide something,” he said.

“A bit too good. Where do we start?”

“I’ll take the left and you can start on the right.”

“What are we looking for?”

“Anything that isn’t natural. Look behind loose rocks and around hidden corners.”

“Okay.”

After half an hour of meticulous searching, they met in the middle.

“Any luck?”

Joel scratched his head. “Nothing.”

“We should cross over and cover each other’s territory, in case one of us missed something.”

“It’ll be dark soon.”

“I know. Let’s just do what we can, okay? We can always come back tomorrow.”

The light had almost gone when they completed their search, still both empty-handed.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Willy asked.

“It has to be, unless I misread the map. I think I might have been a bit hasty eating it.”

“Too late to do anything about it now.”

Joel kicked at a loose piece of rock. “I suppose we can broaden our search tomorrow night, unless –”

“What?”

He picked up the rock. “What if, what if this whole upthrust is orange ore?”

“Surely not; it’s supposed to be extremely rare.”

“Which is why nobody would even think of it. The ore looks just like any old igneous rock until you grind a surface and put it under the light. We should grab a small piece each and examine them in the morning.”

“Okay, then we’d best be getting back before someone notices we’re missing.”

* * *

In Joel’s dream, he was walking along a beach hand in hand with Loraine when Pedro came running up to them.

“You need to wake up, Joel.”

“What, now?”

“Yes, right now. Those surly miners have taken Willy.”

He woke with a start, wondering if it had been real. Feeling like a goose, he crept over to Willy's hammock, only to find it empty.

"Quick, they've taken him to the volcano," Pedro said.

Trying to shake off the feeling that he was still dreaming, Joel dashed outside and headed up the road.

He reached the crater's edge just in time to see the skin-walkers escorting Willy up the steps to the cable car. Without thinking, he grabbed a handful of rocks and ran towards them, taking pot shots at them.

One of the rocks found its mark. The skin-walker turned, staring at him. Again he felt that watchful eye open inside his head, tearing at his innermost thoughts, but before he could react, someone tackled him to the ground.

The next thing he knew, he was on the cable car suspended over the middle of the crater. Two of the surly miners held his arms while the skin-walkers prepared to throw Willy out the door.

"Stop, don't, please."

He turned as another man appeared from the shadows inside the car.

"Ah, now the negotiations begin," Dougall said. "I believe Bert may have left something for you, am I right?"

"What? You? How?"

"I've known for some time that Bert had a secret, something he said would change the balance of power on this planet, because that's what it's all about; power and destiny, our destiny. He was going to tell me before his recycling, but when you turned up he changed his mind. What was it, Joel?"

"I – I have no idea."

Dougall held the piece of orange ore in front of Joel's face. "We found this hidden in your friend's workbench, but I know there was more to it than that. What did Bert tell you, and what were you and Willy up to this evening?"

"Nothing, we just went for a swim and a walk around the lake, that's all."

"Wrong answer, Joel." He turned to the skin-walkers holding Willy. "Throw him in."

Before Joel could react, Willy fell. Joel watched him plummet towards the bubbling lava below, a scream trying to burst from his throat but unable to.

“Tell me what you found and I’ll share it with you, Joel, otherwise you can join your friend.”

Joel watched, unable to breathe, as Willy’s body hit the surface. White sparks erupted, growing brighter and brighter until everything was a dazzling white.

“Wake up, Joel,” Pedro’s voice said. *“Wake up!”*

“Gosh, what a dream,” Joel whispered.

“That wasn’t a dream. You had one of your singleton moments.”

“Then –”

“Wake Willy and leave – now, before they come.”

Joel shook Willy by the shoulder, utterly relieved to find him still in his hammock.

“What the –”

“Shush,” Joel whispered, holding his finger against his lips. “We have to go.”

“Where?”

“Grab that piece of rock from the lake and anything else you might need. I’ll explain once we’re outside.”

Willy nodded, grabbing his small rucksack before following Joel out the door.

“Which way to your village?” Joel asked once they were clear of the buildings.

“West along the road to the gap in the mountains. It’s a day’s walk but there are plenty of freshwater streams along the way. What’s happening?”

Joel took a deep breath. “I’m a singlet – single-ton, Willy. I sometimes experience events as they might play out but can then go back and change them. I don’t know how it works and I can’t control it, but Dougall and the skin-walkers got wind of Bert’s legacy and threw you into the volcano.”

“Dougall? But surely –”

“I thought so too, but he’s one of them. He told me Bert’s secret would change the balance of power on this planet, and all that mattered was power and destiny; his destiny.”

“I’ve always thought Bert and Dougall were up to something, but I never suspected it’d be anything like that.”

“I think Bert might have started suspecting Dougall’s motives, then when I turned up he must have reached a decision. Now the shit’s well and truly hit the fan.”

“What?”

“Sorry, it’s an Earth saying for when everything goes pear-shaped.”

Willy grimaced. “What’s a pear?”

“Never mind; I just hope we left in time to give them the slip.”

“The slip of what?”

Joel sighed. “Just keep walking; that’s all we can do for now.”

* * *

The radio burst into life the moment General Piper emerged from subspace. *“Excalibur, this is Ignus Control; you’re entering restricted space. Please hold your position.”*

“I’m General Piper from Special Operations and require clearance to land at the Lake Placid mine.”

“What’s the purpose of your visit, General?”

Piper groaned. “It’s a security matter between me and the mine supervisor.”

“I’ll have to check with him first. Please hold your position.”

Piper turned to his passengers. “I hate dealing with bureaucrats.”

“I’ve heard bureaucrats say they hate dealing with the military,” Damien said.

Before he could think of a response, Piper’s secure link to Nimber beeped.

“It’s Walker here. What the devil are you up to, Piper?”

“Remember the Earth boy Joel who helped with the bunyip business a few years back?”

“Yes.”

“He was kidnapped a couple of months ago and is enslaved on Ignus. We’re the rescue mission.”

“I see. Is this the same Joel whose message about necromancers on Ignus is going viral on the ultranet?”

“What?”

Piper glared at David.

“It wasn’t me, I swear. I only sent it to my parents and there’s no way they’d have done that.”

Pip and Damien both shook their heads. “The only one in the seminary who saw it was Damon.”

Cam gulped. “I think it was me. I sent it to a couple of friends who were curious about the excursion. I didn’t think –”

Piper shook his head. “No, you didn’t think.”

“Sorry.”

Piper went back to the radio. “Sir, it looks like David’s room-mate was responsible for the leak, but it was unintentional.”

“I want a full report, Piper, in triplicate. I don’t suppose we have any choice now, do we? Go and rescue Joel before the miners decide to terminate him.”

“Yes sir.”

Piper turned to Cam. “I’ll deal with you later.”

“Only after I’ve finished with him,” David said.

Cam covered his face. “I’m sorry, all right?”

“Excalibur, this is Ignus Control. General Walker has confirmed your mission, you are cleared for descent.”

“Thank you. Excalibur out.”

Dougall was waiting on the landing pad as Piper’s ship touched down. “Welcome to Ignus, General. I hope there haven’t been more problems with ore quality, have there? I’ll deal with the sorters myself if that’s the case.”

“No nothing like that, but our visit has to do with one of your sorters, a young man named Joel Morison.”

Dougall clasped his hands together. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible, General.”

“I have authorisation from General Walker to make anything possible.”

David followed Pip from the ship, leaving Cam on board. “What’s wrong?”

“Who are your friends? We don’t normally welcome civilians here.”

“This is Pip Ingle, the Black Delphinidae Emissary, and the Delphinidae High Priestess’s son David who also happens to be Joel’s brother-in-law.”

“I see, well it seems I have bad news for you.”

“How so?”

“Last evening, two of our sorters went swimming after dinner, even though I’d warned them to stay out of the lake at dawn and dusk. The inevitable happened, I suppose, and one of the aquatic creatures took a liking to them.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were eaten.”

“No, that’s not possible!” David cried.

“I’m afraid it’s more than possible, young man. There are witnesses who saw them enter the water and disappear.”

“Have any remains been recovered?” Pip asked.

For a moment Dougall looked puzzled. “Remains? No, when our aquatic creatures develop a craving for human flesh, they devour it all, right down to the last hair and fingernail.”

David turned away, trying not to throw up.

Pip wrapped his hands around Dougall’s. “Thank you, sir. I imagine your other workers are quite distressed. Are there any Black Delphinidae devotees amongst them? Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

“No, I don’t believe so. Most of our workers are either atheist or follow the local beliefs.”

“I see. Did Joel leave any belongings?”

“No, he arrived with nothing and we provide all our workers’ basic needs.”

“Thank you, sir.” He turned to Piper. “General, there’s nothing more we can do here.”

David turned around, looking ready to explode. “No Pip, we can’t leave, not like this!”

Pip placed a hand on his shoulder, smiling at him. “But leave we must, I’m afraid. There’s nothing more we can do here.”

Cam looked up as they re-entered the ship. “What’s happening? Where’s Joel?”

“Dead, I’m afraid,” Piper said. “We were a day too late.”

“Take us up,” Pip said.

“He was lying,” Pip said once they’d jumped to subspace.

“So that’s why you grabbed his hands,” Piper said.

“He doesn’t know where Joel is, or someone else named Willy, I think. They escaped and he’s furious, far more furious than I’d have expected for an employer who’s lost a couple of menial workers.”

“They’ve taken something,” Cam said.

“Or discovered something, more likely.”

“We have to go back!” David said. “We can’t just leave him there.”

“Where would you have us look?” Piper asked. “It’s a big planet and they could be anywhere by now.”

“Piper’s right,” Pip said. “We must wait for Joel to make the next move.”

“But what if they’re recaptured?”

“I’m sure General Walker has connections with the overlords,” Piper said. “I’ll make sure we find out if that happens.”

Pip folded his arms. “It may work to our advantage if the rest of the galaxy thinks Joel’s dead. It’ll at least protect him from Tristan for a while.”

“I just thought of something,” Cam said.

David glared at him. “This had better be good.”

“With Joel’s message going viral, there’ll be an even greater public outcry when they learn that he’s been conveniently eaten by a mythical sea monster.”

“It was a lake, not the sea.”

“Well a mythical lake monster then.”

“Cam’s right,” Piper said. “The best thing we can do for Joel right now is to make sure the overlords have something else to worry about.”

“I have to call Loraine,” David said.

Pip again placed a hand on his shoulder. “No, let me do that.”

Loraine looked ready to explode. "Pip, you can't just leave him there!"

"At this point in time we have no choice, as we don't know where 'there' is."

"But —"

"There's something else, Loraine, something I sensed on Ignus. Call it foresight, insight or the influence of the Black Dolphin, I don't care, but something momentous is about to happen on that world, something good, and I believe Joel is the pebble that starts the avalanche."

Peter Thorpe walked into the room, smiling. "Joel won't be working alone, Loraine."

"What? Why? Who?"

"Someone who's becoming more and more powerful, I believe. Pedro just touched my mind; he's been communicating with Joel for some time and is watching over him. He's become his guardian angel, if you like."

"Pedro? I thought he was dead."

"I don't know if he's ever been truly alive, but he's to play a key role in what's to come, I'm sure."

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better, are you?"

"No, never. Long ago, Pedro saved me from the Barradhim, although for him that was a quite recent act, something that happened after our encounter with him in the time nexus. I believe that act of self-sacrifice has allowed him to tap into greater strengths and before this is over he'll be a force to be reckoned with."

"Are you sure he's on our side?"

"Absolutely. After all, he's me."

Avalanche

Joel gazed at the village nestled in the valley below. Set amongst orchards and fields of crops on the banks of a sedately flowing river, it looked so peaceful and homely he could scarcely believe he was still on Ignus.

“My parents run the farm down there on the left,” Willy said, “although the land’s owned by the overlords.”

“Not for much longer, if that orange ore is worth as much as everyone says.”

Willy smiled. “It’s been my family’s dream for generations to have our own land.”

“Let’s hope we can make that dream come true.”

A dusty track led down to the farmstead, a stone building with slate tiles. The sun had already dropped behind the surrounding hills, although nightfall was still some time off.

“On a mining world, rock is the cheapest building material,” Willy said, noticing Joel’s puzzled expression.

“Oh, yeah, right. We don’t see many stone farmhouses back home, at least in the part of the planet I’m from.”

A middle-aged couple stepped out to meet them as they approached, Joel immediately noticing their Tivinel-shaped feet.

“What are you doing back so soon, Willy?” the woman asked. “I didn’t think the maintenance break was due for a few months yet.”

“Maintenance break?” Joel asked.

“Didn’t they tell you? Every six months they close the mine for routine maintenance. It’s the only time I get to see my family.”

“Who’s your friend, son?” the man asked.

“Dad, this is Joel. Meet my parents, Luke and Carla.”

“So what happened?”

“It’s a long story. Can we go inside? We’ve been walking since the middle of last night.”

“Of course.”

“Where are you from, Joel?” Luke asked while Willy disappeared into the bathroom. “Are you a local lad?”

“No, I’m from Earth, a planet in the Milky Way galaxy.”

“You’re a long way from home.”

“I was kidnapped while on my honeymoon.”

“Really? Does your wife know where you are?”

“I guess so. I saw my brother-in-law a couple of days ago when he was visiting with a group of students, and he was going to arrange a rescue mission for me only last night Willy and I had to make a hasty escape.”

“What happened?”

Willy walked back in, a towel around his waist and his hair wet. “This,” he said, holding up the piece of rock from behind the lake.

His father studied it, turning it over in his hands. “Orange?”

“I think so,” Joel said, “although we’ll need a grinding wheel and ultraviolet light to be sure.”

“I have a grinding wheel, but I don’t know where you’ll find a light.”

“I do,” Willy said, grinning. “The barber shop.”

“Huh?”

“The steriliser uses an ultraviolet light. I remember him showing me when I was a kid and his warning about never opening it while the light was on. A pity he didn’t tell the mine supervisors about the hazards, as maybe there’d be a few less blind sorters.”

“Or recycled ones,” Joel added.

“They recycled Bert,” Willy said. “That’s what started all this.”

Carla wrapped him in a hug. “I’m so sorry, son. He was one of the few workers who treated you fairly.”

“Him and Joel. If it wasn’t for Joel, I’d have joined Bert in the volcano.”

Joel blushed, remembering what had happened after Bert’s plunge. “If it wasn’t for Willy, I might have fallen in.”

Willy glanced outside. “It’s not dark yet; do you reckon the barber would still be open?”

Luke nodded. “He should be. Come out to the shed so I can grind a surface on that rock, then we’ll see.”

Willy dashed back to his room, returning a moment later in a pair of shorts and a tee shirt. “Do you need any clothes, Joel?”

Joel had become so used to not having any that he didn’t realise he was naked. *Clothing was from another life, another person.* “No, not unless I really have to; let my nudity symbolise all that’s been taken from me.”

Willy stared at him, nodding. “Bravo, Joel.”

“*Bravo, Joel,*” Pedro whispered in his ear, although Joel was sure he was trying to suppress a chuckle.

Joel stood in the corner, trying to be invisible, while Luke and Willy chatted with the barber. Until now he’d been utterly confident that the volcanic upthrust behind the lake was pure orange ore. It was the only thing that made sense, but what if it wasn’t? What if it was just plain basalt? Had he misread the map? Or could Bert have drawn it incorrectly? Was there a chest of orange ore hiding just a few metres to one side of where they’d looked?

Willy tapped him on the shoulder. “We’re ready, Joel.”

Joel rubbed his hands over this face, taking a deep breath before following him over to the steriliser. He closed his eyes, not daring to look, as the barber flicked on the light.

“Bloody hell,” Luke said.

Joel chanced a peep. From within the steriliser came a pure orange glow.

“So how much is something like that worth?” Joel asked.

“The barber will know,” Luke said. “Like all barbers, he’s an expert on everything.”

The barber scratched his beard. “A year ago I would have said half a million, but I’ve heard there’s someone with very deep pockets buying up all the intergalactic ore they can find. You’d be looking at ten million at least, perhaps even more.”

“Gosh.”

“We could buy all the farms in the valley with that,” Willy said.

Joel’s mind began spinning as he tried to work out how much the whole volcanic upthrust might be worth, assuming it was made

entirely of ore. An idea began to take shape, something so utterly ridiculous that no-one in their right mind would ever consider it, but, *but if it worked...*

* * *

David switched on the nightly news.

“Heading tonight’s bulletin, the Joel Morison revelations that went viral on ultranet social media continue to gain momentum, with several prominent politicians calling for a judicial inquiry.

“Joining me in the studio tonight is Winston Allcock, chairman of the mining company Minerix. Mr Allcock –”

“Please call me Winston.”

“Very well, Winston. What’s your stance on these very serious allegations?”

“It saddens me that this tired old chestnut has again come forth, in spite of numerous inquiries in recent decades, none of which have found any evidence of abductions or slavery on Ignus.”

“Are you questioning Morison’s voracity?”

“I assure you this is nothing but a student prank. Morison, if that’s his real name, is no more a kidnapped Earthling than I am, and as for his allegation of ritual killings –”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but the Delphinidae High Priestess has confirmed that the young man in the broadcast is her son-in-law, Joel Morison, who was kidnapped from Earth while on his honeymoon.”

“Well, um, of course we all know –”

“Are you accusing the High Priestess of lying?”

“No, um, of course not, but the recording could’ve been made anywhere.”

“She also confirmed that her son, David, made the recording while visiting Ignus on an official university excursion.”

“Well, um, whatever happened to Morison is an isolated incident in which neither myself nor the board of Minerix had any involvement. I suggest you raise the matter with the Lake Placid Mining Company.”

“But aren’t they owned by Minerix?”

"We only have a one-third interest. This is clearly a matter for the other stake-holders."

"Can you guarantee our audience that Joel will be immediately freed and returned to his wife on Earth?"

"I, um, I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"What? Why?"

"Morison is dead."

"Dead? But how?"

"He was eaten by a fish."

"Mr Allcock –"

"Winston."

"Mr Allcock, do you really expect anyone to believe that?"

"They can believe whatever they want, but I can assure you Morison is dead, and as far as Minerix is concerned, that's the end of the matter."

"If Joel is indeed dead on your watch, Mr Allock, I can assure you this is only the beginning."

"What do you reckon?" Cam asked.

"I've never seen anyone squirm so much. I hate to admit it, Cam, but that was a stroke of genius releasing Joel's message on the ultranet. Allcock and his cohorts will be so busy with damage control that Joel will have free rein to do whatever it is he's plotting."

They both jumped as the telephone rang.

"That'll be for me," Cam said, answering it. "Hello? Yes, he's here. Right now? Okay, I'll tell him."

He turned to David, a worried look on his face.

"The Dean wants you in his office right now."

"The Dean? Did he sound angry?"

"No, just mightily pissed off."

"Oh."

"I'll come with you."

"No, you don't have to."

"Of course I do."

David knocked on the open office door.

"Why are there two of you? Which of you is Collins?"

“That’d be me,” David said.

“So who the hell is the other one?”

“I’m his room-mate Cam. Davo doesn’t handle authority figures very well so I thought I’d better tag along. Is this about the Joel Morison thing?”

“Of course it is.”

“It was my fault it went viral, although I didn’t mean it to.”

“Very well, I’ll deal with you both. Do you realise how much embarrassment this has caused me?”

“No sir.”

“You were given strict instructions not to talk to any of the miners during your excursion.”

Cam looked at David, who shook his head. “No we weren’t.”

“Well you should have been. Just what were you thinking?”

“Joel’s my brother-in-law,” David said.

“So?”

“What do you mean, *so*?”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy. Do you know why we have a tradition of students not wearing clothing here?”

“Um, is it because it saves on air conditioning?”

The Dean’s face turned purple, causing Cam to wonder whether he was about to start frothing at the mouth. “Like I said, sir, Davo doesn’t handle authority figures well.”

“It’s because students are the scum of the universe, the lowest of the low, mindless amoebas soaking up knowledge in the hope that someday you’ll become civilised humans. Being the son of the Delphinidae High Priestess makes no difference here, *no difference at all*, you hear me? Kneel, both of you.”

“What?”

“You’d better kneel, Davo,” Cam said.

The Dean took a deep breath. “Making your recording and broadcasting it to the galaxy has almost certainly led to the death of your brother-in-law. How does that make you feel?”

Cam gulped. “But – but didn’t they say he was eaten by a fish?”

The Dean sighed. “That’s Ignus code for *executed*, you idiot!”

“But –”

“I’m suspending you both from your course and will be recommending that the Proctorial Board ask you to show good cause why that shouldn’t become permanent. Now go!”

Cam looked at David as they scurried from the office. “Now what?”

* * *

Luke put down his knife and fork. “You want to buy – a planet?”

“Yes, this planet.”

“But nobody owns a whole planet, do they?”

“The mining companies just about do. Who owns them?”

“Their shareholders, I suppose.”

Joel scratched his chin. “Are they publicly listed?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can the public buy and sell shares in them?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then we could buy all the shares.”

“Actually, you’d only need to buy half the shares to have a controlling interest,” Carla said.

“Easy peasy.”

“But –”

“I know there are lots of buts, but –”

“For starters, if you flood the market with orange ore, the price will plummet to practically nothing.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that.”

“And the minute the shareholders get wind of a takeover bid, their price will soar.”

“I didn’t think of that either.”

Joel took another mouthful of food, using the time spent chewing to focus his thoughts.

“How many mining companies are there?”

Luke scratched his chin. “That’s a good question. Each mine is operated by its own company, some dating back to the first inhabitants a million years ago while others are much more recent. But they’re now all jointly owned by the three big holding companies: Minerix, Consolidated Mines and Resourco.”

“That’s right,” Willy said. “They’re always claiming it’s a highly competitive industry but it’s really just one big cosy cartel.”

“Any takeover bid would have to target all three simultaneously, otherwise the remaining ones would just force you out of business or perhaps even outbid you.”

Joel sighed while glancing across to where Carla was cutting Willy’s steak into bite-sized pieces. *Tiny pieces.*

“That’s it!”

“What?”

“We’re going to need a lot of people; thousands, maybe even ten thousand.”

Luke and Carla looked at each other. “The Settlers’ Association would be a good place to start. They’re as keen as anyone to upset the applecart of what they call the *Unholy Trinity*. What do you have in mind?”

“Each person could buy a small parcel of shares, small enough not to raise any eyebrows, but if it all happened at once –”

“We could do the same with the ore,” Willy said. “Each person gets a small piece of rock that they take to their local gem merchant.”

“Who are they?”

“There’s more than just fractal ore on Ignus, Joel. Fossicking for gems is a popular pastime for the settlers and each town has at least one merchant to buy and sell their finds. They have large lines of credit so will be keen to buy the ore until the price starts to plummet.”

Luke nodded. “With no direct ultranet access here, there are considerable delays in the system, so as long as we can stage-manage our side of it, we might just be able to pull it off.”

“Um,” Joel said, “won’t the lack of ultranet access make the share-buying difficult?”

“Many of the gem traders also act as stock brokers, and for those that don’t, there’s usually a broker nearby. After all, the fossickers need somewhere to invest their earnings.”

“Oh right, so where do we start?”

“We need to get our hands on the ore,” Luke said, “otherwise the rest can’t happen.”

“It’s a couple of kilometres from the mine buildings, but sound carries over water so we’ll need to do it quietly.”

“Can we break off large pieces and cart them back here?” Willy asked.

Luke nodded. “I’ll round up enough able-bodied men and equipment tomorrow, then we can make a start during the night.”

“There’ll be enough glow from the volcanos so we won’t need our own lights.”

Joel gulped, again wishing he hadn’t eaten the map. “I just hope I can find it in the dark.”

* * *

Mark hung up the phone. “David and Cam have been suspended from their course.”

Lorina gasped. “What?”

“The Dean all but bit their heads off over the release of Joel’s recording.”

“That’s preposterous! I’ll go there myself and give him a piece of my mind.”

“No, David said we should stay put for the moment. He and Cam are going to see Pip on Huntress.”

“That’s something I suppose. I’m sure Pip’s people have enough contacts with the university administration to sort it out. Has there been any word from Joel?”

“No nothing, but the public outrage at that mining company chairman is creating a good diversion for whatever he’s plotting.”

“Let’s hope it’s enough. From what I’ve seen of those people, he’s playing a very dangerous game. I wish there was more we could do.”

“I’m sure Pip will let us know if there is; he seems to have his finger on the pulse of whatever’s happening.”

A shiver ran down Lorina’s spine.

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking of what Joey Red Wolf said about Joel’s soul shining brightly in the spirit realm. I’m sure that’s what Pip’s sensing, but I wonder what other spirits might be watching.”

Mark wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly. “Don’t say anything to Loraine, okay?”

“You did the right thing coming here,” Pip said, ushering David and Cam into the Black Delphinidae common room.

“They – they can’t expel us, can they?” David said, close to tears. “Joel’s my brother-in-law and best mate – what was I supposed to do, just leave him there to rot?”

Cam immediately had his arm around his shoulder. “Of course not, Davo, and I’ll stand by you every inch of the way, even if they send us to –”

“To where?”

“I was going to say Huntress, but, um, we’re already there.”

“Cam’s right,” Pip said, “and the Dean’s reaction makes me wonder where his loyalties really lie. Damon’s doing some snooping around the ultranet to see what dark secrets he might be hiding.”

“He called us mindless amoebas,” Cam said, still rubbing David’s shoulder.

“As distinct from mindful amoebas, I suppose,” David said, managing half a smile.

“Of course. One needs to be succinct when making comparisons to unicellular life forms.”

Pip grinned. “Owen’s offered to represent you both at the Proctorial Board hearing if it comes to that, and is also calling in favours from his university contacts to try to get to the bottom of it.”

“I can’t thank you enough for all you’re doing, Pip.”

Damon bounded into the room, looking like he was about to jump out of his skin. “Guess what I’ve found!”

“The Dean is one of the necromancers?” Cam guessed.

“Almost. He’s a director of Minerix, one of the three mining companies that own Ignus.”

“But – but is that allowed under the university by-laws?”

“It’s not only allowed but encouraged; universities are all about embedding themselves with industry these days.”

“Bastards. What’s the name of that journalist who gave Allcock a roasting? We should get her to do a story on it; give the Dean a taste of his own medicine.”

Pip stared into space.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, just my foresight tingling. No, you mustn’t do anything like that yet, for it would interfere with Joel’s plans.”

David looked at him. “You know what Joel’s doing?”

“No, not the specifics, only that he’s trying to beat them at their own game and we have to wait a little while. It’s all about timing.”

“Oh, okay.”

Cam scratched his head. “There’s bound to be a student reaction when they find out we’ve been suspended.”

Pip nodded. “That’s fine, in fact it’s better than fine. It’ll keep the Dean occupied and his mind off what might be happening on Ignus.” He turned to Damon. “Could you see if you can find out who the other directors of the mining companies are?”

“I’m already on it, Pip. It should be easy, as it’s supposed to be public information, but so far it’s been a maze of broken links.”

“Give Clem a call if you need to. He used to be an ultranet whiz kid.”

“Will do.”

Cam ruffled David’s hair. “We’re gonna win, Davo, didn’t I tell you?”

David forced a grin in spite of the icy dread growing within his heart. *Joel was in danger, terrible danger, and there was nothing he could do to help.*

At Their Own Game

Peter Thorpe suddenly woke, convinced someone had entered his room. He focused his mind, preparing to flip himself across the subspace fold to Eden should the intruder make a move.

“Sorry, but I needed you awake,” a familiar voice said, a voice so familiar because it was his own.

“Pedro?”

“We need to talk.”

“Come on out to the kitchen. If we’re going to talk, I’ll need some coffee.”

Peter turned on the light, surprised to see his fourteen-year-old twin sitting on the corner of the bed. “Hey, I can see you!”

“Really? What do I look like?”

He pointed to a framed photograph on the wall, a picture Peter’s parents had taken just after their move from Brisbane in 1989.

“You looked so sad, Peter.”

“Yes, and that sadness has never quite gone away.”

“When this is over, I’ll have to fix that.”

Peter smiled, wondering what he meant. “Come and help me make the coffee.”

“Um, I’m not sure if I can.”

Pedro followed him out to the kitchen, looking around the house for any other familiar memorabilia. “Is that – no, it couldn’t be, could it?”

“That’s Cory and his three mates, taken just after I moved to Avalon.”

“He looks so much like Joel.”

“Yes, he does, but Joel’s inherited much more than just his looks.”

“I know.”

Peter switched on the kettle. “Should I be making you a cup too?”

“I don’t think I have enough oomph to lift it.” He tried picking up a spoon, but nothing happened. “See?”

“Your powers are growing, Pedro. I suspect that soon you’ll be able to do that.”

“I’m not sure if it’s a good thing. What is it I’m becoming?”

Peter shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I’m becoming you, aren’t I?”

“Or perhaps I’m becoming you.”

“Either way will be interesting, I’m sure.”

Peter stirred his cup before taking a sip. “What is it you wanted to talk about?”

“Do Jason and Jenny still have contacts with the big transport operators here?”

“I believe so, although their underlings are doing most of that work now.”

“Trade with the other galaxy is growing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it’s hampered by the high price of intergalactic grade crystals.”

“That could be about to change, but they’ll need to start making noises about placing big orders while riding out the price surge that’ll cause. Tell them not to sign any contracts yet, just talk about wanting to.”

Peter smiled. “Is this something Joel’s plotting?”

“Yes, but the less anyone knows of the details, the less chance there is of a slip-up.”

“I understand.”

* * *

Joel pushed his way through the scrub, hoping to find the sandstone shelf leading to the upthrust, but instead there was only more scrub. “Damn.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It all looks different in the dark, Willy.”

“I have an idea, if you want to try it.”

“Of course; I’m all out of ideas myself.”

“Come back over to the lake and we’ll make our way to the rocky point we swam across to.”

“Okay.”

Joel glanced around as they reached the water’s edge, seeking any familiar landmarks, but everything looked different. He couldn’t even be sure it was the same lake.

“Down this way, I think,” Willy said, turning to the left.

Joel sighed. Across the water he could see the nearby volcano’s cone silhouetted against the red glow on the clouds, the volcano that had swallowed Bert. Was there anything left of him now besides water vapour, carbon dioxide and some calcium salts? Could his essence, his *soul*, really survive recycling through the planet’s core? He shook his head; too much craziness here, way too much.

The rush he’d felt while devising his plan to buy back Ignus for the settlers had gone, replaced by the realisation that he’d fallen at the first hurdle. His thoughts turned to Willy’s family and friends, waiting by the side of the road for word that he’d found the priceless upthrust of ore. He’d let them all down; if only he hadn’t eaten the damn map!

“This is it here,” Willy said, snapping him out of his introspection. Before them, a rocky spur jutted out into the water, bringing back memories of their swim just two nights before. He turned around, hoping to see some familiar landmarks along the edge of the lake, but the darkness made everything just a blur of red and black.

“Maybe we’ll have to come back during daylight,” he said, sighing again.

“That’s too risky. Do you want me to try something?”

“What?”

“Did you know that we Tivinel have some telepathic abilities, not unlike those of the elves?”

“Yeah, you mentioned that when I first met you, I’m sure. Are you going to read my mind?”

“I can’t do that, but I might be able to jog some memories; help you to recall the path we took from here to the upthrust.”

“All right, let’s give it a try.”

Willy took hold of Joel’s hand.

“Um, shouldn’t you be touching my forehead?”

“No, any physical contact is sufficient and holding your hand will make it a lot easier if you’re going to be walking.”

“Oh, right.”

“Close your eyes and think back to our swim the other day; concentrate on the swimming, not on what came afterwards.”

Joel felt the refreshing coolness of the water on his body as he swam, the slightly alkaline taste on his lips, the reeds tickling his feet as they approached the shore. He climbed onto the rocks, still warm in the late afternoon sun, giving Willy a hand up before looking back across the water to the buildings and trying to establish his bearings.

“I think we go inland from here.”

“Where’s the map?”

“I memorised and ate it. It was all I could think of doing to keep it safe.”

“I hope you have a good memory.”

“So do I.”

Beyond the lake, thick scrub lined the shore, reminding Joel of some of the walks he’d done in the Sunshine Coast hinterland on Earth. His mind wandering back to those happy times, he didn’t pay much attention to where he was going until he suddenly emerged onto a sandstone shelf backed by a volcanic upthrust honeycombed with small caves.

“This looks like a good place to hide something.”

“Open your eyes, Joel.”

“Huh?”

Joel looked around. There was still rock under his feet, but it wasn’t the spur on the edge of the lake anymore. Instead he was standing on the sandstone shelf, with the upthrust rising a few metres in front of him.

“Gosh.”

“You stay here while I go and fetch the others. If you hear me whistle, whistle back.”

“Okay.”

He stepped forward once Willy had gone, placing his hands on the upthrust just to make sure it was real. *Orange ore, tonnes of orange ore, enough to buy the whole planet and then some.* As long as he could sell it all before the price plunged.

Tiny pieces, Joel, lots of tiny pieces. Wasn't that what his father used to say about eating an elephant? His thoughts turned instantly back to his parents; the house in Coolum Beach, the school, the dreaded barber, the pizza shop where he first saw Loraine, the water spraying from her hair like a halo in the afternoon sun.

Suddenly he was crying, bawling his eyes out like he'd done when David had found him at the mine. It was crazy, he knew, but it just came flooding out, all the pain and anguish and torment, washing out in a torrent of tears. He let his mind go blank, at one with his cries the way a new-born must; feeling nothing, wanting nothing but to just keep on crying forever. There was no time, no place, no sense of self; just the now, the crying and the wetness of his tears.

"They're coming," Pedro said, causing him to snap his head around, unsure for a moment where or who he was. *"Wipe your eyes before they get here."*

A moment later Willy whistled. Joel whistled back, trying not to make too much noise in case the sound carried all the way across the lake. Scratching noises came from the undergrowth to his right as Willy led the team of rock-cutters onto the sandstone shelf.

Luke put a hand on Joel's shoulder. "Let's get to work, lad. You've done well."

As Joel watched on, the townsfolk, armed with rock saws, sledgehammers and picks, began harvesting their future.

Joel helped carry another pile of rocks to the truck as the sky to the east lightened.

"This will have to be our last load," Luke said.

"Why?"

"Because any moment now it'll be change of shift at the mine and we can't risk anyone coming out for a walk."

"But will it be enough?"

"It'll have to be."

"I suppose we could always come back for more if we need to."

"No, it'd be too risky. There'll be signs we've been here – a broken branch, a crushed plant, tyre tracks – and even if it's not enough to raise the alarm today, it'll put them on watch for our return."

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry, Joel, you’ve done all you can.” In the distance a siren sounded, marking the change of shift. “Let’s get moving.”

“So what’s the next step?”

“Today we rest and check the quality of the ore. Tomorrow delegates from the Settlers’ Association will come to consider our plan.”

“Tomorrow?”

“We have to act quickly if we want to have a hope of pulling this off, Joel. If the delegates approve our plan, it’ll need to be implemented as soon as possible.”

Joel sighed.

Once back at the farm, the rock harvesters returned to their homes to rest while other townsfolk began cutting the ore into thousands of tiny pieces. For a while, Joel helped by testing samples in the barber’s steriliser, until his eyelids became too heavy.

“Come on, Joel,” Willy said, “we should try to get some sleep.”

“Uh huh.”

“Have you thought about what you’ll be saying to the delegates tomorrow?”

“Saying? Me?”

“Of course. This is your plan so it’ll be up to you to convince them to go along with it.”

“But –” Joel sighed, unable to think of any plausible *but*s. “You could’ve waited until I’d had some sleep before telling me.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think, but don’t worry; you’ll be fine. Just be yourself.”

Joel turned to face him. “Thanks Willy; I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

Willy smiled. “We make a good team, don’t we?”

“The best.”

Joel flopped onto his bunk, too tired to think about anything. Beside him sat Pedro, watching as he slept.

“*Sleep soundly,*” he whispered. “*Tomorrow you’ll need all the wit, cunning and wisdom you can muster.*”

Back at Lake Placid, one of the surly miners led Dougall up the road. “See, there are fresh tyre tracks and signs people have been coming and going through the scrub.”

“I see, and I have a pretty good idea who it was and what they’re up to.”

“You mean Joel and Willy?”

“I believe so.

“What are you going to do?”

“Leave it to me; I have some phone calls to make.”

* * *

“Joel, this is Joseph, the president of the Settlers’ Association,” Luke said, introducing him to the elderly man entering the house.

“So this is the young man causing so much fuss in the outside world,” Joseph said.

“What do you mean?”

“A recording you made with your brother-in-law went viral on the ultranet a few days ago.”

“But I thought there was no ultranet access here.”

“There isn’t, but we have ways of working around that.”

“Oh, right.”

“They said you were dead.”

“Dead?”

“A fish was supposed to have eaten you and another miner.”

“That’d be me,” Willy said, grinning. “Why would they say that?”

Joel scratched his chin. “To thwart my rescue, I guess.”

“I’m glad to see you’re both still alive,” Joseph said. “Luke told me you’ve made an interesting discovery.”

“I –” Joel began, but something faint in the back of his mind tingled out a warning. *Don’t trust anyone you don’t know when it comes to money*, his father had often said; at the time he’d thought it unkind and unfair, but now he sensed the wisdom in it. “Tell me about this association of yours, Joseph.”

Joseph puffed out his chest. “We represent most of the non-mining people on Ignus, be they farmers, shopkeepers, service workers or utility providers. We’re all that stops this world from being totally run

by the mining companies. There are a hundred and twenty provinces, each with its own local management committee, and they each elect a delegate to represent them on the council.”

“It almost sounds like you’re the government.”

“The government in exile, yes. We have no legal power, the mining companies with their overlords see to that.”

“Just who are the overlords?”

Joseph laughed. “If we knew that, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Joel glanced down at Joseph’s feet. “Um, if it’s not a rude question, are all the settlers Tivinel?”

“I must say that’s a surprising question, given where you’re from.”

“The man who kidnapped me was Tivinel.”

“Really? He couldn’t have been one of the settlers, since we can’t leave Ignus, and I wasn’t aware any others existed.”

“That’s why I have to do this my way.”

“What do you mean?”

Joel turned to Willy. “Show him one of the pieces.”

Willy led him into the spare room where the barber’s steriliser had been set up with one of the samples in it. “Take a look.”

“Gosh, that’ll be worth a pretty penny. What are you going to do with it?”

Joel switched off the ultraviolet light. “We’ve found enough of these for the people of Ignus to buy a controlling interest in the mining companies, but it needs to be a coordinated operation which is where your association comes in.”

“A controlling interest, you say? That must be some haul of ore you have.”

“It is. Will you work with us?”

“If what you say is true, then yes, of course, it’d be a dream come true for us, but you’ll need to convince the delegates.”

“I know.”

* * *

Joseph cleared his throat, silencing the hall of delegates. “Thank you all for coming at such short notice. I’ve called you to hear a

proposition this young man beside me wishes to put forward. Before I hand the floor over to him, I stress that the unholy trinity mustn't get wind of what's happening or we'll lose what promises to be an undreamed of opportunity for us all. Please welcome Joel Morison."

Joel stood to the enthusiastic applause of the gathering, making him wonder how much they knew about him. "Thanks for coming to hear my proposal. This all began a few months ago when I was kidnapped while on my honeymoon on Earth. I was held prisoner on a ship and starved for a month, before escaping in a shuttle and landing at the Lake Placid mine. There I was put to work as a sorter, under the care and guidance of an amazing man named Bert."

He paused, rubbing his eyes and wiping his nose with his forearm as he tried to control his emotions. "Bert was like a father to me, but the ultraviolet light used in the sorting had damaged his eyes and – and he – this is so difficult for me as I don't understand any of it – he voluntarily had himself recycled in the volcano."

The delegates began murmuring to themselves until Joseph cleared his throat again. "Please continue, Joel."

"There were evil men called Servants of the Core or skin-walkers, who I'm sure stole his soul before sending him into the lava. But Bert left something for me, hidden in a secret compartment at the back of one of his drawers; a piece of intergalactic-grade fractal ore and a map. Willy and I went searching for what was on the map and found, let's say, a considerable quantity of ore, enough we reckon to buy a controlling interest in the mining companies."

Another outburst of murmuring, louder this time, prompted Joseph to thump the desk. "Let him finish, please."

"Thanks. It's going to be difficult, though, because if word gets out that we're selling so much ore, the price will plummet, and also if news leaks of our takeover bid, the share prices will soar. My proposal is for each of you to take a quantity of ore back to your constituencies, to be distributed amongst a hundred or so trustworthy people, and then at a coordinated time, we need everyone to exchange their ore for shares, using as many different gem traders and brokers as possible. My hope is that we can achieve our goal of fifty-percent ownership of each of the holding companies before anyone twigs to what's happening."

Half a dozen hands shot up. Joseph pointed to the one closest to the front.

“That’s all well and good in theory, laddie, but it’ll only take one careless whisper and we’ll all be left holding a stockpile of worthless ore with three very irate holding companies breathing down our necks.”

“That’s why we need to act quickly,” Joseph said. “Without ultranet access, communications on this world are slow at best, so we’ll have a small window of opportunity to make it work. It’s surely the breakthrough the association’s been dreaming of since time immemorial.”

Another man vigorously waved his hand. “What happens to the gem traders in all of this? Assuming we can pull the wool over their eyes, aren’t they going to be left holding a great pile of worthless ore?”

“Serves them right,” someone called out. “They’ve been ripping us off for generations.”

“They’re not all crooks though. What about the honest ones just trying to make a living?”

Joseph stood. “Yes, in the short term they’ll be the hardest hit, but there’ll always be a demand for ore, particularly with intergalactic trade increasing, and we can manage the stockpile for them to stop the price falling too low.”

“There’ll be new opportunities for them in an open society. Think tourism; visitors from other worlds coming on fossicking holidays.”

“The losses will be spread over thousands of traders,” Luke said, “so it’s not like there’ll be just a few to carry the burden. The slow communications here means they’re always taking risks on the gems they buy; sometimes they pay off handsomely while others not so well, it’s why their margins are so high.”

“Very well,” Joseph said, “I think we can run with that. Once we own the trinity we’ll have room to manoeuvre, I’m sure. The real question is whether the ore will fetch a high enough price to gain a controlling interest in all three.”

A woman at the back raised her hand. “I’ve heard rumours that the holding company share prices have tumbled following Joel’s

broadcast, with Minerix particularly hard hit after their chairman made a complete fool of himself on prime-time television.”

A man at the front stood. “I hear orange ore is in high demand thanks to an unknown buyer grabbing everything he can lay his hands on. This is the perfect time for the association to move. As controlling shareholders we’ll be able to –”

“No, wait,” Joel said. “I don’t want your association to buy the shares.”

Everyone looked at him in stunned silence.

“No offence intended, and I’m sure you all mean well, but over time I think you’d just become the same as them, like in that *Animal Farm* story we read at school.”

“Joel –” Joseph said, but Joel ignored him.

“No, for this to work the shares have to be owned by each individual citizen, making the mining operation a cooperative, I suppose. They have to be owned by the people of Ignus and answerable directly to those people.”

“That’s madness!” someone up the back yelled. “The association must be in control.”

“Hear! Hear!” others shouted.

“With all due respect, Joel,” Joseph said, “you know little of our customs or the extent of the association’s grievances with the trinity. We have to act as a consortium in this, trust me.”

Again Joel heard his father’s voice whispering in the back of his mind. *Don’t trust anyone you don’t know.* “Look, you can be the government if you want, but it has to be at arm’s length from the mining companies. From what I’ve seen, those companies are rife with corruption, cronyism and bullying, and that’s not even mentioning the kidnappings and ritual killings. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely; the only way to fix it is to make everything open. The people who live here must own the planet, not the companies or even your association.”

“What the hell would you know?” someone on the right yelled.

“Go home, Joel. We know what’s best for our world.”

“Hear! Hear!”

Joel ran his hands over his face, wishing now he’d never found Bert’s map.

“You’ve done your part,” Joseph said, placing a hand on Joel’s shoulder. “It’s time now to leave it to the association. As soon as we’ve opened the planet to civilian craft, we’ll arrange transport home for you.”

Joel nodded, convinced that if he tried to speak it’d just become blubber. He turned towards the nearest exit.

“Wait,” Willy said. “Joel’s right. I’ve experienced more of the trinity’s cruelty than most.” He wiggled the stump that remained of his left arm. “I’ll be the first in line to dance on the overlords’ graves, but I’m sure those who founded Minerix, Consolidated Mines and Resourco didn’t intend them to become what they are today. Concentrated power corrupts, whether it’s big business, religious orders, political parties or associations like ours. Really I’d like to see everyone on the planet become a shareholder, but I suppose we’ll have to make do with the ten thousand or so we can reach through your constituencies. As Joseph said, we need to act quickly if we’re going to pull this off.

“Joel found the ore so technically it’s his, and I’m in complete awe that he doesn’t want any for himself. It’s in the nature of the man, I’m sure, and I for one will stand by him in whatever he thinks we should do.”

Carla moved over beside her son. “Our land is owned by the mining companies, our lives are owned by them too. Three years ago I had to stand by and watch as they took my boy away to work in their goddamned mine, only to have him tortured and mutilated because he made an honest mistake. If the association takes over the companies, it’ll just be a change of landlord; our lives and children will still belong to someone else. Joel’s plan gives us a chance for true freedom, to own our land, our homes and our lives. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change our world, to give hope to our children and grandchildren. We should embrace it with open arms, take responsibility for who we are as individuals and not just replace one set of overlords with another. I’m with you, Joel, all the way.”

Luke joined his wife and son. “Willy and Carla have said most of what I wanted to say. For too long we’ve been a people in exile, cut off from the rest of the galaxy and treated as scum. As Carla said, it’s

time to eliminate the overlords, not replace them. We must do this properly or not at all; another opportunity as good as this may never come to pass.”

The delegates all remained silent, their expressions stony-faced, until the woman at the back stood and began clapping. Another joined her, then a third. Joel and Willy exchanged glances as more and more joined in, until only a handful remained seated.

“I shall record that as a vote by acclamation in favour of Joel’s plan,” Joseph said.

Luke whispered something to Joseph, who nodded. “Those who are participating can collect their ore from my shed. You’ll need to distribute it amongst your trusted constituents tomorrow, for the day after we’ll make our move. Many of you come from different time zones, so the nominal time will be noon here. If that falls outside your business hours, pick the nearest time you can. Remember to make sure everyone uses a different gem dealer and stockbroker, to stop anyone twigging to what’s happening until it’s too late. Are there any more questions?”

Several of the delegates looked at each other, but nobody spoke.

“Right then, let’s go beat those bastards at their own game.”

Day of Reckoning

Pip called David, Cam and Damon into his office. “It’s time to tell that reporter about the Dean.”

“Woo-hoo!” Cam said, causing David to glare at him.

“My foresight is telling me Joel is about to make his move and needs to have the mining companies seen in as poor a light as possible.”

“Do you know what he’s doing?” David asked.

“No, my foresight is never very specific.” He turned to Damon. “How are you going with that list of directors?”

“I have names for about half of them, but it’s a multi-dimensional maze of encrypted links and working through it by hand is taking forever. If I had some way of automating it –”

David’s eyes lit up. “Cam can do that! I’ve seen him in action trawling through the library catalogues, and nothing could be as convoluted as those.”

Pip turned to Cam. “Can you?”

“I’ll give it a shot. I’ve found a way of working around broken or encrypted links using the resolver log files.”

“But I thought access to those logs was restricted to system administrators.”

Cam grinned. “Nobody told me.”

“Excellent. You and Damon can go to work on that while David and I speak with the reporter.”

* * *

“With me tonight in the studio is David Collins, the son of the Delphinidae High Priestess. I understand you were recently suspended from your studies in the Apogee University’s School of Physics, is that right?”

“Yes, the Dean suspended me and my room-mate because the message from my brother-in-law Joel was released on the ultranet. The Dean told me students weren’t allowed to talk to the miners on Ignus, but what was I supposed to do? Joel was my brother-in-law and best mate, and now they’ve – they’ve killed him too for good measure.”

“Yes, it’s a terrible thing and the public outrage against Minerix has been swift and sharp. I understand you now have evidence of a link between the Dean and that company.”

“Yes, the Dean is a director.”

“A what?”

“He’s a director of Minerix. It says so in their annual report to the stock exchange.”

“If that’s true, and I don’t doubt you for a second, David, he has one enormous conflict of interest to explain.”

David grinned. “You could say that.”

“In recent days the Minerix share price has recovered some of its losses after bargain-hunters moved in, but this latest revelation will no doubt see it tumbling as soon as the market opens tomorrow.”

“I hope so; someone has to be held to account over Joel’s death.” David wiped his forearm over his eyes. “Otherwise –”

“There won’t be an *otherwise*, David, not if I can help it. Thank you for your time this evening.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ve contacted Minerix for a response to this latest allegation, but none has been forthcoming.”

* * *

Luke pulled up in front of the gem-dealer’s shop. Joel, his stomach already full of butterflies, shivered as a chill ran up and down his spine. Trying to shake off the feeling he was being watched from the inside again, he ran his hands over his face and through his hair.

A bell above the door tinkled as they entered, causing the man behind the counter to look up.

“Can I help you?”

Luke held out a piece of ore. "I came across this while ploughing my lower field and it looks a bit like that fractal stuff the mining companies dig up."

The dealer noted the ground surface on one side of the ore. "I see you've already had it checked."

"Yes, the barber reckoned it was intergalactic grade and quite valuable."

"Let me take a look."

The dealer first studied it under a powerful magnifying glass before switching on an ultraviolet light. He drew in a sharp breath before switching off the light and placing the sample on a set of scales.

"The barber was right, and a sample of this purity will indeed attract a good price. How does five million sound?"

Luke shook his head. "The barber offered me more than that. Ten minimum."

"Six."

"Seven."

"All right, six and a half."

Joel looked crestfallen, as this was well short of what he'd been hoping for. The butterflies in his stomach all took flight, making him feel quite nauseous. Meanwhile as Luke went to shake the dealer's offered hand, he pulled it away. "You didn't find this in your field, did you Luke?"

"What?"

"My friend Dougall from Lake Placid told me a sizeable quantity of this stuff was stolen by someone bearing a striking resemblance to that young Cornipean man with you."

"Stolen? Are you accusing me —"

"Far be it for me to be making accusations, Luke, but I'm sure these fine gentlemen here will be able to determine the truth."

A door behind the counter opened as four skin-walkers entered the shop.

"Take the Cornipean and the one-armed lad," the dealer said.

Luke stood in their way, but the first skin-walker batted him aside while the others took hold of Joel and Willy.

“Tell us where the rest of the ore is hidden,” the one holding Joel said, “before we start feasting on these two.”

“There’s no more ore,” Luke said. “This is all we found.”

Two of the skin-walkers took hold of Willy’s soles while a third took his palm. Willy screamed for a moment before falling silent as his expression turned blank.

“No, stop!” Joel cried, but pain exploded in his head in a white flash that grew brighter and brighter. A rushing noise filled his ears as his eyeballs seemed to burst...

* * *

“Are you okay, Joel?” Luke asked from the driver’s seat as they pulled up outside the dealer’s shop.

Joel shook his head, trying to clear it. “No, keep driving; we have to go before they sense me.”

“Who are *they*?”

“There are skin-walkers in that shop. Dougall tipped the dealer off and they were waiting to ambush us.”

“But how do you know?”

“I just had a singlet moment.”

“A what?”

“Joel’s a singleton,” Willy said. “That’s how he saved my life.”

“I’ve heard stories about such people but didn’t think they really existed. So you can change the future, can you?”

“No, it’s not something I can control. It just happens sometimes, usually when someone’s in extreme danger and I have the chance to save them. Is there anywhere else we can go; another dealer somewhere?”

Luke scratched his chin. “There’s one in the next town I think we can trust.”

“But what if his price is even lower? We need at least eight million apiece if we’re going to pull this off.”

“Relax, Joel,” Carla said. “Worrying yourself sick isn’t going to make the price any higher.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Joel said, taking slow deep breaths. Gradually the butterflies eased their flapping.

The road crossed a gap in the line of low hills before winding its way down to a picturesque township on the banks of a small river, causing Joel to again marvel at the contrast to the volcanic wastelands surrounding the mine. In a place like this there'd be plenty of wild berries and yams, he mused, but that thought turned his mind back to Loraine. With news of his supposed death having no doubt reached her by now, he couldn't help wondering if she'd have gone off and married someone else by the time he returned home, if that ever happened.

"Joel, please," Pedro whispered in his ear. "Body language is everything. If you go into that shop looking like you expect peanuts for your ore, that's exactly what you'll get. I'll let you in on a secret – one of the biggest freight companies in your galaxy has just gone out to tender for a new fleet of intergalactic ships, which means they'll need all the fractal ore they can lay their hands on."

Joel jerked his head around.

"What's wrong?" Willy asked.

"Huh? Nothing, I've just had a thought, that's all."

The sign on the shop said *Ron Erkhart and Son, Licensed Gem Dealers*. Joel wondered who the licensing authority might be, given the lack of any official civilian government on Ignus, but decided it was best not to know. Not sensing any skin-walker presence this time, he followed Luke, Carla and Willy inside.

"Ron, is it?" Luke asked the middle-aged man behind the counter.

"No, I'm the son, actually. My father passed away a few years ago but I've been reluctant to change the sign. Family tradition and all that, you see."

"Yes, I understand."

"How may I help you?"

Luke pulled out the piece of ore. "I came across this and the barber told me it could be quite valuable."

The dealer ran his finger over the exposed surface. "This is fractal ore of good quality, that much is clear, but I'll need to examine it under ultraviolet light to determine its grade."

"Of course."

Joel expected to see something akin to the barber's steriliser, but instead the dealer picked up what looked like an oversized phone, placing the probe on its end against the ore.

"This spectrograph will give a more accurate readout of the ore's quality and grade than can be discerned just by looking at it."

He pressed the trigger on the side, sending a momentary flash of purple light onto the prepared surface. For several long seconds the display on the instrument said *analysing* before a coloured graph appeared showing a smooth symmetrical spike in the orange region of the spectrum.

"Well, this is a fine specimen," the dealer said, placing the ore on a set of scales at the end of the counter. "Intergalactic ore of the highest quality. Let me check the latest price schedule which just came through this morning."

He stepped into his back office, taking the ore sample with him.

"What do we do if he sends out the skin-walkers?" Willy asked.

"Run like hell," Luke said.

"I can feel them when they're close," Joel said. "It's like I'm being watched from the inside out, but I can sense nothing of that here."

The dealer returned, holding a sheet of paper. "Well you've certainly come at the right time, it seems."

"How's that?" Luke asked.

"One of the freight companies in that other galaxy is building a new fleet and will need as much of this stuff as they can get."

"That's right!" Joel said.

"Oh, you must be from that galaxy, I see. Earth, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"I can sense these things."

"So how much is it worth?"

The dealer scratched his chin while looking again at the sheet. "I'll offer you thirty million."

"Thirty!" Joel said, before remembering what Pedro had told him about body language. He screwed up his face, trying to make it look impassive.

"I think you'll find that's a fair price."

Luke and Carla exchanged glances. "It's more than fair, Mr Erkhart. We accept your offer."

"Thank you. I must tell you that, had you tried to haggle, I'd have withdrawn my offer straight away."

Luke nodded.

"How would you like payment?"

"We're interested in making a purchase of shares. Can you do that or is there someone you'd recommend?"

"You'll find a reputable broker two blocks down. I can put through a line of credit if you wish."

Luke pulled a plastic card from his wallet, which the dealer tapped against his pod.

"That'll be valid for eighteen hours, after which we may need to renegotiate."

"Thank you, we'll go down there now."

"Gosh, thirty!" Joel said as they walked down the street, barely able to contain himself.

"Steady down, we still need to buy the shares before we decide whether to celebrate or drown our sorrows."

"Yeah, but, but thirty million!"

The sign on the brokerage said *Glenda Erkhart, Licensed Investment Broker*.

"Either everyone in this town is called Erkhart," Carla said as she led them inside, "or I sense a family connection."

The middle-aged woman behind the desk smiled as they entered. "My husband just called to tell me you were coming. How may I help you?"

"We'd like to invest our windfall in Consolidated Mines, if that's possible," Luke said.

"Let me just check for you." She turned to the computer on her desk, entering the required codes on the forms that appeared. "Our feed is several hours behind real time, but it looks like that stock is being heavily sold off following new revelations about one of the Minerix directors. You could wait and possibly get a lower price later today or tomorrow, or I can put the purchase through now."

"How many shares will I be buying?"

“The latest selling price is forty-two cents per share, so that’ll be roughly seventy million shares.”

“What’s the company’s total issue?”

“A hundred billion.”

Joel’s face lit up as he did a bit of quick mental arithmetic.

“Put it through,” Luke said.

The broker attacked her keyboard again. “The transaction’s gone through to the central Ignus clearing house, but without ultranet access there’ll be a delay of six to twelve hours before it’s finalised.”

“Is the number of shares likely to change in that time?”

“No, we have a substantial levelling fund which will absorb any price fluctuations. As far as you’re concerned, those shares are now yours.”

She collected the share certificate from her printer, signing it before handing it over.

“Thank you so much.”

“It’s been a pleasure. I hope your plan succeeds.”

“What?”

She winked. “It’s hard to keep a secret on a planet of telepaths, Luke. Those of us who know are right behind you.”

“Thank you again.”

* * *

Luke led Joseph into the house, along with two men who, if their demeanour and dress were anything to go by, just had to be lawyers.

“I have the final figures for you,” Joseph said, causing Joel’s butterflies to all take flight again. “Of the ten thousand people we gave the ore to, all but sixty-seven were able to exchange it for shares. The offered ore price varied greatly, from two million to over sixty million in one case.

“All the share transactions took place before the clearing house could connect to the off-world stock markets, so our ploy of exploiting delays in the system worked, with the clearing house confirming all sales.

“The people of Ignus now own sixty-seven percent of Resourceco, sixty-nine percent of Consolidated Mines and a whopping ninety-two

percent of Minerix. Apparently the media have been giving Minerix a hard time out there and investors were almost giving away their shares.”

Carla wrapped Joel in a bear-hug, “You did it! You really did it!”

“You’re a legend, Joel,” Willy said, slapping him on the back. “We should make you king of Ignus!”

“King Joel the First,” Luke said. “That has a nice ring to it.”

“No,” Joel said. “All I want to do is go home.”

“Which brings me to the other reason for my visit,” Joseph said. “These two gentlemen with me are the association’s lawyers and have drawn up a petition to be signed by all the new shareholders and lodged with the High Court of Meridian.” He turned to one of the men, who pulled out a document and began reading.

“We, the undersigned, being the majority shareholders of Resourco, Consolidated Mines and Minerix, do hereby petition this court to:

1. Immediately dismiss the directors of Resourco, Consolidated Mines and Minerix,
2. Appoint the Public Administrator to investigate the financial operations of these companies and report back to a duly convened meeting of shareholders,
3. Instigate an investigation into the employment practices of Resourco, Consolidated Mines, Minerix and their subsidiaries,
4. Instigate a police investigation into allegations of slavery and ritual killings within those companies,
5. Restore ultranet access to the general population of Ignus, and
6. Deactivate the planetary defence system to allow civilian spacecraft uninhibited access to Ignus.”

The other lawyer turned to Joel. “We anticipate that you’ll be able to leave Ignus within a matter of days, however we were wondering if there was anything else you think should be added to the petition before we circulate it for signing.”

Joel scratched his chin. “It covers most things, I’m sure, but, um, my grandfather always said that while governments have their eye on the big picture, it’s really the little things that matter most.

“My friend Bert was recycled because the ultraviolet light used in the sorting room damaged his eyes and the same will no doubt

happen to all the sorters eventually. I noticed that the gem dealer we saw had a spectrograph which he said gave a more accurate grading than visual inspection, while at the same time not exposing the user to its light. I think it'd be good if the sorters could be given spectrographs before any more go blind."

The lawyers both looked at Joseph, who nodded. "That's the least we can do, Joel, the very least. Is there anything else?"

"I, um, I need to let Loraine and David know I'm alive and okay."

"I expect that'll happen sooner than you think."

"*Consider it done,*" Pedro whispered in his ear.

* * *

Peter turned, sensing he wasn't alone in his living room. "Oh, hi Pedro. I wish you'd knock."

"I'm not sure if I can." He tapped the wall with his fist but nothing happened. *"I just dropped by to let you know Joel's plan succeeded, and to suggest you tell everyone to keep a close watch on the news feeds from Meridian."*

"That's great!"

"Tell Loraine Joel's fine and sends his love. He'll be coming home as soon as he can."

"I will, thanks. What was it he did?"

"Best you see for yourself. I must dash as I need to be back on Ignus."

Before Peter could say anything more, Pedro vanished with a plop.

Jack and Jill Morison joined Peter and the Collins family to watch the latest news bulletin.

"The galaxy's financial sector is in a spin following this morning's revelation that some ten thousand small investors on Ignus have surreptitiously purchased a controlling interest in Minerix, Consolidated Mines and Resourco. Rumours are circulating that the directors of those companies have been sacked and are currently being interviewed by officers from the Corporate Governance Commission."

“Unconfirmed reports suggest this takeover bid was orchestrated by Joel Morison who, contrary to earlier reports, would appear to be alive and well.

“We cross now to Government House where Supreme Councillor Michael Chandler is about to make a statement.”

“People of the galaxy, I’m as shocked as you are at the recent revelations about the three Ignus mining companies and assure you that the affairs of those companies, including reports of slavery and ritual killings, will be fully investigated. My government will leave no stone unturned in bringing those responsible to justice.

“For eons there’ve been urban legends of people being kidnapped and sent to the mines on Ignus, but the official response has always been one of denial. That’s now changed and I’m pleased to report tonight that police Superintendent Scott Davies will be heading a task force investigating such claims. If you’ve had a loved one or friend who might have been a victim of this heinous practice, please call the hotline number appearing on your screens or visit your local police station.

“This is a time of great change for the people of Ignus. The Settlers’ Association, representing most of the non-mining population, has expressed a desire to become the government of that world. In two days’ time I’ll be attending a civic reception to begin formal negotiations and to speak with the people who pulled off this remarkable corporate coup. I’m sure you’ll all join me in wishing them well as they begin to take control of their own destiny.”

“Did I hear right?” Jack asked. “Was Joel really behind that share buy-out?”

“That’s what they said,” Jill answered.

Jack screwed up his face while trying to comprehend it. “That’s my son! Bloody brilliant!”

* * *

Cam bounded into Pip’s office, closely followed by Damon. “We have that list of directors for you.”

“It took a lot of work,” Damon said, “but Cam’s a genius at ferreting information out of the ultranet.”

“That’s great, well done!” Pip scanned through the list. “This may prove embarrassing for the government.”

Cam looked stricken. “You’re not suggesting we hush it up?”

“Of course not. This won’t be the first time I’ve embarrassed the government.”

“Oh, right.”

“We came across quite a few references to the overlords,” Damon said. “At first I thought that was just a grandiose name for the directors, but now I’m not so sure. I think they may be a covert group doing the directors’ dirty work.”

“Do you have any names?”

Cam shook his head. “They’ve been super-careful not to leave any trace of themselves.”

Pip sighed. “I’ll pass the list of directors to Scott Davies and perhaps his people can coerce some of them to talk.”

“You mean torture them?”

“I was thinking more along the line of plea bargains.”

“Oh, right. I guess I’ve been watching too many spy movies.”

“You’d be surprised at what goes on in some quarters, but I’m sure Scott’s methods are all above-board. Have you heard of the library police on Cornipus?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to run afoul of them, although Michael Chandler’s been keen to clean them up after what happened to Mark a few years back.”

“I was there,” David said, entering the room.

“Speaking of Michael,” Pip said, “he wants us to go with him to Ignus tomorrow where they’re holding a civic reception. I’m thinking we should take the *Renewal* so Damon can fly Joel back to Earth afterwards.”

“That’s fine with me,” Damon said.

“Great, I’ll let Mark and Lorina know what we’re doing.”

* * *

Mark hung up the phone. "That was Pip. They're all going to Ignus tomorrow as part of Michael Chandler's entourage then Damon will bring Joel back in the *Renewal*."

"That's great!" Lorina said.

"I wish we could go to meet him there," Loraine said.

"So do I, but even if an intergalactic ship was available straight away, it'd take us thirty-six hours to reach there and they'd all be gone by then. I know it's going to be terrible for you waiting here for them to arrive, but it'll only be for a few more days."

Loraine ran her hands over her face, trying to stop herself from crying. "All right then, I suppose."

"We can –" Mark began, but the phone rang again, interrupting him. "Hello. Yes, she is, I'll put her on." He turned back to Loraine, trying hard to stop a grin from spreading across his face. "It's for you."

Loraine took the phone. "Hello?"

"Loraine? It's me!"

"Who? Joel?"

"Yes, they've just turned on ultranet access here. How are you? It's been ages; I can't believe I'm really talking to you!"

"Oh Joel, I – I've missed you so much. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I suppose you've heard about what's been happening here."

"It's been all over the news. You're quite the hero by the sound of it."

"Nah, I was just in the right place at the right time. The people I'm staying with are the real heroes."

"I can't wait to see you again. I wanted to come to that civic reception, but it'll be all over before we could get there. Dad said Damon will be bringing you back to Earth on his ship."

"I haven't spoken to Pip yet, but that's great news. I think he and David did a lot behind the scenes to help our share-buying get over the line."

"Yes, David exposed the Dean of his faculty as a secret director of Minerix. It was all over the news a couple of days ago."

"Give him my thanks if you speak to him before I do."

"Will do. I miss you so much, Joel."

"I haven't stopped thinking about you the whole time. See you in a few days, okay?"

"I can't wait, honestly, but I suppose I'll have to."

"When I get back we'll have to finish our pilgrimage."

"Of course. They say autumn is the best time for walking through Spain; lots of wild berries and yams."

"Yum yum!"

Lorraine wiped the tears of joy from her eyes. "I love you so much."

"Me too. I'd better go now as they need me to help prepare for the reception. See you soon!"

"Yes, see you soon."

Part Four

Once Upon a Time



The Skin-Walkers

David dashed forward as he entered the room, almost bowling Joel over as he wrapped his arms around him. Cam sauntered in behind him, a bemused grin on his face.

“You’re looking pretty good for someone who’s been eaten by a fish,” he said, shaking Joel’s hand after he and David had separated. Joel looked stricken but Cam grinned. “Don’t worry, Pip knew straight away the man at the mine was lying and Davo made sure your wife knew you were okay in spite of what everyone was saying.”

“That’s a relief, I must say. Thanks for all you guys have been doing behind the scenes. It helped a lot, I’m sure.”

“All we were doing was exposing the truth.”

“Yes, but your timing was superb. The Minerix shares hit rock bottom just as we started buying them.”

Damon, Pip and his wife Cloe stepped up to join them. Cloe gave Joel a hug while kissing him on the nose. “I’m so glad you’re okay; we’ve all been worried sick.”

“As I was just telling Cam, I’m so grateful for all you’ve been doing to help.”

“It’s the least we could do,” Pip said. “I’ve been sensing that you’ve been up to something but had no idea what it was, only that we had to discredit the mining companies as much as possible.”

“It worked a treat, I must say.”

“As soon as this ceremony’s over I’ll take you back to Earth,” Damon said.

“Thanks.” Joel glanced around. “Where’s your father?”

“He and Hamati are checking out an ancient ruin on Huntress. It looks like your friend Tristan is up to something there.”

A shiver ran up Joel's spine. "I hope they're careful. I don't know what he's up to, but it has something to do with time cusps, something he needed my singlet, um, single-ton ability to pull off."

"I suspect he's trying to resurrect an extinct time line," David said. "We need to talk to Granddad as soon as we're home, as he encountered something similar in Morgoth's palace on Bluehaven."

Joel nodded.

"I think they want us inside," Cloe said, ushering them towards the door.

The town hall was packed to capacity, forcing David, Cam, Damon, Pip and Cloe to squeeze in along the far wall, while Joseph beckoned Joel forward onto the stage. With him, and dressed in the traditional light green trousers and dark green billowing shirt of non-clerical Delphinidae, was the galaxy's Supreme Councillor, Michael Chandler.

"Joel, I'm so pleased to see you alive and well," he said, shaking his hand. "You had us all worried for a while."

Joel nodded, not sure whether to thank him for his concern or apologise for making him worry.

Joseph stood, tapping the water glass in front of him. The hall hushed. "Thank you all for coming to celebrate our new-found freedom. Today marks a new beginning for the people of Ignus, a time for us to take control of our lives and fulfil our own destinies. To start the ball rolling, please join me in welcoming our Supreme Councillor, Michael Chandler."

Michael stood to what was clearly a half-hearted applause. "I know many of you are disappointed that my government and those of my predecessors have turned a blind eye to the activities of the mining companies here, and you have every right to be. *Out of sight, out of mind* is the phrase being used by those responsible for this galaxy's corporate governance, but that's no excuse for them or for me. As Supreme Councillor, the buck ultimately stops with me, but as much as I'd like to, I can't turn back the clock and undo the pain and suffering you've endured.

"What I can do, though, is announce today that the Galactic Council has voted unanimously to transfer all residential and rural

land titles held by the mining companies to their lessees, to take effect immediately, and to initiate the drafting of a planetary constitution for Ignus, establishing the Settlers' Association as the inaugural government of this world."

The assembly applauded with considerably more enthusiasm.

"Of course none of this would've happened without the heroic actions of the young man seated beside me, for it seems the mining companies' overlords bit off more than they could chew when they abducted him two months ago. The hardships he suffered would have broken a lesser man, while the riches he uncovered would have tempted even the most egalitarian of us. Though I've been told he wants nothing for himself other than a flight back to his home and wife on Earth, allow me, Joel, to present you with our galaxy's Medallion of Honour."

Everyone stood in acclamation as Michael hung the medallion around Joel's neck.

Joel blushed. "Thanks, really, this is the last thing I was expecting. You make me out to be some sort of saint, but I was just going with the flow, trying to make the most of a bad situation. I'm privileged to have been able to play a part in all this, but it was pure chance that put me in this position. The real honour should go to Bert, my late mentor in the sorting room, who made the original find and left the map for me."

He held the medal above his head. "Bert, this is for you."

Again the gathering stood in acclamation.

"I wish you all well in your newly found freedom and ask only that you avoid the temptation to create the same concentration of power that existed with the mining companies. Your freedom is precious; guard it with—"

Joel slumped, holding his hands against his face.

"What's wrong?" Joseph asked.

"They – they're here."

"Who are here?"

"The skin-walkers."

From the shadows at the back of the hall emerged four men dressed in animal skins, led by a now-familiar figure.

“What about the miners, Joel?” Dougall said, striding towards the front. “All this nonsense of giving the Tivinel scum their freedom has left us with nothing.”

From amongst the assembly, a dozen of the surly miners stood, making their way forward to accompany him.

Dougall turned to the gathered settlers. “All of you leave; our business is only with the Supreme Councillor and our escaped sorter.”

A woman screamed as people pushed and shoved their way towards the exit door.

“Let me through!” someone cried as fists began to fly.

“Wait!” Luke yelled. “Damn you all, wait! This is the first test for our new freedom and you run like cowards.”

“You bet!” someone said, pushing his way towards the exit.

“I knew this was too good to be true,” another muttered.

Within minutes the hall had emptied, save for Pip’s entourage and Luke’s family.

“So much for the illustrious free citizens of Ignus,” Dougall said, turning to Michael. “You might have second thoughts about your proposed constitution once you know who they really are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those Tivinel are telepaths; they can read our minds and control our thoughts. If it wasn’t for the skin-walkers, they’d be doing it right now, I’m sure.”

Michael looked at Luke. “Is this true?”

“Yes, but we’re touch telepaths, that’s all. We need physical contact and even then our powers are limited to just sharing feelings and emotions.”

Michael nodded. “I’m a Delphinidae and have similar powers.”

“He’s lying,” Dougall said. “How do you think they pulled off that share buying without telepathic coercion and collusion?”

“That was my doing and I don’t have any powers at all,” Joel said.

“That’s not what I’ve heard, but I’ll deal with you shortly. That ore you stole was supposed to have been mine, Joel. Didn’t Bert tell you to give anything orange to me?”

“Yes, but –”

“This is getting us nowhere,” Michael said. “From what I understand, the whole concept of ownership on this world is moot,

which is why I'm here proposing a new constitution. Is there something you and your thugs want, apart from settling petty scores?"

"Give him the list," one of the surly miners said. Dougall pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Michael.

"What's this?"

"A list of demands from the miners."

Michael skimmed through it. "Voluntary employment, fair pay, leave entitlements, protective equipment, representation on the board and so on. You do realise this is all part of the new shareholders' petition, don't you?"

"What petition?"

Luke smiled. "It's the basis of the new Articles of Association for the mining companies. Joel wanted spectrographs for the sorters to protect their eyesight, but we decided to go the whole hog and bring the miners' conditions of employment into line with those across the galaxy."

One of the surly miners turned towards Dougall. "But you said –"

"So I was wrong. You've got what you wanted, okay?"

The miners looked at each other, smiling for once.

"Is there anything more?" Michael asked. "I have a busy schedule, you know."

"Just one thing, Your Highness. I knew I should've recycled Joel the day he turned up at the mine, but I'm afraid my friendship with Bert made me too soft-hearted. Now it's time to make good that error of judgement." He turned to the skin-walkers. "Do it."

"No!" Willy yelled, pushing his way forward, but one of the miners grabbed him and shoved him into a seat while the others made sure no-one else could interfere.

The skin-walkers closed around Joel, each taking hold of a hand or foot. At once he felt their stinging gaze from inside his head, dissecting his thoughts and memories like knives through paper. As they tore at his mind, Joey Red Wolf's words came back to him – *your soul shines brightly in the spirit realm* – but his fraying consciousness turned them into something he'd once chanted in kindergarten: *your heart shines brightly, let it shine, let it shine; your heart shines brightly, let it shine...*

“LET IT SHINE!” Pedro yelled in his ear. *“They can see into your mind, right? So blind them!”*

“How?”

“Think of the happiest, most beautiful moment of your life. Focus on it, make it the centre of your being, blind them with your light.”

Joel searched through the fog enveloping him, trying to think of something, anything. His childhood teddy bear, the beach, chocolate ice cream; all pleasant memories but impotent against the darkness enshrouding him.

“Think, Joel,” Pedro said. *“Find something that’ll drive back the dark.”*

Images of more childhood pleasures flashed by, but his thoughts were too scrambled now, his consciousness too fragmented to think. The fog swirled through him, darkening, tearing, but from amongst the cloud of what had once been memories came a glimmer of light, a tiny star that was all but gone.

“Look, Joel, a shooting star!”

“Where?”

“You missed it, but I made a wish for you.”

“What did you wish for?”

“If I tell you, it won’t happen.”

He knew now, with absolute certainty, what her wish had been. *May you always find that star in even the darkest of times.*

The dream shifted, for it seemed to him now that he was dreaming. Dreams within dreams; in truth all things are the same...

“Maybe in the future you’ll be dreaming about this place and the beautiful sunrise we just witnessed,” Loraine said.

A sunrise – a morning in another life, sitting naked on a cold rock beside Loraine in the forest...

A kookaburra began its morning serenade, soon joined by several others of its clan.

“Hey, they’re laughing at us,” he said.

“They’re just envious, that’s all.”

“And so they should be.”

Away in the distance, the sea burst into orange fire as the sun’s disc crept over the horizon...

Joel focused on that light, letting it fill his senses as it radiated outwards – brighter, brighter, as bright as a thousand rising suns...

The fog vanished as the skin-walkers fell back, covering their faces in pain from the light, but for a moment Joel's mind remained connected, able to see what controlled them. He drew in a sharp breath, shattering the connection.

"Pip!" he cried. "I need you here, quickly."

Pip dashed to his side, closely followed by Damon and Cloe, while Dougall and the surly miners looked on in stunned confusion.

"There are things possessing these men, horrible things like giant slugs. They're inside Sheol, I'm sure; can you project us in there?"

"Yes, but are you sure you want to do this?"

"No, but I have to."

"All right then. Take hold of my hand."

Joel felt Pedro gripping his other hand as Pip's essence wrapped itself around them.

Pedro's trademark orange glow surrounded them as they stood facing each other in the chamber representing Ignus in the spirit realm of Sheol. Before them, writhing on the floor, were the four giant slugs, each a metre long and as thick as an elephant's trunk.

"What are they?" Joel asked.

"Very dangerous," Pedro said, pulling them a few steps back. "If they touch you, they'll devour your spirit."

"They're the things from behind the walls of Sheol, aren't they?" Pip said.

"Yes, but what I'd like to know is what they're doing out here."

"An excellent question," a voice said from behind them. Joel turned to see a man in a hooded cassock.

"Charon, thank heavens you're here," Pedro said.

"I saw a bright flash a few minutes ago and thought I'd come and investigate."

"That must have been me," Joel said.

"Really? You must be Joel – I hope you haven't come to ride my boat."

"No, sir, I asked Pip to bring me in here to deal with those things, but, um, now that I'm here I don't know what to do."

“Damn pests; the ogres used to eat them, you know, but now they’ve gone, this place is really going to the dogs. You wouldn’t believe the slime trails they leave behind.”

“In the physical world they call it ectoplasm,” Pedro said.

Joel screwed up his face. “Yuck, that’s gross. So what do we do with them?”

“I don’t think you need do anything with them,” Charon said. “They’re dead.”

Everyone turned to look at the slugs, which were now motionless. As they watched, their dry skins shrivelled up, turning to dust before their eyes.

“What killed them?”

“You did, Joel, with your light,” Pedro said.

“Gosh.”

“We’d best be getting back, then,” Pip said.

“Before you do, a word of advice. Be very careful about letting the Tivinel loose in your galaxy.”

“Why?”

“Best you ask Hamati.” With that, Charon turned and walked off into the darkness.

“Joel, take my hand,” Pip said.

Joel opened his eyes to find himself back in the town hall. At his feet lay the four skin-walkers; for a moment, he thought they too might be dead, until one of them moaned.

“Oh my head,” he said, sitting up and glancing around as the other three also recovered. Joel took a step back in case they might try to grab him again, but instead they focused their attention on Dougall.

“You bastard, it was you who let them put those things in us!”

The skin-walkers stood, circling around him.

“No, wait, it was the overlords who made me do it!”

“You slimy bastard! We should tear you limb from limb.”

Without warning, one of the skin-walkers lashed out, punching him in the side of the head. He stumbled, falling onto one of the seats vacated by the settlers.

“Wait!” Joel said as the skin-walkers moved in for the kill. “We need him alive.”

All four turned, bowing their heads. “Yes, master.”

“Oh blimey,” David said to Cam, earning himself a poke in the ribs from Cloe.

Joel ran his hands over his face and through his hair. “Tell me what happened.”

The skin-walkers pulled off their animal skins, throwing them on the floor in front of Dougall, before turning back to Joel.

“We were farmhands fresh out of school, working the fields near Etford on Bluehaven, young Delphinidae men without a care in the world, but one morning the rouseabout called us over to his shed where an overlord and his henchmen were waiting. We were drugged and the next thing we knew we were on the mine face at Lake Placid.

“At first Dougall seemed like the perfect boss; eager to show us the ropes, forgiving of our mistakes, even standing up for us when the other miners gave us flack. But all that changed when he took us out to a waiting spacecraft one night after dinner.

“He told us he had a special job for us, something only those with Delphinidae telepathy could do, so we went along willingly enough. We landed near an ancient ruin on Huntress, some sort of temple we were told, where more of the overlords were waiting.”

“I think I know the place,” Pip said. “Was it at the top of a mountain with an archway between two peaks?”

“Yes, that’s the place.”

David and Cam exchanged worried glances.

“So what happened?”

“We were told it was to be a training seminar, but it quickly became indoctrination into their religion of recycling and rebirth. That led to them having us project our spirits into Sheol, something only telepaths can do, which is why we were chosen I guess. It was done as a bit of a game, like holding your breath underwater, until they set those creatures onto us. After that, everything is a haze; I know we did terrible things, acting as a conduit for those slugs to suck out people’s souls, but we had no control over what we were doing. If Dougall said *jump*, we jumped.”

“Tell me about the overlords.”

“There’s not much to tell; they were pretty aloof and didn’t engage us in idle conversation, except, um, they had those strange feet like the settlers here.”

“That’s right,” Joel said. “Bert told me once that the overlords were Tivinel but they hated the settlers for some reason.”

“You didn’t hear them use any names, I don’t suppose?” Pip asked.

“No, but if anyone knows their names, *he* does.” The skin-walker pointed at Dougall.

“I’m not saying anything,” Dougall said. “It’d be more than my life is worth.”

“Which is pretty worthless around about now, you bastard.”

The skin-walkers started moving towards him again, but Joel held out his hand.

“Sorry, master.”

Joel looked at Luke. “So what do we do with him?”

Michael stood. “He needs to be placed into custody and handed over to Scott Davies’ investigative team. Maybe they can coerce him into talking.”

“At least tell them about the twisters, Dougall,” one of the skin-walkers said.

“What are twisters?” Michael asked.

An evil grin spread across Dougall’s face. “All right, then. I’m sure Joel will appreciate the black humour in this. Fractal ore comes in two polarisations, one with a right-handed twist and the other left-handed. Natural ore always has a fifty-fifty mix and before it can be used, the polarisations have to be separated. Occasionally, though, the sorters find pieces of ore that are entirely one polarisation. We tell them they’re old crystals that have been recycled through the volcanoes and re-emerged as new ore.”

“That’s right,” Joel said. “Bert told me it’s the only plausible explanation.”

“Bert could never think outside the square, but I expected more from you, Joel, I really did. We tell the sorters that the existence of twisters proves that the recycling of people through the volcanoes is real, their souls coming back as new people after passing through the

core. Even if they're not entirely convinced, it at least instills the seed of possibility the skin-walkers can exploit to milk their souls.

"The reality, though, is much more mundane. There's an industrial recycling plant on the other side of the volcano that processes worn-out machinery, including the occasional spacecraft. If they find a good-quality crystal in one of them, they secretly put it aside. One of the workers melts it down, throws in some aggregate and casts it to look like a piece of ore that's then put into the hopper for the sorters to find. The whole thing's a scam, you see, but they all swallow it hook, line and sinker."

Joel's blood started to boil. "You – you – how could you? How could you let Bert recycle himself knowing it was all a lie?" He stood, stepping towards Dougall with fists raised. "I ought to –"

"No, Joel," Pip said, blocking his way. "Hitting him won't bring Bert back and will only give his lawyers ammunition to use against us. At least the truth's out now and we can stop others from suffering a similar fate."

"He's right, master," the skin-walker said.

Joel turned. "Why do you keep calling me *master*?"

"You saved us from those creatures so we owe you a life debt. We're now your servants."

"Oh brother," David said, smirking, earning himself another poke in the ribs. "What?"

"No, um, you don't owe me anything," Joel said. "If you want to be of service, though, you might like to help Michael and his team of investigators bring the perpetrators of all this to justice."

"I'll make sure you get back to your families on Bluehaven," Michael said.

The skin-walkers glanced at each other, nodding. "Yes, thank you, we'll do everything we can to help as long as Dougall winds up behind bars."

"My people and I will make sure that happens."

Everyone turned towards a commotion at the door where a dozen or more townsfolk, all armed with machetes and axes, barged their way in.

"Where are they?" one of them yelled, looking around the hall before spying the pile of animal skins on the floor. "What happened?"

“Joel drove away the demons controlling them,” Luke said. “Put down your weapons before someone gets hurt.”

“Joel?”

“He’s now our master,” one of the skin-walkers said. “We owe him the life-debt.”

“What about him?” another of the townsfolk said, pointing his axe at Dougall. “We should chop off his arm and see how he likes it.”

“No,” Willy said, “he’s to be handed over to the police investigators.”

“Maybe just his fingers then. He won’t need them where he’s going.”

“No, you mustn’t touch him,” Michael said, “otherwise it could jeopardise the prosecution.”

“Spoil sport.”

“I need to speak to Joel,” one of the townsfolk said, still with his axe raised.

Joel took a step backwards, fearing he may be about to lose part of his anatomy, but the man blushed, lowering the weapon.

“Sorry. Look, you might not remember me, but I spoke at the meeting a couple of days ago about the gem dealers being left with a pile of worthless ore. I thought you’d like to know it hasn’t worked out that way.”

“Really?”

“Someone out there is still buying all the ore they can get and keeping the price up. The dealers are beside themselves, considering the margin they make on such sales.”

“That’s great news. Do you have any idea who the buyer is?”

“No, except it’s not the military or any of the big freight companies. Strange, isn’t it?”

“I think I might know,” Pip said, joining them. “I just had a call from Damien; he and Hamati are at an ancient temple on Huntress where it seems Tristan is up to some sort of mischief involving large amounts of intergalactic ore. Cloe and I are about to head back there to see what’s happening.”

A shiver ran up Joel’s spine as memories of his month of starvation flooded back. He blinked as the light seemed to waver for a moment. “Do, um, do you want me to come with you?”

“No, Joel, you’ve done more than enough already. Damon will take you back to Earth as soon as you’re ready to go.”

“What about us?” David said as he and Cam joined them.

“You should go with Joel, as you need to talk to your grandfather about that portal Tristan’s built.”

David nodded before turning to Cam. “Do you fancy a trip to Earth?”

“Yeah, why not? There’s nothing much else for me to do here.”

“It’s settled then, good.”

“Thanks again for all you’ve done,” Michael said, shaking Joel’s hand. “You’re an amazing young man, truly amazing.”

“Um, thanks. I hope everything goes well with the new constitution and government here.”

“I’m sure it will.”

“Master,” one of the skin-walkers said. “We’d like to go with Pip to Huntress as we’re familiar with the perils of that temple.”

Joel looked at Pip.

“Of course, I welcome your help.”

“Good luck,” Joel said, turning as Willy approached.

“I guess you’ll be going home now.”

“Yes, as soon as Damon’s ready. Will you be staying with your parents?”

“For the moment, yes. I won’t be going back to the mine, at any rate.”

“I don’t blame you.” Joel went to pull his wallet from his pocket before realising he didn’t have either. “If I had something to write on I’d give you my contact details.”

“Here,” Cam said, handing him a notebook and pen.

Joel carefully printed out both his and Loraine’s numbers. “One of those should find me, I hope.”

Willy wrote out his number while Joel held the pad for him. “This is my parents’ place, but you’ll need to add the ultranet prefix for Ignus, whatever that is now.”

“Okay, sure. Perhaps Loraine and I could come here for a holiday in a few years when everything’s settled down.”

“That’d be great, yes.” Willy wrapped himself around Joel, giving him a one-armed hug. “Thanks for everything, and I do mean *everything*. Are you sure you won’t take just one piece of ore?”

“No, that wouldn’t be right. One thing my father taught me was to always stand on my own two feet.”

“Your father sounds like a wonderful man.”

“Yes, and I think I’m only just starting to realise that.”

Michael took hold of Joel’s hand, leading him up to the podium. “Everyone, Joel is about to leave, but before he does we should give him a send-off to remember.”

He held Joel’s hand aloft as the room hushed.

“Hip-hip!”

“Hooray!”

“Hip-hip!”

“Hooray!”

“Hip-hip!”

“Hooray!”

“Safe travelling, Joel, and I hope the next time you visit our galaxy it’ll be under more pleasant circumstances.”

Joel waited for the applause to die down before stepping over to where Damon, Cam and David were waiting.

“All set?”

“Yep, I suppose so.”

“What are your plans once you’re back on Earth?” Cam asked Joel as they followed Damon outside to where his intergalactic cruiser was parked.

“Loraine and I want to finish our pilgrimage through France and Spain. We were doing the Paths of Saint James, following in the footsteps of the characters from a book Mum gave me for my thirteenth birthday.”

“Is that where you were kidnapped?”

“Yes, it was in the abbey in Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert.” A shiver ran up Joel’s spine as he stood before the cruiser, its appearance reminding him of Tristan’s ship that had been sitting on top of the abbey tower.

“You can give her a call as soon as we enter the transfer orbit,” Damon said.

“Yes, I will. How long will it take to get to Earth?”

“Thirty-six hours.”

Damon did a quick check of the craft before closing the hatch and engaging the real-space engine. Joel watched with mixed emotions as the landscape of Ignus expanded beneath them, the sight of the volcanoes once again reminding him of Bert.

“Are you okay?” David asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Damon passed him the handset. “You can make your call now.”

“Thanks.”

Joel punched in Loraine’s number, hoping it wasn’t the middle of the night where she was.

“Hello?”

“Hi Loraine, it’s me.”

“Joel! Where are you?”

“I’m on Damon’s ship and about to leave Ignus. We’ll be there in thirty-six hours.”

“That’s wonderful! I can hardly wait.”

“I’ll give you a call once we reach Earth orbit, then you can come and meet us at the spaceport, okay?”

“Yes, that’s fine, it’ll be early Thursday morning here.”

“Excellent, we can go and have breakfast at that café by the beach.”

“My stomach’s rumbling already. Safe travelling and I’ll see you soon. I love you, Joel.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

“All set?” Damon asked.

Joel took one last look at Ignus before Damon activated the subspace jump. In a flash of orange light, they were gone.

Homecoming

“Be careful, master,” one of the skin-walkers said as Joel walked out along the narrow spur towards the archway framed between two rocky spires. “This is a place of great evil.”

“Don’t worry, the hairs on the back of my neck are already standing at attention.”

Joel paused as he passed under the arch, taking in the ruined amphitheatre, the giant wheel at its base and, as his eyes adjusted to the dark, the small figure chained to it.

“Hamati!” Pip yelled, dashing past him as he ran down to the Barungi chieftain.

“Go back! You’re walking into –”

“A trap,” Tristan said, stepping out of the shadows. “I’ve finally found a use for these worthless Barungi; it seems they make wonderful bait.”

With a wave of his hand, a dozen hooded men stepped out, surrounding them.

“So nice of you to return, Joel; you know I’d almost given up on you.”

“Sorry, master,” one of the skin-walkers said. “We should’ve used the other way in.”

“No!” Joel yelled, almost falling out of bed.

David turned on the light. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s a trap!”

“What’s a trap?”

“We have to warn Pip and the others.”

“We can’t,” Cam said. “We have no communications while we’re in intergalactic subspace, is that right, Davo?”

“We have to turn back then!”

"I don't think we can do that either," David said. "Once our course is locked in, that's it; there are no navigation beacons out in intergalactic space."

"Damn!"

"What's all the commotion?" Damon asked as he stepped into the sleeping quarters.

"Joel had a bad dream," David said.

"It was more than that, more vivid, like a premonition or something."

"Tell us what happened."

"It was weird, like I'd gone with Pip, Cloe and the skin-walkers instead of being here, but when we landed on Huntress, Hamati was chained to a huge wheel in a ruined temple and we were trapped by Tristan."

"A wheel?" David asked. "How'd you know about the wheel?"

"It was in the dream, that's all."

Cam crept closer. "You don't think –"

"I don't know what to think."

Joel furrowed his brow. "How can I have a premonition of being somewhere I didn't go?"

David grinned. "With you, Joel, anything's possible."

"Ha ha."

"It's still another day before we reach Earth," Damon said, "but as soon as we do I'll call Pip and make sure he's okay."

"Thanks."

"As long as you're all awake, you can come and have breakfast."

Joel followed the others out to the galley, but gasped, suddenly unable to breathe, when he saw the four covered plates on the table.

"Choose one or forfeit this round," Tristan's voice echoed through his mind.

"No," he squeaked, before his vision sparkled and he found himself face down on the floor.

"Use your ability, Joel. Choose the correct plate – choose it – use it – use it or lose it."

"We should've used the other way in."

"What other way in?"

"Joel? Are you okay?"

Joel drew in a sharp breath as the ship coalesced around him. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“Gosh. It, um, it was the plate covers – for a moment I thought I was back on Tristan’s ship.”

“Sorry,” Damon said, lifting the covers to reveal four settings of scrambled eggs on toast. “I didn’t want them getting cold.”

“Sip this,” Cam said, handing Joel a glass of water.

“*Slowly or you’ll barf it all up,*” Pedro’s voice whispered from his subconscious.

“Once you’re back home you should talk to a counsellor,” Damon said. “I think your ordeal has scarred you more than you realise.”

Joel wiped his brow which felt cold and clammy. “You might be right.”

“Come and get some food into you,” David said.

Joel eased himself up, taking deep breaths. For a moment his vision sparkled again before settling. He drained the rest of the glass while stepping over to the table. “Those eggs smell nice.”

“Dig in.”

Joel chuckled. “You don’t have any wild berries and yams, do you?”

“No, why?”

“Loraine reckons that’s what nature boys should live off; it became something of a standing joke between us.” Joel shivered. “How did Tristan know about that? We were out in the middle of nowhere when she said it.”

“You said you thought he was a Tivinel, and we know from Luke that Tivinel are telepathic.”

“But they’re only touch telepaths.”

“Bah,” Damon said. “The difference between touch telepaths and the others is mostly academic. Anyone with telepathic ability can extend their range with the right training.”

“Oh, I see. Perhaps, yes, he sat on the beach with Loraine while I was washing the chemicals off in the surf.”

“Chemicals?”

“I was cleaning the mud off my chest in a fountain, but the policeman said there were chemicals in the water.”

David rolled his eyes. “I won’t ask how you got mud on your chest.”

“I fell over while climbing out of the river.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Let him finish,” Damon said.

“Thanks. It was just after he spoke to Loraine that we found the restaurant serving wild berries and yams for dessert.”

“Yams for dessert?”

“They reckoned it was a typo and should’ve been jams. But, um how’d he guide me to the restaurant? It was like I’d been there before – Loraine called it *déjà vu* or something.”

“Was it in a busy street?”

“Yes, there were people everywhere.”

“You can bet he was one of those people, probably hiding in the shadows on the other side of the road. You were unsuspecting so it would’ve been easy for him to plant that suggestion into your subconscious.”

Joel nodded. “So why –”

“No more questions or our breakfast will go cold. David and Cam have finished theirs already.”

“Sorry.”

* * *

Joel put down the magazine he’d been reading. “Are we there yet?”

Damon shook his head. “No.”

“What time would it be where Loraine is?”

“About half an hour later than the last time you asked.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, Joel,” Cam said. “I’ll make you some hot chocolate and then you should try to get some sleep.”

“Thanks.”

Joel followed him through to the galley. This time there were no plate covers on the table to mess with his head. “What part of the galaxy are you from, Cam?”

“Me? I’m from Hazler. My parents run a chain of cafés in the city of Oswald.”

“I’ve never been there. What’s it like?”

“Capitalism on steroids; they say if you can’t buy it on Hazler then it doesn’t exist. It’s all about business and anything goes as long as you can make a buck out of it, but if you can’t make a buck you starve.”

Joel grimaced. “I know what it’s like to starve to death and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“That’s okay, you weren’t to know. You don’t sound like you found it very appealing there.”

“No, I’m cut from a different cloth, it seems, which is why I’m studying – I mean was studying – theoretical physics on Cornipus.”

“I’d like to go to university, but I don’t have the brains for all that theoretical stuff.”

“What are you interested in?”

“Everyone says I’m a nature boy, so something to do with nature and ecosystems, I suppose. Perhaps I could become a park ranger or a naturalist or something.”

Cam nodded. “If that’s where your heart is, go for it.”

“I have to wait until Loraine decides what she wants to do.”

“You don’t have to do the same thing as her, you know.”

“Yes, but we should at least try to go to the same university. It’d make married life a tad difficult if we were living on different planets.”

“I see, yes.”

“How’d you end up as David’s room-mate?”

“It was just the luck of the draw. When I found out I’d be rooming with the son of the Delphinidae High Priestess, I was terrified he’d be dressed in fine robes and life would be one long sermon, but, um, it seems he’s cut from a different cloth too.”

Joel laughed. “I can’t imagine David as a preacher, and as for the fine robes, well I guess you know he’s a naturist at heart.”

“It’s a bit hard not to notice, although at the university he just blends in with the crowd.”

“That’s why he chose to study on Cornipus rather than somewhere closer to home.” Joel took a sip of hot chocolate. “This is really nice.”

“It’s a special blend of cocoa my parents use in their cafés. It has a soothing effect that’ll help you get a good night’s sleep before we arrive.”

“I hope so; these last few days it’s all been catching up with me.”

“Yes, we’ve noticed. I know it’s easy to say, but just try to put it all behind you and focus on the happy days ahead.”

“All right.”

Joel closed his eyes, letting his mind drift back to the start of his honeymoon, remembering the tranquil field with a harvester chugging away in the distance. A life on such a farm under the summer sun wouldn’t be half bad, he thought, as he drifted into a deep and restful sleep. His dreams, when they began, started innocently enough with their swim beside the *Pont du Diable*, the Devil’s bridge.

They should rename it Tristan’s Bridge, he thought, almost waking then, but the dream wasn’t about to let go that easily.

After their swim, they sat on the bank eating oranges while the hot wind quickly dried their skin.

The road north climbed up the side of the gorge, narrowing as it ascended. On the right, a broad stone parapet separated it from the sheer cliff dropping away to the stream below.

“Bugger this gravelly bitumen,” Loraine said as a car sped by, horn blaring and forcing them to the side. “I’m going to walk on the parapet.”

“Um, do you think that’s wise?”

“Don’t worry; I won’t fall.”

“I’ll stay on the road; I don’t have a head for heights.”

“Yes, I know.”

Joel looked northwards. “Those clouds are thickening up and moving this way. Do you think it might rain?”

“I hope so. I love walking in the rain.”

“Yeah, me too, as long as it doesn’t hail.”

One of the clouds, having broken away from of the pack, passed across the sun, plunging them into a gloomy darkness for a moment.

At the same time, the wind dropped to almost nothing. Joel shivered in spite of the heat.

"I wouldn't want to be caught in a hail storm," Loraine said, "it could be –"

A sudden gust of wind, the leading edge of the cold front moving down from the north-west, hit them, throwing Loraine slightly off balance. She moved her foot onto the edge of the parapet, but the stone, loosened by centuries of weathering, gave way beneath her.

Joel dashed forward, reaching out to grab her hand. For a moment he had hold of her, but another gust hit, causing his fingers to slip off hers. In one terrifying moment, she toppled over, disappearing down into the gorge.

"Loraine!" Joel screamed, clambering onto the parapet and looking over, hoping there was a ledge or something to break her fall, but there wasn't. Far below, his wife lay spread-eagled over the rocks on the side of the stream, a pool of blood growing beneath her.

A man came running up the hill behind him. "Oh my God, what happened? Is she hurt?"

Joel turned, finding himself face to face with Tristan who was already whipping out his phone.

"I'll call the ambulance."

"I – I think it's too late."

Joel covered his face, but a moment later a siren approached. When he lowered his hands, two policemen were staring at him.

"What happened here?"

"I saw it all," Tristan said before Joel could respond. "His wife was walking along the parapet after complaining about being forced to the side of the road by the traffic. An argument started, though, becoming more heated until Joel pushed her off the edge."

"No!" Joel yelled. "No way! It was a wind gust and a loose rock. I didn't push her, I'd never push her."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have to place you under arrest for the murder of your wife. You don't have to say anything, but anything you do say may be taken down and used in evidence."

"But I didn't do anything!"

The other policeman stepped forward, pushing a mobile guillotine. "You're also guilty of bathing in a contaminated fountain, are you not?"

"What?"

"The penalty for that is death by decapitation."

The policemen grabbed him by the shoulders, pushing his neck into place before lowering and securing the lunette.

"Don't worry, sir, this will only take a moment of your time."

"You disappoint me, Joel," Tristan said as the blade began to fall.

"You should've used the other way in."

"WHAT OTHER WAY IN?" Joel shouted.

David turned on the light. "Are you okay?"

"I'm glad I'm not rooming with you, Joel," Cam said. "At least Davo doesn't yell in his sleep."

"Sorry."

Damon opened the door. "Another bad dream?"

"Tristan accused me of murdering Loraine and then the French police guillotined me for washing in that stupid fountain."

"I'll hand it to you, Joel," David said. "You don't do anything by halves."

Damon shook his head, sighing. "We'll be arriving at Earth shortly. Do you want a quick breakfast?"

"No," Joel said. "Loraine's taking us to a café at the beach where we can watch the sunrise."

David looked at Cam. "How romantic."

"Come on out to the cockpit, then," Damon said. "We'll be emerging from subspace in about twenty minutes."

Joel sat in the co-pilot's seat, his eyes glued to the console's countdown display, watching as the minutes finally became seconds. With a flash of orange light, sunshine filled the cockpit, while below them rotated Earth's oceans and continents.

Damon glanced back and forth across the panels, flicking switches and pushing buttons.

"What's wrong?" Cam asked.

“Something’s happened to our navigation and communications systems. We’re not receiving any signals.”

“I feel strange,” David said, his voice barely more than a rasping whisper. “It’s like I’m really someone else – Daku.”

As they watched in horror, his skin hardened while fading to a dull beige. Thousands of tiny cracks appeared across his body before it crumbled into a pile of dust, scattering and disappearing as it touched the floor.

Cam stared open-mouthed at the empty space left behind by his room-mate and best friend. “*A great change has befallen us,*” he whispered, “*and all that once was has been lost.*”

All That Once Was

“Who’s Daku?” Joel asked as the shock of what had happened wore off.

Cam rubbed his hands over his face, trying to steel himself. “It was a dream Davo’s been having almost every night for several weeks. In it, his name was Daku and he belonged to a primitive culture on Earth, living in a cave with his great-grandfather. Daku had in turn been dreaming of our reality, but the old man said that a great change had befallen them and all that once was had been lost.”

Damon scratched his head. “So, um, do you think David has actually become this Daku?”

Cam shrugged, tears now running down his cheeks.

“There was something in that book Peter Thorpe wrote,” Joel said, “the one called *The Course of History*. You wouldn’t have it in the ship’s database, would you?”

“No, but I can go one better than that. Peter gave me a signed first edition that I’ve kept in my quarters somewhere. Let me go find it.”

Joel put his hand on Cam’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, his turning to dust like that just means he’s somewhere else in this reality, down there in that cave with his great-grandfather if my guess is correct.”

“But how will we find him?”

“That’s why I need Peter’s book.”

Damon dashed back in, handing the precious volume to Joel.

“Thanks; I think it’s in the chapter called *Poles Apart*.”

I looked across at Billy and he was staring vacantly into space. Then he must have noticed me watching him, for he turned towards me, scratched his head and shook it wildly as if to clear away the cobwebs inside.

“This probably sounds crazy,” he said, “but for just a moment I thought I was a different person, or at least a different version of me.

It's as if my fourteen-year-old self and that eleven-year-old self are now sharing my body."

"Exactly," Tom said. "From the moment of the car crash, the flow of time on Earth must have split into two different streams. One of those is the reality you both know, but in the other stream the house burned down and Billy flipped across to here. Now since the laws of the universe presumably don't allow there to be an eleven-year-old and a fourteen-year-old Billy walking around together and shaking hands with each other, what we're in now over here must be yet another time line, a composite if you like of the other two."

"The same thing's happened to David," Joel said. "He and Daku can't be walking around together and shaking hands with each other, so they've merged into a single being."

"But why didn't it happen to us?" Cam asked.

Joel scratched his chin. "Maybe, um, maybe we don't exist in this time line."

"That's a scary thought."

"But he's probably right," Damon said.

"So what do we do now?"

"We need to find Daku."

"Davo told me that, in his dream, they were in a cave near where the town of Narrabri used to be."

Joel's face lit up. "There was a cave connected to that time nexus where we found Jim and Pedro a few years back. David called it the Emu Cave; it was a sacred place for his people."

"That sounds like it," Cam said. "The only question is, how do we find it?"

"I have a full set of topographic maps in the ship's navigation system," Damon said, "but since we don't have any satellites or beacons we'll have to rely on dead reckoning from any landmarks we can spot."

"Mount Kaputar would be a good starting place," Joel said. "It's not far from Narrabri and is the highest point for hundreds of kilometres, but we'll need a way to take bearings. Do you have a compass?"

"A what?"

Joel shook his head. "Something with a magnetic needle that shows direction."

"Huh?"

"Earth's magnetic field is aligned roughly north-south, so a compass needle will always point north. My grandfather once showed me how to make one; do you have something iron or steel we could use as a pointer?"

Damon opened the tool kit under the console. "How about a nail?"

"Perfect; now I just need a way of magnetising it. Do you have anything magnetic?"

"There are magnetic latches on the galley cupboards, but I don't see how —"

"I'll show you."

Joel dashed out to the galley, nail in hand, and opened the nearest cupboard. "You just rub it along the magnet, going in the same direction each time."

Damon and Cam watched on in awe as Joel went to work.

"That should do it. Do you have a small bit of steel I can test it with, like a paperclip or something?"

Damon rummaged through the drawers, eventually finding some steel wool.

"That'll do; break a bit off and I'll see if the nail can pick it up."

"Woo-hoo!" Cam said as the steel wool clung to the nail like a long lost brother.

Joel stared at him. "You mean you've never done this?"

"No, we have navigation satellites and subspace beacons to find our way around."

Joel sighed. "Too much technology; just as well I'm a nature boy. Right, I need a bowl of water and something that'll float, like the top off a bottle."

"Easy," Damon said.

"Now we put the nail on the bottle top, float it on the water and, *voila*, it points north-south."

"Amazing, but how do we know which end is north?"

"That's easy, we just have to look at the shape of the land. The pointy bit at the top of Australia is north."

Damon went back to the map display. "There's Mount Kaputar, so where's this cave?"

"South-west, in an area called the Pilliga."

"Okay, I've found Pilliga, so can you be a bit more specific?"

Joel stared at the map. "How about there where it says *Emu Cave*?"

"I suppose there's a fair chance that might be it."

"What's the bearing and distance from Mount Kaputar?"

Damon placed a couple of markers on his map. "It says eighty-three kilometres at two hundred and twenty degrees."

"Let's go then."

Cam and Joel strapped themselves in while Damon engaged the reverse thrusters, sending the ship down towards the planet below.

Damon landed on a rocky ledge where a babbling stream splashed down into a pool. Beyond it, at the base of a small cliff, was the cave.

"There's nobody here," Cam said.

"Let's go take a look," Damon said, opening the hatch.

Joel led them down a scramble of rocks and through the scrub along the edge of the pool.

"There are Aboriginal paintings on the walls of the cave," Damon said, "and it looks like there've been campfires here, but nothing very recent."

"It's a sacred site, not a residence," Joel said, snapping his fingers. "They hold their corroborees here, that's all."

"Davo said that in his dream, he could look down over the river to where Narrabri used to be, but I can't see any river from here."

"It must be a different cave. Damn!"

"There was something else in Peter's book," Damon said.

He began flicking through it once they'd returned to the ship. "Here it is."

Billy looked around and then beckoned me to follow him. We walked back through the undergrowth between the cliff face and the creek. There was absolutely no trace of the fire trail we'd walked down only minutes before. In a while the cliff face flattened out and

we climbed to the top of the ridge. I knew that from right at the top we could look down over Narrabri.

When we finally reached the top I looked over the other side and almost screamed. There were no buildings or roads, only more forest as far as the eye could see. Billy pulled me back down and we sat on a rock. I was very close to losing it, but he just sat there looking into my eyes and holding my hands.

"It's okay, Peter. Really, it's okay. Trust me."

Slowly I calmed down. Billy was my best friend and I'd trust my life with him. I shuddered when I thought this might very well be the case now, but I took a deep breath and steadied myself.

"Come with me if you're okay now," he said. "It's not far."

"What isn't?" I asked rather defiantly, but he shushed me and didn't answer.

We walked a short way along the ridge top and then descended under an overhang. There were some Aboriginal paintings on the rock and as I looked closely at them I could tell they were fairly recent. Billy looked at them for a moment and nodded.

"Any thoughts, Joel?"

Joel looked at the map. "It must be close to Narrabri, and the only ridge that makes sense is this one here. Let's go take a look."

Damon worked out the bearing and distance while the others strapped themselves in. "Look for a place where the river breaks up into a series of billabongs, which will be roughly where Narrabri was, then the ridge should be just to the north-east of there."

Damon flew at about five hundred metres above the ground while Joel and Cam scanned the landscape below. "We should be just about over it now."

Joel pointed out to the right. "Look, is that smoke over there?"

"Yes, and it's coming from the top of that ridge where someone's jumping up and down waving at us."

"That was easy," Cam said as Damon tried to find a big enough rock ledge to land on.

“Daku, at your service,” the young Aboriginal man said as they opened the hatch. Cam dashed out, wrapping him in a hug, followed by Joel and Damon.

“We thought we’d lost you,” Cam said once they’d separated.

“You have; I’m Daku now, not David, but I have his memories. Weird, isn’t it?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come and I’ll introduce you to Warrain; he knows a lot more about this stuff than I do.” He dashed back up towards the overhang, dancing through the scrub with practised ease.

To Joel, he looked the spitting image of David, surprising since his mother in this reality couldn’t have been Lorina. The only thing that struck him as different was his voice; in the course of his schooling he’d met people who’d been raised in predominantly Aboriginal communities and, although Daku had been speaking the Meridian common tongue rather than English, he sounded exactly like that.

He remembered Peter Thorpe once telling him that, in time cusps, the universe only changes the bits that have to be different and leaves everything else the same, but how that might apply in this case where entire civilisations had been wiped out was at best unclear. Small wonder he wanted to be a naturalist rather than a physicist.

They emerged from the scrub to find themselves standing before a campfire amongst dozens of Aboriginal people, who parted as Daku led an elderly man through.

“This is my great-grandfather Warrain.”

“Damon, Joel, I’m so glad you’re here,” Warrain said in English, his Aboriginal inflection even more apparent than Daku’s. “It seems I’ve spent a lifetime waiting for this moment.”

“Billy?” Joel asked.

“That was my name, yes, before the universe unravelled. I have memories of my life here amongst the Kamilaroi, as well as of my life as Billy Collins, until yesterday. Now I’m only Warrain.”

“Come join us for breakfast,” Daku said, handing them each a piece of eucalypt bark.

Damon looked at it. “Do we eat this?”

“No, silly, it’s a plate. Take some *gubiyaay* from over near the fire.”

“What’s that?”

“You’d call it a sweet yam, I suppose. There are wild berries as well.”

“Wild berries and yams,” Joel said, feeling like he’d just been turned inside out.

Warrain looked at him. “What’s wrong, Joel?”

“It’s nature boy food.”

“Oh yes, I remember Loraine saying something about that.”

“Loraine – where’s Loraine?”

“Daku’s an only child; I fear she no longer exists.”

Cam grabbed Joel as his knees buckled, saving him from falling face-first onto the rock. “What did he say? I don’t understand your language.”

“Loraine – my wife – she doesn’t exist anymore.”

“But – but you can’t be sure of that, can you?”

“I don’t have a sister here,” Daku said. “Apart from Warrain, nobody else has any recollection of her.”

Warrain nodded. “When I was a boy, Elko planted his *Seed of Remembrance* in me, allowing me to recall what happened in time cusps. It was a ploy to ensure Peter and I could find each other after the cusp in which we first met had ended.”

“So how come we remember?”

“You three, and the part of Daku that was once David, were in intergalactic subspace when the dominant time line changed, so you were protected.”

“I’m a singlet, um, single-ton,” Joel said. “Damn, I wish could say that properly!”

“What’s a singleton?” Cam asked.

“Peter said I can only exist in one time line at a time, so I experience them sequentially.”

“My dad was also a singleton,” Daku said, “but, um, why isn’t he here?”

Warrain smiled. “That must mean this time line isn’t yet permanent. We need to find a way to tip the balance back to the other one.”

“Sometimes I can go back and change things,” Joel said. “I think I should’ve gone to Huntress with Pip and Cloe instead of coming here,

but I don't know how to do it. It just happens by itself sometimes – we need to find Peter if he exists in this reality.”

“Yes, he exists,” Warrain said. “A few weeks back, in that other reality, an Eridanian Tivinel warned us that one of his kin was plotting the mother of all time cusps. In the vision he gave us of this time line, Peter was in England somewhere near Stonehenge.”

“What's this stone thing we're looking for?” Damon asked as they descended over the south coast of England.

“Stonehenge,” Joel said. “It's an ancient monument built by the Celts which supposedly has astronomical significance.”

“It'd be right up Peter's alley, then,” Warrain said.

“It should be marked on your map, Damon.” Joel squeezed over in front of the navigation screen, trying to remember the relevant school geography lessons. “It's somewhere in the south of England I think, about midway across – yes, there it is.”

Damon stared out the window. “We're coming in over the south coast; what landmarks do I use to find it?”

“Can you see the Isle of Wight?”

“The Isle of *which*?”

“No, Wight. It's roughly diamond-shaped, with a long narrow inlet on the mainland heading north-west from the top of the diamond.”

“No, wait, yes, I think I can see what you mean.”

“Head straight up that inlet and keep going for about fifty kilometres.”

“Okay, I'm on it now. So what's this henge thing look like?”

“It's a circle of standing stones, although some are missing and others have fallen over.”

“That doesn't help much.”

“You fly and I'll look, okay?”

“What's that over there?” Cam asked, pointing slightly to the left where the setting sun glinted off something reflective.

“Nah, it's – no, wait – what the hell?”

The Stonehenge they approached looked nothing like what Joel remembered from his textbooks. Not only was the circle complete, with all the stones vertical and the lintels in place, but across the top

on a wooden platform perched what was unmistakably an optical telescope.

“Not quite the primitive pagan culture we were expecting, is it?” Daku said.

Warrain chuckled. “It looks like Peter’s certainly in his element here.”

Damon landed the ship just outside the earthen embankment surrounding the monument. Within the enclosure were many tents arranged in what appeared to be a village market.

Warrain stepped from the hatch to find himself facing an elderly man dressed in tan trousers and a yellow tunic made from a coarse home-spun cloth. “Peter?”

“Here they call me Pryderi, but yes, that was once my name.”

“All that once was has been lost.”

“Yes, except for this ship it seems. Joel, Damon, you’re a sight for sore eyes.” A tear ran down Pryderi’s cheek.

“So what’s with the telescope?” Joel asked. “We weren’t expecting anything much more than hunters and gatherers here.”

“Yes, it’s a beauty, isn’t it?” Pryderi said, leading them towards the ring of stones. “It’s a two metre reflector on an equatorial mount driven by an intriguing clockwork mechanism of belts and pulleys.”

“How was it made?” Warrain asked. “We saw nothing but forests and fields as we were flying in from the coast.”

“No, we didn’t make it; it was a gift from the god-king.”

“The what?”

“Our lord, ruler and arch-deity; he calls himself Tristan the Omniscient.”

Joel felt his knees starting to buckle again, prompting Cam and Daku to each grab an arm. “T-Tristan?”

“Yes, he’s the lord of the universe and can see into the future; he foretold of your arrival today and so it has come to pass.”

Pryderi pulled aside the flap on a tent alongside the nearest standing stone. Within, a man dressed in a scarlet robe lined with white fur stood as they entered.

“Your Highness, may I present Warrain and his party.”

“I’ve been expecting you,” Tristan said, “and of course young Joel who’s caused me so much grief. But fear not, for you’ve unwittingly played right into my hands.”

A sea of conflicting emotions swirled through Joel; the little boy inside him, still strong in spite of his two month ordeal, wanted to just curl up and bawl his eyes out, while the angry teenager clenched his fist in preparation for bloodying Tristan’s nose. He screwed his eyes shut, with every muscle tensed ready to strike, as Tristan continued to ramble.

“My grandmother discovered a genetic thread in our family, something which, in a different flow of time, could have made me Pasha, the Tivinel lord of the universe. You were to have found that thread for me, using your powers to test each time line, but no, I had to use technology instead, spending the family fortune on your bloody fractal ore to build my machine.

“I succeeded, as you can see, except for one small oversight; there’s Earthling blood in my makeup, so for me to exist at all I needed to find a time line in which my ancestors came from Huntress to this planet. Unfortunately their ship is unserviceable; indeed all I could salvage from it was that stupid telescope, so I’m trapped on this primitive planet with no way to return to my subjects back home.

“Now, though, you’ve solved that problem by bringing me your ship. You once stole a shuttle from me, Joel, so you see I’m simply settling that debt.”

Without thinking, Joel raised his fist, taking aim at the big fat ugly nose in the middle of Tristan’s big fat ugly face.

“Go on, Joel; hit me if that’ll make you feel better. I dare you, I DARE YOU!”

Joel took a deep breath, but a tiny voice, a familiar voice, spoke up inside his head. *Don’t play into his hands*, his father said, *don’t give him the satisfaction*.

Listen to your father, his grandfather now said. *Be calm, be at peace and say nothing, absolutely nothing. You can beat him, Joel, but only if you block him out.*

“Come on, Joel, put up your fists; let’s settle this man to man.”

Joel lowered his gaze, staring down at his feet and wiggling his toes as a gentle smile spread across his face. In his mind’s eye he

could see the waterhole on Dead Cow Creek where he and Loraine had first made love. *That's right*, his grandfather said, *take hold of that memory and don't let go.*

Don't let go, his father said. *Those memories are your true strength.*

"How dare you just stand there with that silly grin on your face?" Tristan yelled, looking like he was about to explode. "Don't you know you've lost everything? In case you haven't figured it out yet, your lovely wife doesn't exist anymore. She doesn't exist, Joel, she was never even born; how does that make you feel, huh?"

She exists in that memory, his grandfather said, *and you can bring her back, bring everyone back, if you hold on and don't let go.*

Joel continued to smile and wiggle his toes, his mind fully immersed in the waterhole.

"Oh go hump a ferret," Tristan yelled, turning and barging out of the tent. Joel led the others behind him, still smiling gently as Tristan bounded onto their ship, slammed the hatch and took to the sky.

"Not good," Cam said. "Why didn't you thump him when you had the chance?"

"Hush," Pryderi said. "Joel knows what he's doing."

"Do I?"

"Of course; come and I'll introduce you to someone you once knew."

He led them around to the other side of the standing stones, where an elderly man stood preparing a meal over an open fire.

"Cory, they're here."

Joel stared at him. "Granddad?"

"Oh my, Joel," Cory said, wrapping him in a hug. "You've certainly grown since I last saw you."

"H-how is it you're alive?"

"I guess the food in this time line is healthier. I'm a singleton like you, Joel, and experienced my other life before arriving here. It's strange, as although I have memories going back to when I was a youngster here, it feels like I only really came alive yesterday."

"That's when Tristan caused our time line to end," Damon said.

"That's right, and only Joel can go back and set things right."

Joel grimaced. "But how? Tristan took our ship."

“Shucks, Joel, you don’t need a ship.”

“But –”

“Perhaps I can help you, but you must understand one thing.”

Joel ran his hands over his face, trying his hardest not to burst into tears. “You – you’ll go back to being dead if I succeed.”

Cory nodded.

“I can’t, no way!”

“You must, Joel; remember that’s how it was meant to be. I had a wonderful life and a few extra years of old age doesn’t matter in the great scheme of things. You have your whole life ahead of you; Peter – I mean Pryderi – told me you’re married now.”

“I don’t care about me –”

Cory raised his hands. “I know you’re not selfish, so think of all the other lives snuffed out by that madman. Only you have the power to set things right.”

“But I don’t want that stupid power! Why me?”

“I asked myself the same question so many times it’s not funny. There is no *why*; some things just are.”

Joel sighed. “All right, but how do I do it? I can’t control this singlet thing I have; damn, I can’t even *say* it.”

Cory smiled. “Tell me about the *singlet* moments you’ve had.”

“The first one was when Loraine fell off the parapet on the way up to Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert and died on the rocks below.”

“How did you feel when that happened?”

“I was devastated, of course. What did you expect?”

“No, I mean what thoughts ran through your head, do you remember?”

“It was like our whole life together played back in reverse, right to the time I first saw her running up from the beach with her hair spraying water like a halo around her. Then it was like this loneliness monster from my childhood had come back and swallowed me whole.”

“I see. What about the second time?”

“That was when I saved Tristan’s ship from being hit by an asteroid.”

“You what?” Damon said. “If you’d let it be destroyed, none of this would’ve happened.”

“I didn’t know what he was up to at the time; otherwise I’d have kept my mouth shut and just died with the rest of them.”

“What do you mean? You were on his ship?”

“Yes, it was when he kidnapped me.”

“Oh, right, I didn’t mean –”

“No, it’s okay, but you’re right, if I’d known what he was plotting I’d have sacrificed myself.”

“Had you been thinking about saving yourself?” Cory asked.

“No, it all happened so fast I didn’t have time to think. The hull blew out and everything depressurised in a matter of seconds; all I felt was pain and a bright light.”

“What was the third time?” Cory asked.

“That would’ve been when the skin-walkers took Willy and threw him into the volcano. Again it all happened so fast I didn’t have time to think; there was a shower of sparks when he hit the lava which grew brighter and brighter until everything was white.”

“Have there been any other occasions?”

“No, wait, yes. When we were selling the fractal ore, the gem shop we went to had skin-walkers waiting for us and they stole Willy’s soul. Also I think what I’m in now is another one, as I should’ve gone to Huntress with Pip instead of coming here, but I can’t find a way to go back to the start.”

Cory nodded. “My experience has been much the same, with them occurring at critical moments in my life. Pete – Pryderi – will remember the one I had when we first met in Avalon, and there were others, too, including the time I first met Rebecca Gosling.”

“She was Tristan’s grandmother,” Pryderi said.

“Really? That explains a lot.”

“So how do I get back?” Joel asked.

“I think what you need is a point of no return, like Loraine’s death, the depressurising ship and the things that happened to your friend.”

“You mean one of us has to die?”

“Perhaps not, but that does seem likely, doesn’t it?”

“No – I can’t – what if you’re wrong?”

Cory shrugged.

Joel grimaced, rubbing his hands over his face. “If anyone has to die, it must be me.”

“No way, Joel!” Daku said, instantly at his side and with his arm around his shoulder. “No way.”

Pryderi exchanged glances with Warrain. “I think that’s the only option. Joel is the conduit between time lines and death is the absolute point of no return.”

Cam wrapped his arms around both Joel and Daku, hugging them tightly. “This is your call, Joel.”

Joel closed his eyes, seeing once more the waterhole on Dead Cow Creek and Loraine lying next to him on the sun-warmed rock. *Hold onto that memory; you can bring her back, bring everyone back, if you hold on and don’t let go.* In an instant he knew what he had to do.

“Is there a waterhole nearby, somewhere deep enough to swim in?”

Pryderi stroked his chin. “There’s the grotto, but –”

“Sounds perfect; how far away is it?”

“About half a kilometre.”

“What’s the *but*?” Warrain asked.

“It’s our fresh water supply and swimming is prohibited.”

Joel shook his head. “Let’s be outlaws then.”

Pryderi led them downhill towards the valley in the south-east.

“This is beautiful,” Daku said as they emerged from the scrub surrounding the grotto.

“Yes it is,” Pryderi said, “and totally unspoiled in this reality.”

Joel looked around. Amongst a pile of boulders embedded into the hillside, a stream emerged from a cave, forming a deep pool before cascading down into the valley. He stared at the rock, wondering if what he was seeing could possibly be real.

“What is it, Joel?” Cam asked, staring at him.

“I know it sounds like a crazy long-shot, but I think this rock around the cave entrance might be fractal ore.”

“Can you be sure?”

“If I had a grinding wheel and an ultraviolet light I could be, but I doubt I’ll find either of those here.”

“Fractal ore is actually quite common on Earth,” Pryderi said, “or at least the lower grades are.”

“So what does it mean?” Cam asked.

“This could become a gateway, a bridge between time lines.”

Joel nodded. “Tristan said that because he couldn’t use my powers, he had to make a machine with heaps of fractal ore to do his dirty work.”

“You’ll need something to excite the crystals, though,” Warrain said, “like an electric current or ionising radiation.”

Cory climbed onto the rocks. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but this looks like quartz embedded with the igneous ore.”

“So?”

“A long time ago in another life I was an electronics engineer. Quartz is piezoelectric.”

“What does that mean?”

“Stresses in the crystal produce charge separation which can be capacitively coupled into electrodes.”

Cam just stared at him open-mouthed, but Joel nodded. “So how do we stress the crystals?”

Warrain pointed up to a ledge above the cave. “If we could drop some rocks off there, would that be enough?”

“With big enough rocks, yes, I think so.”

“Cam and I can do that,” Daku said, grabbing him by wrist and leading him up to the ledge.

“What do you have in mind, Joel?” Cory asked.

“I need to swim in there beyond the point of no return, then hopefully dropping the rocks will generate enough of a subspace disturbance to push me through. If not, I guess I’ll drown.”

“I don’t like this,” Damon said.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Um, no.”

Daku’s head appeared above the ledge. “There are a couple of big rocks up here we should be able to push over.”

Joel wrapped Cory in a hug. “I love you, Granddad. Are you sure you can’t come with me?”

“No, Joel, I no longer belong in your reality. It’s time for me to go in peace.”

“I, I wish people didn’t have to die.”

Cory smiled. “Life would become pretty boring and tedious if that were so. Even the stars and galaxies have to die eventually. Now you

make sure you get back to your wife and make the most of every day you have together.”

“I, I will, I promise.”

Joel took one look around at everyone before jumping in the water, almost crying out at how cold it was. The mouth of the cave looked dark and ominous, hardly what he’d want for a portal back to normality.

For as long as he could remember, he’d always had a subliminal fear of drowning, stemming perhaps from his poor swimming ability as a child. He remembered once reading a surfing magazine while waiting in the barber shop, imagining himself riding the waves like a pro, but that daydream had turned into a nightmare – *day-mare?* – when the wave had dumped him head-first into a sandbar, paralysing him underwater, unable to move, unable to breathe.

He ran his hands through his hair, pulling it down over his eyes so he didn’t have to look into the dark cavern before him. *Shit this water’s cold!* Taking a deep breath – his last breath if his plan failed – he counted to three before diving under the water.

At first everything was pitch black, but as his eyes adjusted to the darkness he began to see phosphorescence around his hands each time he pulled against the water. *It’s so beautiful*, he thought. *I wish Loraine could see this.*

Once more his thoughts turned back to the waterhole on Dead Cow Creek and the sun-warmed rock on which they’d made love. It’d been the happiest day of his life, without a doubt.

He could feel her warm arms around him, driving out the water’s cold, her lips pressing against his, the passion arising from reservoirs hidden deep within. He focused everything on that memory while stroking deeper and deeper into the cave, way beyond his point of no return now, he was sure.

Two dull thumps pounded around him, snapping him back to reality. He almost drew in a sharp breath before remembering he was still underwater. *Daku and Cam have dropped the rocks*, he thought. *Why am I still here?*

Suddenly panic gripped him, his easy strokes replaced by wild flailing. He tried to rise to the surface but found only solid rock above

him, his vision sparkling as his brain cried out for oxygen. *It's nearly over now.*

The sparkling intensified until everything was bright white. At the very last he could hold his breath no longer, allowing the cold black water to fill his lungs as the life that had been Joel Morison dissolved away into oblivion.

Except it didn't.

The Other Way In

Under his feet, Joel felt a hard wooden floor, while murmuring voices filled the air around him. *Air*. He drew in a sharp breath.

“Joel, what’s wrong?” Pip asked.

Joel opened his eyes to find himself back in the town hall on Ignus. He shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs. “I just had a sing-singleton moment, a time cusp in which all civilisation had been lost. I have to go to Huntress with you.”

Pip shook his head. “Isn’t Loraine waiting for you back on Earth?”

“Yes, but no – by the time we got there everything had changed and she, she no longer existed.” He covered his face as the tears began to flow. “D-David became Daku, Peter was Pryderi and my grandfather was still alive, but, but there was no Loraine.”

David put his arm around Joel’s shoulder. “Daku really exists? I’ve been dreaming about him for weeks.”

“Yes, you became him and were living with Warrain, who was really Billy. We flew to England to find Pryderi but Tristan was their god-king and stole our ship.”

“He was their *what*?”

“He called himself *Tristan the Omnipotent*, saying his grandmother had discovered some genetic thread in their family that could’ve made him the Tivinel lord of the universe and that he’d done something to make it come to pass. He had a name for it, something starting with *P* I think.”

Pip turned white. “Not *Pasha*?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“So that’s what he’s up to. A Pasha is the ultimate telepath, able to control people’s minds and see both the past and the future.”

Joel nodded. “That explains why Pryderi led us straight to him and how he knew we were going to arrive on an intergalactic ship.”

“If he becomes Pasha, he’ll be unstoppable.”

“I know, which is why I have to prevent that from happening.”

“How?”

Joel shrugged. “I have no idea, only I have to go to Huntress with you and find the other way in.”

“The other what?”

“I don’t know what it means; only I think there’s another way into that place in the mountains.”

“Yes, the master is right,” one of the skin-walkers said, “but it’s a dangerous path to reach it.”

“Then let them lead us to it,” Pip said. “There’s no need for you to come, Joel.”

“No, there’s more I have to do, I’m sure.”

“All right, I suppose, but you’ll have to explain it to Loraine.”

“Hi Joel, are you on your way yet?”

“Um, not quite, there’s um, something I have to do first.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

Joel took a deep breath. “I have to go to Huntress to stop Tristan from changing everything.”

Joel glanced at Damon, wondering whether the connection had dropped out when there’d been no response for several seconds, but he just shrugged.

“Loraine, are you still there?”

“Listen to me, Joel. You’re going to be getting on Damon’s ship, flying back to Earth and meeting me for breakfast in the café by the beach. Is that so difficult?”

“Loraine, there won’t be a café by the beach if I do that. I had another sing-singleton moment and when we arrived on Earth, everything had changed. You, you weren’t just dead, Loraine, you’d never been born.”

Loraine remained silent for several more seconds. *“I, I’d rather never be born than to lose you, Joel.”*

“How can you say that? I have to save you; I have to save everyone.”

“No you don’t. There are police and armies whose job it is to save everyone. Tell them what they need to know and let them do it.”

Now it was Joel's turn to remain silent. What Loraine had said was true; the police and armies had a far better chance of stopping Tristan than he did. If they use the other way in – “No, there's something only I can do, I'm sure. Only I have this singlet thing.”

“Can't you tell the military what you know, then come home and use your singlet thing to go back and try again if it's not enough?”

“I don't think it works that way. The last time, I had to drown myself in order to get back, and even then I think it only worked because there were fractal rocks around the cave. I might not have any more shots at getting it right. I saw my grandfather in that changed reality – he was still alive then, something to do with the food, he reckoned – and he told me a life isn't measured in years, it's in what you do with it that counts. I won't waste my life by allowing everything I love to not only disappear, but to have never even been.”

In the silence that followed, Joel was sure he could hear her sobbing.

“This is too much for me, Joel, too much; I don't even know why we're having this conversation. If, if you survive and the world doesn't end, it, I think it'd be best if you didn't, didn't –”

Joel stared at the phone, a glazed expression on his face as his own tears started to flow. “I think she hung up.” He covered his face. “She – she doesn't love me anymore.”

David put his hand on his shoulder. “No Joel, the trouble is she loves you too much.”

“She – she does?”

“Of course, but right now you have to put that out of your mind. We have a job to do.”

Cam scratched his head. “So where are we off to now?”

* * *

“There's an old Tivinel village about five kilometres east of the temple,” the skin-walker said, pointing to Damon's topographic map. “Come in low to avoid any radar and land in the town square.”

“All right.”

The ship swept inland, following a broad river as it snaked across the floodplain before climbing into the foothills. Clouds hung low

over the dense forest that had grown voraciously in the two decades since the restoration of Huntress had begun. Before then, the planet had been trapped in captured rotation under its dimmed sun, almost devoid of life for millions of years following the Pasha Drago's calamitous rule.

Damien had assured everyone that the last of the Tivinel had been wiped out eons ago and there could never be another Pasha, but he was wrong and now the threat of an even greater calamity loomed large and imminent. A chill ran up Pip's spine as he remembered the black portal in the temple's basement, Tristan's gateway to an altered reality.

Opening an intergalactic communications channel, he placed a call to Earth. "Jason, it's Pip here."

"Pip, what's happening? Loraine is beside herself."

"Huh? You mean there are two of her? Is that possible?"

"No, it's just one of our quaint expressions; she's very upset and keeps talking about wanting a divorce."

"No!" Joel cried, covering his face and tearing at his hair.

"Don't let her do that," Pip said, motioning to David to take Joel from the cockpit. "I'll talk to her as soon as we've dealt with Tristan."

"All right, I'll try my best. How can I help you?"

"I need to know everything about that time portal you found in Morgoth's palace."

"Yes, David mentioned you were interested in that. It relied on the time slippage between Bluehaven and its twin, which it leveraged to create a link to another time line."

Pip looked crestfallen. "Huntress has no twin; on the other side of the fold it's just empty space for light years in every direction."

"Yes, I know, but Peter thinks there could be another way to achieve the same thing by creating a wormhole in intergalactic subspace."

"Gosh, a wormhole to where?"

"It could either be to the same point in another time line, or somewhere in the past or future, but it has to link to the same portal in that other epoch."

Joel re-entered the cockpit, his eyes red and hair in wild disarray but with an expression of grim resolution on his face. "Tristan said

he'd spent the family fortune buying up all my intergalactic-grade fractal ore in order to do what he did, as he had to resolve all the possible outcomes to find the one he wanted."

"That's right, such a wormhole is inherently chaotic. Remember that time nexus we found a few years back?"

"Yes, of course."

"It was a confluence of all possible time lines. Do you remember how some surfaces were smooth but others were grainy, with more and more intricate structure revealed the closer you looked?"

Joel scratched his head. "At the time I was more interested in not getting eaten by the bunyip, but I remember the smooth bits and some crinkly stuff that felt awesome on my soles."

"The smooth areas were the stable time lines, while the crinkly bits, as you called them, were chaotic solutions where the smallest of change would cause a completely different outcome."

"Are you saying Tristan's built another nexus?"

"Essentially yes, except one that links to a specific point in time and space."

"So how do we get rid of it? Can we just pull the plug or blow it up?"

"No, that could have dire consequences as the other end of the wormhole will still be operating. Imagine a fire hose that gets loose under full pressure, thrashing around and smashing everything in its wake."

Pip grimaced. "In the note he left us, he warned that touching any of the controls could set off a temporal implosion."

"You'll have to find a way to safely close both ends; there should be a control for doing that, otherwise someone may have to go through."

Joel gulped. "You mean a suicide mission?"

"I was thinking more of asking someone on the other side to do it, but, well, if it comes to that –"

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it," Pip said as Damon brought the ship down over the old Tivinel village. "We're just about to land; do you have any other advice?"

"If anyone does go through, try not to do anything that may change the flow of events. If the wormhole is in one of those crinkly

bits, even something as simple as crossing the road and causing a vehicle to slow could wipe out everything here."

"Thanks, you make it sound so easy when you put it like that."

"I'm just trying to warn you of possible consequences. Do what you have to do without upsetting any applecarts, is all I'm saying."

"I know. Thanks for all your advice."

"Good luck and come back safely."

Pip closed the call while Damon landed them on the old village square. All around, vines and weeds consumed the crumbling remains of buildings and gardens, reminding Joel of a movie he once saw about the aftermath of a nuclear war. He ran his fingers through his hair again while taking a deep breath.

"What is this place?" Joel asked as the skin-walkers led them uphill along the badly eroded street. On either side were ruined houses, most little more than foundations now, while deep gouges though the exposed road base made stumbling and tripping a constant hazard.

"We were told the temple's devotees, the worshippers of the volcano, lived here."

"Is this a volcano?"

"Not anymore, and even back then it was more a thermal vent than a true volcano. A deep fissure below the temple once had a fairly stable lava pool at the bottom."

"Is that the fissure with the wheel over it?" Pip asked.

"Yes, that's it. Those moving on to the next life rode the wheel, but it was all a con."

"That's terrible," Cloe said.

"The devotees came along willingly enough and it kept the priests employed, so it's all a matter of perspective I guess. All religions demand a price for admission."

"Sad but true."

At the end of the road a narrow track wound its way into the forest, ascending along the side of the valley. Although the trees weren't very tall, creepers and vines filled the understorey, making any deviation off the path impossible.

"Who maintains this track?" David asked.

“The overlords, or should I say those in their employ; during our training we did our fair share of wielding machetes along here. You’ll need to be careful as there’s a narrow section along the top of a cliff with no room for error.”

“I don’t have a head for heights,” Joel said.

Around the next bend, the forest fell away, leaving the track winding along a narrow ledge on a spur. Joel felt a wave of panic starting to rise, taking him back to the parapet on the road to Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert.

“We’ll help you,” Cloe said, moving alongside him. “Try not to look down.”

“I – I wish people wouldn’t say that to me.”

“Sorry. Just take it easy and focus on putting one foot in front of the other. We won’t let you fall.”

Joel edged forward, with Damon in front and Cloe behind, telling himself that each step he took was one step closer to the end, until a loose rock moved under his foot, causing him to stumble.

“Easy now, I’ve got you,” Cloe said, gripping his arm and pulling him back against the rock face. Damon held his other arm, making sure he couldn’t move.

“I really can’t do this.”

“No negative thoughts, okay? Just close your eyes and focus on your breathing; we’re holding you so you can’t fall.”

“I wish Willy was here; he could massage my thoughts.”

“Perhaps I could do that, master,” one of the skin-walkers said.

Damon and Cloe both shook their heads, but Joel nodded. “It couldn’t make things any worse.”

“Let me take your hand, master,” the skin-walker said, squeezing against Damon.

“I’ll get out of your way,” Damon said, crouching down, but the rock under his foot shifted, crumbling the clay around it as it tumbled over the edge. Damon, already off balance, grabbed at another rock, stopping his fall, but just as he tried pulling himself back up, it too gave way.

Two metres below, another narrow ledge broke his fall, with a small tree wedging him against the rock face.

“Damon, are you all right?” Cloe yelled, but there was no response. “Damon?”

Joel opened his eyes, wondering what all the shouting was about, but felt himself reeling when he realised what had happened. The skin-walker’s powerful arm pressed him back against the rock, making sure he couldn’t slip down, as the world sparkled into a grey nothingness.

One of the other skin-walkers scrambled down onto the lower ledge, working his way around to Damon. “He’s alive but banged his head pretty badly and is out cold. He could have a fractured skull.”

“Damien’s up at the temple and has healing skills well-suited to head injuries,” Pip said. “We can send him back down as soon as we get there.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Cloe said, working her way down onto the ledge. “We shouldn’t try to move him until Damien arrives.”

Joel groaned, taking in what was happening as the world swam back into focus. “This is all my damn fault.”

“Shut up, Joel,” David said. “Can one of you guys get him out of the way?”

The skin-walker holding Joel eased himself around him. “Start walking, master; I have hold of you so you can’t fall.”

“Don’t care anymore,” Joel muttered, plonking one foot in front of the other and wishing now he really had drowned in that other reality.

Joel looked up as the track abruptly ended at large stone door built into the rock face. The skin-walker stepped up to the electronic keypad set incongruously beside it, keying in a six-digit code. With a grinding sound, the door swung out.

“The number’s 3-1-4-1-5-9 in case you need to use it again,” he said. “It’s the first six digits of *pi*.”

“Got it,” David said, giving Joel another dirty look for good measure.

“We may meet a bit of opposition in there, in which case you’re our prisoners. Try to act dazed, as if we’ve mangled your minds.”

“That’ll be easy for Joel.”

“That’s enough, David,” Pip said. “We need to find Damien as quick as we can.”

From just inside the door, roughly hewn stone steps led up through a narrow passageway, with occasional side passages branching from landings.

The stairs ended at a closed door, where the three skin-walkers moved to the front. "You wait here while we go through first."

Inside the room, two guards looked up as the skin-walkers entered.

"Oi, what are you doing here?"

"We have prisoners for his lordship. He told us to keep a watch for them and they turned up on Ignus."

"The boss is busy upstairs so put them in the cell."

"Keys?"

The closest guard stepped over, handing him a set of keys.

"Look at me," the skin-walker whispered.

The guard stared into his eyes which appeared to glow with a pale blue light.

"Go to sleep."

Before the other guard could react, another skin-walker did the same to him. Within moments, both were asleep.

"It's an old Delphinidae trick," the third skin-walker said, waving the others into the room. "Come this way."

Around the corner, a barred door secured a small cell, the man inside standing as they approached.

"Damien!" Pip cried.

"Shush," the skin-walker said while unlocking the door. "There may be more guards around."

"What happened?"

"Tristan was waiting for us when we arrived," Damien said. "He tied Hamati to that wheel thing in the temple before locking me down here."

"That's right," Joel said. "I saw it in a dream in the other time line."

Damien gave him a puzzled look.

"It's a long story, but Damon fell and injured his head so you need to go down and out the back door to him."

"I'll go with you," Pip said. "Damon's, um, family now, I guess."

Joel gave him a worried look, but nodded. "As soon as you're within communications range, send the police up here."

“Will do.”

“I guess that just leaves us,” David said to Cam once they’d gone.

The skin-walkers took them back across the room to a flight of stairs leading up to the temple. At the front of the altar, still tied to the wheel, Hamati glanced in surprise at them before turning to look across into an alcove.

“More guards,” one of the skin-walkers said. “Wait here in the shadows while we take care of them.”

Joel held his breath as they scoured the amphitheatre. A short scuffle broke out in one corner but the guards were quickly subdued.

“These are handy fellows to have around,” Cam whispered.

“Shush,” David said.

“All clear,” one of the skin-walkers said. “You can untie him now.”

Joel, David and Cam went to work on Hamati’s ropes while the skin-walkers stood guard.

“Tristan is down in room on left,” Hamati said. “He expect you to come through front door so leave guards here waiting.”

“I know,” Joel said, “which is why we used the other way in.”

“There are seven of us against one of him,” David said. “Let’s do it while we still have the advantage of surprise.”

“Okay, follow me.”

Joel pulled open the steel door at the bottom of the stairs, only to find Tristan standing immediately on the other side.

“I thought I heard voices up there and was about to investigate. It’s so nice of you to come back, Joel; I was beginning to wonder what had become of you.”

“It’s over, Tristan, your plan has failed.”

“Really? What makes you think that?”

“I had a singlet moment and saw the after-effects of your plan. You become Pasha, but are stranded on Earth with no way to return to your subjects. In the time cusp, you took Damon’s ship, but now it’s here so that’s not an option.”

Tristan just shrugged. “I see you have it all figured out, Joel. Let me shut this thing down and I’ll surrender quietly, okay?”

Joel glanced at David and Cam, who looked equally stunned. “Okay.”

Tristan walked back towards the portal before pausing in front of the controls. “You know I could just trigger a temporal implosion and send us all into oblivion, but no, I’m neither that vindictive nor a martyr to my cause.”

“*Be careful, Joel,*” Pedro whispered in his ear.

Joel immediately turned, but saw nothing.

“What’s wrong, Joel?” David asked.

“Shush.”

As Tristan pressed a sequence of buttons, the black disc of the portal began to shimmer, a moment later becoming transparent.

“There’s one thing you should know, my young friend. After allowing the Barungi vermin to return to this planet and freeing the Tivinel peasants from Ignus, you’ve left the door wide open for them to start cross-breeding and produce another Pasha. Don’t you see? Only by becoming Pasha myself could I prevent that from happening. I’m not your enemy, Joel; right now I’m the only friend you have. If you’d let me use your talents, I might have found a way to achieve my goal without destroying your civilisations or your lovely wife, but with this limited technology at my disposal, well, such is the price for saving the universe.”

“You’re lying!”

“Tell him, Hamati.”

Hamati looked around before stepping forward. “What Tristan say is true, free Barungi and Tivinel could make new Pasha.”

“You see? I really have no choice, Joel, no choice at all.”

Before anyone could react, Tristan turned and leapt through the portal, disappearing instead of landing on the floor behind it.

“I thought he’d turned it off,” Joel said, staring through the ring.

“No, he opened it, you fool,” David said. “Come on, we have to go after him.”

“Wait,” Hamati said. “Portal lead back to when Drago became Pasha. Hamati alive then; you must find me and let me help.”

He pulled a notepad from his pocket, scribbled an address and handed it to Joel. “This where I lived.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll come with you, master,” one of the skin-walkers said.

“No Joel,” Pedro said. “If the guards wake, they’ll overpower Hamati and shut down the portal, trapping you on the other side.”

“It’d be best if you stayed here to guard the portal,” Joel said. “Don’t let anyone near it until the police arrive, and even then don’t let them touch anything.”

“Yes, master.”

“Come on, Joel,” David said, “before Tristan changes history and we all disappear.”

Joel took one last look around before joining hands with David and Cam and leaping through the portal.

The Ferryman's Daughter

Joel landed on the floor of the temple basement, wondering why nothing had happened, but when he glanced around, Hamati and the skin-walkers had gone and the racks of equipment looked different.

"Where are we?" Cam asked.

"In the same place, I think," David said, "but in a different time."

"Let's get out of here before someone finds us," a third voice said.

They turned to see a fourteen-year-old boy standing behind them.

"Who the hell are you?" David asked.

"Pedro, at your service."

Joel stared at him. "I can see you now. Are you real?"

Pedro pinched himself, a look of mild surprise on his face. "I've always been real, but now it seems I'm back to being flesh and blood. Come on, let's go."

Joel feared the basement door might be locked, but it wasn't. He crept up the stairs behind Pedro, expecting to come face to face with armed guards at any moment, but the altar was deserted.

He glanced around, taking in the plush seating of the amphitheatre and decorative artwork on the walls and ceiling. Directly in front of him, the wheel, painted bright red, looked shiny and new.

David was about to dash up the steps to the main entrance, but Pedro pulled him back. "There are voices coming from outside; I think we need to make for the back door."

"What if there are people down there too?"

Joel spied an assortment of robes piled in the corner. "Put those on; it'll hopefully make us look like we belong here."

"Either that or mark us as prisoners."

"Do as he says," Pedro said, picking up the top robe.

"Do I look as ridiculous as you lot?" Cam asked.

“This is a religious order,” Joel said. “We’re supposed to look ridiculous. Is everyone ready?”

David grimaced. “Now I know why I hate clothes.”

“Come on, let’s do it. Make it seem like we belong here and are going somewhere with a purpose; look straight ahead and don’t glance around at anyone.”

Joel led them down the stairs and across the room. Other similarly dressed devotees were busy at desks and benches, but paid them no heed as they passed through. He breathed a sigh of relief once they made it onto the stairwell to the back door.

“Do you think the key code will be the same?” Cam asked as they reached the stone door.

“*Pi* won’t have changed,” David said. “Give it a try; 3-1-4-1-5-9.”

Joel keyed in the six digits, fully expecting an alarm to sound, but the door swung open on well-oiled hinges.

“Amazing.”

Joel stared at the ground, surprised to find a concrete path underfoot instead of the rough track. His wildest dreams came true when they reached the spur, for not only were there no loose rocks to give way under him, there was even a handrail.

“I was wondering how we were going to get Joel across this,” David said. “Let’s hope our luck holds.”

No sooner had he spoken than a fat man in a purple robe rounded the corner.

“*Breckna!*” he yelled.

Joel stared at him.

“*Breckna! Breckna!*”

“I think he wants us to move aside,” Pedro said, squeezing over onto the railing. The others followed his lead, allowing the fat man to pass.

“Sheeze,” David said. “How are we going to communicate if we don’t speak their language?”

“We’ll do what we always do,” Cam said. “Just make it up as we go.”

“I like this guy,” Pedro said, leading them on down the path.

The road at the end of the track was kerbed, guttered and sealed, with rows of brick houses set amongst tidy well-maintained gardens. Birds chattered in the tree-tops, but there were no people out in the street.

“Let’s head for the town square,” Joel said. “Maybe there’ll be a map or something.”

“What are we looking for?” Cam asked.

“This address Hamati gave me.” He unfolded the piece of notepaper he’d been gripping in his left hand. “Except, um, I can’t read any of it.”

“Let me see,” David said, snatching it from him. “It almost looks Eridanian, don’t you think?”

“Maybe, but how? Hamati’s never been to Eridani.”

“We’ll have to ask someone using sign language,” Cam said.

In the town square, crowds of people bustled around market stalls, buying produce and wares or simply chatting in groups. Cam looked around until spying a young man standing alone and munching on a bread roll. The others followed as he dashed over to him, tapping him on the shoulder and showing him the piece of paper.

“*Det är över på kusten. Gå nedför backen till färjan,*” the man said, pointing further down the hill.

Cam looked confused, but Pedro grinned. “*Tack! Tack så mycket!*”

The man smiled, nodding to him before walking off.

Cam turned to Pedro. “You can understand him?”

“Pretty well. It’s not quite the same, but it’s near enough to Eridanian.”

“But how’s that possible?”

“Charon told me that the northern Eridanians were engineered by Tivinel refugees who made them in their own image. They no doubt taught them their language too.”

“Well I’ll be damned. So what did the man say?”

“He said the address is on the coast so we need to go down the hill to the river and take the ferry.”

“That makes sense,” David said. “The Barungi were supposed to be lowlanders while the Tivinel lived in the hills.”

On the other side of the square, another road followed a small stream down the hill, snaking its way towards the distant coastal plains.

“How far do you think it is to the ferry?” David asked. “We’re going to need food and water eventually.”

Joel pointed to the stream. “We have plenty of water, assuming it’s not polluted.”

“That’s a pretty bold assumption. You can try it first.”

“Maybe we can hitch a ride,” Cam said, although almost all the traffic they’d seen had been going up the hill rather than down.

“Nah, too much risk of winding up in prison if we do that.”

The township gave way to orchards and small plantings of crops. A fruit tree overhanging the fence proved too tempting; making sure no-one was watching, Joel boosted Cam up into the branches, allowing him to grab several things that looked like a cross between an apple and a pear.

“I hope they’re edible,” David said.

“They wouldn’t be growing them in orchards if they weren’t,” Cam said. “How about you try the first one.”

David shrugged before taking a bite. “Mm, nice. Grab a few more.”

A man in a passing car tooted his horn as he sped past, making Cam almost fall out of the tree. “I think we have enough for now, don’t we?”

The orchards yielded to forest and scrub as the road became steeper. A sign on a white post informed them that they were *12P* from Benton.

“How far is a *P*?” Joel asked.

David lifted his robe, pretending to urinate. “About from here to that bush I reckon.”

Joel and Cam both glared at him.

“Children, please, could you save your pissing contests till later?” Pedro said, his hands on his hips. “The Eridanian *Pedimete* is roughly the same as a kilometre, so I guess we have a couple more hours of walking ahead of us.”

“At least it’s downhill,” Cam said.

Around the next bend, the road crossed the stream at a small bridge and headed abruptly uphill. Cam started running as David and Joel threw sticks and stones at him, while Pedro shook his head and sighed.

Soon the road topped the spur and descended steeply again into the next valley. The forest closed in around them, becoming quite gloomy as the sun disappeared behind the ridgeline, while the grassy shoulder became noticeably damp underfoot.

“I wouldn’t want to be walking down here in the dark,” Cam said.

Joel and David both looked up, expecting night to suddenly fall, or at the very least an eclipse. Cam breathed a sigh of relief when neither happened, but it was short-lived as around the next bend the road plunged into a tunnel. Looking back to see Joel and David picking up more sticks and stones, he sprinted into the opening.

Two hours later they arrived at the outskirts of Benton. Making the bold assumption that any ferry would be at the lowest point in the town, they followed assorted streets downhill until finally reaching the river. A few hundred metres to their right, a long jetty extended out into the water, with a sizeable ferry boat moored to the end of it.

Hoping it wasn’t about to leave, they sprinted down the grassy bank, huffing loudly as they scrambled out along the jetty. A tall blonde-headed man stepped from the boat to see what all the commotion was about.

Pedro stared at him. “Charon?”

“Indeed. Should I know you?”

“I’m Pedro. Surely –” He suddenly remembered he was now a couple of million years in the past. “You’ll no doubt find this hard to believe, but we’re from the future.”

Charon stared at each of them in turn. “I’ve had dreams of late, disturbing dreams I must say, but your faces look hauntingly familiar. Please, come on board.”

After seating them on a bench at the stern, Charon disappeared below-deck for a few minutes.

“How is it he speaks in the Meridian common tongue when everyone else talks Eridanian?” Cam asked.

David scratched his chin. “The Delphinidae have the ability to quickly pick up any language, using their telepathic empathy, so I’m guessing that trait originated from the Tivinel.”

“Oh right, so if we’d come in here speaking Swahili, that’s the language he’d have started speaking to us in.”

“I guess so.”

Charon returned with a bread and fruit platter, a pitcher of ale and five glasses. “While you’re digging in, perhaps you could tell me how four Gomeral happen to be dressed as *angels of rebirth*. You gave me quite a start when you walked up the jetty; I thought for a moment my time had come to say howdy-do to my creator.”

Joel blushed. “We found these robes when we came out of the portal in the temple and thought they’d make us less conspicuous.”

“Is that how you came here? We’ll speak of it later, but right now I think we should find more appropriate dress for you before one of the proctors sees you.”

“Who are they?”

“The church police; you don’t want to run afoul of them, believe me.”

“So what should we be wearing?” David asked. “I prefer not to wear anything if I don’t have to.”

Charon grinned. “In the tropics, perhaps, but this region is more conservative, so no, I think shorts and a tunic would be best. My daughter’s up in the emporium so I’ll ask her to buy them for you.”

“You have a daughter?” Pedro asked.

“Yes, Elsa is her name; she should be back shortly.”

“Elsa,” Pedro said, tasting the word as it passed his lips, while Charon pulled out a phone to call her.

“That’s all organised,” he said, completing the call. “What do you know about the portal in the temple?”

“Not much; we’re pursuing a fugitive who came back here trying to change the course of history and make himself Pasha.”

Charon nodded. “It’s fortunate you met me, then, as perhaps I can help you. The temple, as you may know, has as its tenet the concept of reincarnation, with its duly anointed participants riding the wheel into the lava to be recycled, both physically and spiritually. They

have strict rules limiting the ride to the elderly or terminally ill, but even so, many have questioned their motives over the ages.

“Two decades ago, some of us decided to put their religion to the test, building a time portal and giving instructions to all who rode the wheel to seek out the portal in their next life and report back. To date no-one has, but recently a connection was established to a time millions of years into the future. A man from that time told us our world had been devastated, with the surviving Tivinel scattered across the cosmos, but that he’d found the portal and reactivated it when the planet had been restored.”

“Tristan,” Joel said.

“Yes, that was his name. Is he the fugitive you seek?”

“He’s the one; we have to stop him changing the future.”

“So what brought you to my ferry?”

Joel handed him the piece of paper. “A Barungi chieftain named Hamati, a survivor from the apocalypse here, gave us his address at this moment in time. He said he’d be able to aid us in our quest.”

“Do you mean he’s come back after being recycled?”

“No, he’s still alive; some of the Barungi fled into Sheol where they were trapped until this planet was restored.”

“Sheol?”

“It’s a different realm of existence, the spiritual equivalent of subspace or so I’ve been told. I don’t really know much about it.”

“I –” Pedro said, but the sight of a teenaged girl boarding the ferry disrupted his train of thought. For a moment he was sure he’d been transported back to when the young Elissi had stepped from a car on Eridani, for this girl was similar in both looks and dress. Her face was a little more rounded, though, a little more jolly and carefree.

“Elsa, you’re back,” Charon said, now in his native tongue. “Don’t worry, these fine gentlemen aren’t here to escort me to the next life, they just need a change of clothes and transport down the river.”

“I guessed as much,” she said, glancing at each of them in turn before letting her eyes settle upon Pedro.

“I’m Joel,” Joel said, extending his hand and breaking the momentary silence.

“I’m David and this is Cam who doesn’t speak your language.”

Cam blushed as she clasped his offered hand.

“I hope these will fit you,” Elsa said, handing Pedro the bag of clothing. “I was expecting you to be a little older.”

“They’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“I’ll just step outside while you change.”

“There’s no –” Pedro started to say, but she was already halfway out the door. He sighed before pulling the temple robe off over his head. David, Cam and Joel followed his lead.

“How are they?” Elsa asked, stepping back inside.

“Fine,” Pedro said, his legs held together to stop the shorts from sliding down around his ankles.

“They’re a little loose around the waist,” Joel said. “Do you have anything I could use as a belt?”

Elsa chuckled. “I’ll grab some rope.”

Joel turned to Charon as she dashed back outside. “What time do you head down the river?”

“The Barungi workers finish soon, so once they’re all aboard I’ll cast off. I can’t risk leaving any behind.”

“Why?”

“The Barungi can’t stay overnight in Tivinel towns; it’s against regulations.”

“Oh, I see. Is that to stop –”

“The purebloods in power don’t like the idea of Tivinel and Barungi intermingling, unless of course it serves their purpose.”

“Which is to make more Gomeral slaves,” Elsa said, returning with a reel of cord and a knife. “Fortunately they haven’t taken me yet.”

Joel looked at her feet. “Oh, you’re not a Tivinel, are you? Does that mean –”

“Yes,” Charon said. “My wife is Barungi and Hamati is my brother-in-law.”

“Gosh.”

In surprise, Pedro took half a step sideways, causing his shorts to drop to the floor.

“Let me fix those for you,” Elsa said, kneeling in front of him and cutting off a length of cord which she began threading through his waistband. He closed his eyes as her hand brushed his groin, hoping he wouldn’t embarrass himself any more than he already had. His

thoughts turned back to the similar incident on Eridani when his shorts had fallen down in front of Elissi. *Was history repeating itself?*

“There; all fixed,” Elsa said, standing and giving Pedro a nod of approval. “No need for any more embarrassment.”

She cut off another length of cord and turned her attention to David, who made sure to keep a firm grip on his shorts while she fixed them for him.

As Joel was having his shorts adjusted, a group of a dozen or so short pink-haired people sauntered onto the jetty, chattering and laughing amongst themselves. Charon stepped out alongside the gangplank, a book of tickets in his hand and a money pouch over his shoulder. *Don’t pay the ferryman!* echoed in the back of Joel’s mind, something from a song his grandfather used to play, he thought. He shook his head and grimaced as Elsa tied the knot in his cord.

“Is that too tight?” she asked.

“No, um, just a goose walking over my grave.”

“A what?”

“Nothing, just a saying from where I’m from. Are these the Barungi workers?”

Elsa gave him a strange look, as if to say *no, silly, they’re goblins and leprechauns*. “Yes, they’re the workers. Come on up to the wheelhouse before you’re trampled in the rush.”

The mention of wheelhouse conjured up an image of the big red wheel in the Tivinel temple, causing another shiver to run up and down Joel’s spine.

“More geese?”

“Huh? Yeah, I guess so.”

Elsa gave him another strange look before ushering them all through the heavy wooden door at the front of the passenger compartment.

Joel had expected to see a big wooden wheel set amongst pulleys, ropes, ornate brass gauges and blow-tubes, but instead before him stood a sleek modern console fitted with keypads and display screens. He scratched his head, trying to make sense of the high technology set within what appeared to be a feudal society. *A dangerous mix*, he thought, remembering stories of the weapons of mass destruction that had appeared at the time of Earth’s technological dawn.

Charon stepped into the wheelhouse, breaking Joel's train of thought. "No stragglers today; I guess everyone wants to be home early for the start of the holidays."

"Holidays?"

"Yes, tomorrow is New Year's Day, marking the beginning of five days of festivities."

Charon pressed a button on the console, causing a loud engine to burst into life below deck. Joel glanced out the window to see a cloud of black smoke drift across in the breeze. *Fossil fuels*, he thought, bringing back more of his grandfather's stories about the late twentieth century.

The ferry pulled out from the jetty, turning in a wide arc before picking up speed as it headed down-river.

Soon after leaving Benton, the river emerged from the foothills, snaking its way across a broad floodplain planted with grain crops as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance a cloud of dust or smoke suggested a harvester in action, but apart from that there were no other signs of human activity.

"These are Barungi lands," Elsa said in response to Joel's puzzled look. "The Tivinel purebloods in the mountains would never dirty their hands with something as mundane as agriculture."

"But isn't your father –"

"I'm of mixed blood," Charon said, "and although there's a lot more Tivinel in me than Barungi, as you can see from the shape of my feet, it's not enough for me to be accepted by those self-proclaimed high folk."

"Gosh, I never realised the Tivinel were so aloof, although come to think of it, the ones from the Settlers' Association on Ignus were a bit full of themselves."

Elsa nodded. "Don't worry; the Barungi can be just as bigoted as the Tivinel at times, although Uncle Hamati is something of an exception."

"Your uncle's a good man," David said. "He –"

Joel poked him in the ribs. "Best not to say too much; we don't want to risk changing the future."

"Yeah, you're right. You should pretend we don't exist."

Elsa and Pedro exchanged nervous glances, while Cam stared out at the passing countryside, oblivious to the unintelligible conversation going on around him and wishing he was back in his room at the university.

The land on the right began rising, forcing the river to veer left before looping around into a gully. The slopes on each side soon became cliffs, rising some ten to fifteen metres above water level and making it very gloomy as sunset approached. Around the next bend the canyon broadened, though, revealing a village of stone buildings spread out on the left of the stream.

“Welcome to Kurramurra, home of the local Barungi,” Charon said, picking up a handset on the side of the console. “I’ll let Hamati know to expect visitors.”

His call completed, he guided the ferry alongside a small wharf, with Elsa securing the ropes before rolling out the gangplank. The Barungi passengers disembarked in an orderly manner, without any of the pushing and shoving Joel had been expecting. Once they’d all dispersed, Charon locked the wheelhouse and escorted everyone onto the dock.

“Try not to stare at anyone or anything,” Elsa said as they joined the main thoroughfare. “If you look like you’re just going about your business, no-one will notice you.”

Amid a sea of short pink-haired people bustling about making last-minute preparations for the holidays, they proceeded down alongside the river before turning into a side street. On the next corner stood a house somewhat taller and grander than its neighbours, its fine masonry adorned with marble pillars and arches.

Charon stopped beside a gate in the stone fence at the side of the building. “Hamati lives with his father, the local chieftain, who still doesn’t approve of my marrying his daughter, so he’s going to sneak us in through the back entrance.”

A moment later the gate swung open, revealing a young Barungi man, his long shaggy pink hair perfectly framing his boyish smiling face.

“Ah my favourite niece and her accursed father,” he said, wrapping Elsa in a hug.

“Uncle Hamati, I’m your *only* niece,” she said, hugging him back.

“You’re still my favourite. So who are your friends?”

Joel stepped forward. “I’m Joel and these are David, Cam and Pedro.”

“It’s nice to meet you all; please, come on through.” Hamati led them along a cobblestone path through the back garden to a door in the corner of the building.

Joel stood transfixed at the threshold, convinced for a moment he’d been transported back to his grandfather’s shed. Before him was a veritable Aladdin’s cave of experimental electronics; wall-mounted shelves holding drawers of components, books and spools of wire, a huge workbench covered in partly assembled circuit boards, small hand tools and hastily drawn schematics, and beside that a metal stand holding rings made from a black substance that could only be refined fractal crystal.

“Excuse the mess,” Hamati said. “So what can I do for you?”

“Show him the note,” Charon said. Joel pulled it from the pocket of his shorts, unfolding it before handing it to Hamati. “Do you recognise the handwriting?”

“It’s mine, of course, but how did you come by this?”

Joel looked at David, who shrugged. “We’re from the future; we came through that portal in the Tivinel’s volcano temple. You gave the note to me just before we left our time; you said you’d be able to help us.”

“Did I really? So, um, if I help you and do something I wouldn’t have otherwise done, won’t that create an unstable temporal loop?”

“I think you were only meant to tell us what we need to know,” David said before Joel could think of a response.

“I see, well that might be okay then, as long as you aren’t planning to change anything.”

“No, we’re trying to stop someone else who came back here to change everything.”

“Would that be Tristan?”

“Yes. How’d you know?”

“Charon’s been telling me about his contact with the temple. I’ve suspected from the start that Tristan was up to no good, but of course no-one will listen to a mere Barungi.”

The flash of anger and hatred in Hamati's eyes caused Joel to turn away, staring instead at the workbench and fractal rings.

Hamati smiled, his face once more that of a good-humoured boy.

"If you are indeed from the future, I dare say you know all about my little experiment here."

"Subspace," Joel said before he could stop himself.

"Is that what you call it? A good name, I think. I'm trying to develop a theory that will make sense of what my experiments have revealed, but there's a sticking point."

"What's that?"

Hamati walked over to the corner of the room where a metal plate was set a few centimetres below floor level. In the wall above it was a round hole marked with an engraving of a stylised dolphin.

A creeping feeling came over Joel, like the *déjà vu* he'd experienced in Montpellier, but no, this was different; he really had been here before. *Five years earlier, a much older Hamati had led him, Pip, Clem, the two yowies and the metamorphosed bunyip named Number Five to a ruined village on Huntress. There they'd passed through a portal set into the floor of one of the buildings; a portal into Sheol.*

"You recognise this too, I see," Hamati said. From around his neck, he lifted a black dolphin-shaped amulet on a gold chain, holding it in front of everyone for a moment before pushing its head into the hole. A dull shimmering appeared across the surface of the plate, engulfing it.

"Sheol," Joel whispered.

"We call that place the Dark Cave; the Barungi chieftains use it for secret meetings and to travel quickly from village to village. I suspect there's more to it than that, a lot more, and that it has a fundamental connection to subspace, but I just can't quite put my finger on it."

"We really shouldn't say anything. What was it you said might happen, an unstable temporal loop?"

"Indeed, but just the look on your face tells me I'm on the right track."

Joel grimaced, fearing he'd just irrevocably changed the future, but Hamati smiled. "I'd have been continuing my research in any event, so you haven't changed anything, I'm sure."

“That’s a relief; I’m in enough trouble back home already without altering the future into the bargain.” Joel rubbed his hands over his face, trying not to think about Loraine’s wanting a divorce.

Hamati smiled again. “We can’t have that so I’m happy to help you, but there’s someone you need to meet.”

“Who?”

“You’ll find out soon enough, but as time is of the essence I’ll have to take you through the portal.”

Joel glanced at David and Pedro, who both nodded. Cam had turned away, though, instead studying something of interest on Hamati’s workbench.

“David,” Joel asked, “could you tell Cam what we’re doing?”

David stepped over to his friend, putting an arm around his shoulder and switching to the Meridian common tongue. “Cam, we have to go through the portal into Sheol. Are you okay with that?”

“Um, yeah, sure. Look, Davo, do you see how he’s exciting the fractal rings?”

“So?”

“I’ve never seen it done that way before. When we get back to the university I’d like to try it.”

“Come on, Cam, we have to sort out this mess otherwise there won’t be a university to go back to.”

“Oh.”

They joined the end of the line as Hamati ushered them down through the shimmering portal. “Watch out for the right-angle shift in gravity as you go through. If I could figure out why that happens, I might have a better understanding of how the damn thing actually works.”

“You’ll get there, I’m sure,” David said as he stepped through. Hamati smiled, grabbing the chain on his ebony dolphin, ready to whip it out of its socket as he lowered himself into the portal. A couple of seconds later, the shimmering disappeared.

The New Year Festival

“Everybody hold hands,” Charon said. “It’s all too easy to become separated in here.”

Elsa clasped Pedro’s hand; he was glad it was dark since no-one would be able to see his goofy expression.

“It’s not far,” Hamati said, leading them off to the right. A minute later he paused, feeling against the wall before pushing his dolphin amulet into a socket. “Step through and again be wary of the right-angle rotation.”

Emerging from Sheol, Joel looked around, finding himself in what appeared to be a cross between a theatrical dressing room and an office. Across the room, Hamati was in animated discussion with a man looking like he was about to go on stage as the Count of Monte Cristo.

Another man entered, whispering to the Count before waving everyone over. “He wishes to see you straight away.”

The Count led them down a short hallway into a palatial chamber topped with a white translucent dome some hundreds of metres above the marbled floor. More actors and actresses scurried about, carrying sheafs of documents, decanters of wine or fruit platters.

A fresco on the wall depicted an underwater scene of coral and swaying sea grasses. For just a moment Joel caught something from the corner of his eye, something dark looking at him with deep sad eyes, he thought, but when he turned it had gone. He stared at the corals and grasses, trying to find what he was sure he’d seen, but couldn’t.

At the far end on a raised dais sat a man in a black robe, his head bowed as if in deep thought. He stood as Joel turned to look, descending the steps at the side before walking directly towards him.

“Pip?” Joel started to say, such was the resemblance, but it wasn’t. While this man had Pip’s wavy blonde hair and slender youthful

appearance, his face carried the markings of a long and sorrowful existence, reminding Joel a little of Peter Thorpe. *In truth, all things are the same.*

“They say only a true adept can see the Black Dolphin in the fresco,” the man said, standing before Joel. All around him, everyone bowed or knelt, and Joel was about to do the same when the man held up his hands. “You bow to no-one, my friends, for at this juncture you are far more important than any of us.”

Joel scratched his head. “You seem to know all about us, but, um, who are you?”

The man smiled, letting the lines of worry and care fall away.

“Forgive me, as it’s been an awfully long time since I’ve had to introduce myself. I’m Roland, the Pasha, but please call me Roly.”

Joel felt his legs turning to rubber as the ramification struck him. *The Pasha, the one Drago was supposed to defeat; this was the man who had to die in order for the future to be saved.*

“Come walk with me,” Roly said, leading them out a side door onto a stone plaza overlooking the sea. In another shock, Joel realised they were on an island and had a pretty good idea which island it was.

He turned to David, who looked even more unsteady on his feet than Joel. “Gosh, is this the place?”

Eight years ago, David Collins had come to this island with his parents, only to be possessed by the spirit of Drago, the last Pasha of Huntress. If not for Pip’s courage and self-sacrifice, all would have been lost, and now everything had come full circle.

“What was it you said in there about the Black Dolphin?” Joel asked.

Roly stepped over to the railing, looking down into the water for a few moments before turning back to him.

“Long ago, when I was scarcely older than you, Joel, I lived with my parents by the sea. It was a beautiful village, shared by Barungi, Tivinel and Gomeral alike; there was a lot less hatred back then, a lot less. I spent much of my time in the water and encountered many dolphins, mostly the common grey variety, but one day a black dolphin surfaced beneath me, enticing me onto his back and carrying me far out to sea.

“He brought me to this island, where he spoke to me of *sunshine, warm seas and love; of a simple life, lost long ago and yet perhaps even now still redeemable*. Of all the other creatures on this world, the black dolphins alone were telepathic. *We were the oldest*, he said, *and now I am the last. I am many things; the spirit of enlightenment, the essence of growth, the seed of sentience, and now I am you, for you are not only my emissary but my guide. You have passed beyond redemption for the stars grow dim; remember that, Roly, in your years of sorrow ahead, but take heart, for from that sorrow will spring joy beyond all imagining.*

“With the last of his strength he returned me to my village, his spent body floundering on the beach, but I knew what I had to do. I returned to the island with my friends, building my house and establishing the order of the Black Delphinidae. Guided by the essence that had passed into me, I painted the frescos on the walls, the very ones you see today.”

“Gosh, so you’re the Emissary here too. How did you become Pasha?”

“I never wanted to be, but the ruling Pasha from the Dragon clan sought me out, challenging me to usurp his rule or die trying in a ritual as old as this world. In the end I triumphed, by good fortune rather than skill, and so my home transformed into a palace with extensions galore and servants everywhere.

“For five thousand years I’ve ruled this world; my subjects, at least those who don’t despise me, now affectionately call me the *Old Pasha*. But my time is nearly spent, for there’s now another who secretly plots against me.

“So I’ve come to the greatest dilemma of my time; should he succeed, he’ll rain destruction and death upon this world, but those ashes will bring a renaissance of undreamt majesty, that future from which you come. I’ll gladly give my life, for I’ve cast my shadow upon these lands for far too long, but now another, a fugitive from your time, is intent on saving me and ensnaring me in a life debt. I would become his puppet, condemning this world to stagnation and a slow decay into oblivion, for he thinks nothing of the lives of others.

“My friends, tomorrow at the New Year Festival, my usurper will make his move, and you each have a role to play in what will

transpire. Not only must you stop the fugitive, you must prevent him from returning to your time.”

Joel grimaced. “I’d guessed as much.”

“Please, allow me to touch your mind for a moment so I’ll be able to contact you should the need arise. Something tells me I might have to do that.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Roly gently placed his hand on Joel’s forehead for a few seconds before stepping back. “All done.”

“W-what’s going to happen, do you know?”

“The future is veiled, for there is much uncertainty and grief, but do not despair, for hope springs eternal in the love of family and friends. You alone can do this, Joel, that much I can foresee, but how it happens I cannot tell, only that you won’t be alone.”

He wrapped Joel in a hug before turning to David and Cam.

“Your love for each other will be Tristan’s undoing; hold onto that thought no matter what, for one or both of you may have to sacrifice everything. Remember *love conquers all*.”

David and Cam exchanged glances as Roly turned his attention to Pedro and Elsa.

“You are both young in body but wise in spirit; through your understanding, some of this world’s ills may be healed. All I ask is that you follow your hearts and be true.”

Pedro’s hand found Elsa’s as Roly turned lastly to Charon and Hamati.

“Whatever unfolds tomorrow, you’ll both become leaders of your people. I see a dark place and a river, for there you must go if those you cherish are to survive. You both have a role in not only the present but the distant future from where Joel and his friends have come. Just remember that no matter how black it might be, there’s always light at the end of the tunnel.”

Hamati bowed. “Thank you for your wisdom, my liege.”

“You are most welcome. Ensure the creed continues after I’ve gone, that’s all I ask. Now I mustn’t detain you any longer as I’m sure you have much to prepare.”

Roly led them back into the main hall. Joel glanced again at the fresco, this time seeing a black dolphin looking out from amongst the corals and sea grasses.

“Hey, I can see him now!”

“You have been blessed, Joel. Take that as a good omen for what’s about to unfold.”

“I will, thank you.”

Roly returned to the dais, while the Count escorted the others back to the portal into Sheol.

“Fare ye well,” he said as they passed through.

After farewelling Hamati, Charon and Elsa led them south along the river. On the outskirts of the village, the land rose again, forming cliffs either side of the water. A few hundred metres along, the road turned to the right over a stone bridge crossing the gorge.

“Hey, this must be the bridge Pip put his leg through and got stuck,” David said.

Joel glanced around, comparing the surroundings to what he’d read of Pip’s adventure. “Yeah, I think you’re right, but it looks brand new now.”

“It was built hundreds of years ago,” Elsa said, “but it’s been well-maintained by the Barungi.”

As the twilight deepened, street lights along the road began coming on, causing Joel to notice the power poles and wires for the first time. He was about to ask why they didn’t use subspace energy modules instead of distributing electricity, given what he’d seen of the portals and Hamati’s experiments, but decided not to. If they hadn’t discovered subspace power yet, best not to say anything that might change the future.

The road descended as the canyon opened onto a broad bay, with the sound of ocean waves breaking in the distance. Just ahead, another bridge led across a stream towards the beachside town, but Charon turned to the right before reaching it, instead following a narrow road along the north bank.

“Where are we going?” Joel asked.

“I’m taking you up to the seminary, as I don’t have enough beds at home for you all.”

“Oh, right.”

“The dining room will be serving dinner at about the time we arrive and there’s plenty of spare accommodation at the moment, what with the holidays upon us.”

“Thanks; I could sure do with a good night’s sleep as it’s been quite a harrowing time these last few days.”

“And the rest,” Pedro said.

“What happened?” Elsa asked.

“Joel was kidnapped and enslaved in a mine, but struck it rich and bought the planet for the peasants.”

Joel nodded. “I was returning to my wife when I discovered Tristan was about to change the future and I’d have no home to go back to, which is how I ended up here instead.”

“And we all came along to keep him company.”

“That’s so sweet,” Elsa said. “You’re lucky to have such friends, Joel.”

Joel nodded again, but his thoughts had turned back to Loraine, now not only three million light years away but millions of years into an uncertain future as well. Tears formed as he wondered if there’d be any chance, any chance at all, of ever seeing her again.

“Joel, you’re crying.”

“He does that a lot,” David said.

Cam put an arm around his shoulder. “Hey, Joel, it’s okay, we’re nearly there. Just one more day and it’ll be all over and everything will be sweet, I promise.”

Joel stopped walking, turning to face him while wiping his eyes with his forearm. “One more day.”

Even in the dark, the seminary grounds looked familiar to David and Cam, as they’d stayed there with Pip just recently, but the main hall was quite different both outside and in.

“This has changed a bit,” Cam said, looking around as Charon led them through the common room.

David nodded. “Pip told me the buildings were destroyed in the apocalypse and all that remained were the cellars and vaults. He and Clem rebuilt it after the planet was restored a decade ago.”

Charon pushed open the door to the dining room. “Find a table and grab something to eat; I’ll be with you shortly.”

Joel joined the queue to the servery behind David and Cam, his mind turning back to the one at the Lake Placid mine. It seemed eons ago now, but could it really be less than a week? He turned as someone behind him snickered, expecting to see the gang of surly miners, but it was just a group of acolytes laughing at some private joke.

“Are you okay, Joel?” Cam asked.

“Huh?”

“You looked like you’d just seen a ghost.”

No, a ghost has just seen me. “Yeah, I think I did.”

He turned back to the acolytes, who were now listening intently as one of their number recited poetry. *The surly miners never did that.*

“What would you like, sir?”

“Huh?”

Joel found himself at the head of the queue, looking down through a glass panel at an assortment of dishes.

“I bet he asks for wild berries and yams,” David said to Cam as they were collecting their cutlery.

Joel ran his hands over his face, not sure what was real anymore.

“Um, the rice thing, whatever that is.”

“Dead rat or turd?”

“What?”

“I asked if you want the ingredients separate or stirred.”

“Oh, right; separate, I think.”

Joel took his plate, watching his feet in case one of the surly miners tried to trip him again. *Now where was Willy sitting? And why had the room started spinning?*

Someone grabbed his arm; one of the sorters, he thought. “This way, you don’t want to drop it.”

“*Don’t drop me!*” the dead rat said.

“I won’t.”

“Get him some water,” Dougall said. *No, it wasn’t Dougall, it was the other one, the one he couldn’t see.*

“Pedro?”

“I’m right here, Joel. Sip this.”

“Slowly, yeah, or I’ll barf it all up.”

“What’s wrong with him?” a girl asked.

“Loraine? Where are you, Loraine? I can’t see you.”

“*She doesn’t exist anymore,*” Tristan said. “*She was never even born.*”

“Can’t – can’t let you into the portal; you must stay here.”

“Elsa, find your father, quickly!”

“*Joel, go find your father!*”

“Yes Mum.”

He tried to stand, but before he could the floor jumped up and hit him in the face. The next thing he remembered he was lying in a cosy bed with a soft woollen blanket over him, then sleep took him far from the troubles of the universe.

* * *

Joel woke to find Elsa and Pedro sitting beside him in a sunlit bedroom.

“How are you feeling?” Elsa asked.

He ran his hands over his face, wiping the sleep away. “Okay, I think. What time is it?”

“About seven-thirty; don’t worry, you haven’t missed breakfast.”

“You lost it big time last night,” Pedro said.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“The doctor reckons it was just exhaustion; you’re not running a temperature or anything.”

“That’s good. Today’s the day, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Charon’s arranged for a minibus to take us up to the volcano temple.”

“Why there?”

“That’s where the Pasha’s giving his New Year’s address.”

“Oh, I thought it was going to be on the island.”

“No,” Elsa said, “the Tivinel true-bloods have invited him up there this year.”

Joel nodded as the pieces seemed to slip into place. “Drago wants to take him out on his home turf.”

“Who’s Drago?”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s okay,” Pedro said. “She’ll find out in a few hours, I expect. Drago is the usurper Roly mentioned.”

“You’re here to stop him, right? But didn’t Roly say –”

“No, we’re here to make sure he succeeds. We have to stop Tristan from stopping him.”

Elsa looked confused. “Maybe it’d be best if I didn’t know.”

Joel glanced around the room, finally spotting his shorts and tunic dumped in the far corner. “Um, I’d better get dressed I guess.”

“Okay.”

When Elsa didn’t make any move to turn away or close her eyes, he eventually decided she probably wouldn’t freak out at the sight of a naked Earthling and pulled back the blanket.

“Come on,” Pedro said when Elsa still didn’t move. “We should give him a little privacy.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t realise. Come down to the dining room when you’re ready, Joel.”

“Thanks.”

All eyes turned to Joel as he entered the dining room, making sure not to miss a single move in case there was an encore performance from the previous evening. He was sorely tempted to give them the finger, but thought it’d be unproductive, so instead he smiled a goofy grin as he stepped over to the servery.

“What would you like this morning, sir?”

Joel stared at each of the offerings, making sure to order something that couldn’t be served separate or stirred. “Um, is that scrambled egg?”

“Yes, sir. Would you like it on toast?”

“Yes please.”

Joel took his plate; *excellent, no dead rats or turds this time*. He sauntered back to the table, feeling the best he had in a long while.

“This is good,” he said to David after swallowing a mouthful. “So when do we leave?”

“What’s this *we*? You’re not going anywhere, not after last night’s fiasco.”

“I, but, but I have to.”

“You don’t have to and you won’t. Cam, Pedro and I can do whatever has to be done.”

Joel looked at Pedro, who shrugged.

“But there’s something I’ll have to do, something that needs my –” He was about to say *singlet powers*, but that thought prompted a different tack. As a rule Joel didn’t lie; it was a common trait for those with Asperger’s syndrome, he’d discovered after Peter had dropped that particular bombshell on him, but it was time to break the rule.

“Something needs your *what*?” David said.

“I, I had another singlet thing, just before I came down. I stayed behind like you wanted, but Tristan overpowered you and destroyed everything. I *have* to go, it’s the only way.”

“Are you making this up?”

“No, of course not; why would I do that?”

“I can think of several reasons: revenge for one, after what Tristan did to you, then there’s –”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I have to go with you, you’ll see!”

Some people are described as poker-faced, but Joel wasn’t numbered amongst them. He ran his hands over his eyes, trying to hide whatever expression would reveal his lie to everyone.

David grimaced. “This goes against my better judgement, and if you get us all killed I promise I’ll never speak to you again, but I’ll let you come on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“When we see Tristan, you let Cam and me approach him first. I don’t want you going in guns blazing and throwing another fit.”

Joel heaved a sigh of relief. “Yeah, sure, whatever you say. As long as I’m there to do whatever I have to, that’s fine.”

“All right then; the bus leaves in twenty minutes so finish your breakfast and anything else you have to do.”

Joel nodded as he shovelled more egg and toast into his mouth. From across the table, Pedro winked at him while flashing a knowing grin.

* * *

In spite of its future spooky countenance, on this day the temple looked positively jovial, with streamers and brightly coloured banners flying from the towers and archway. Bright sunshine from a cloudless sky added to the festive atmosphere as finely-dressed Tivinel men, women and children gathered in groups, with Gomeral vendors on the side offering all manner of trinkets and food.

Charon led them across the narrow spur into the amphitheatre where many of the seats were already taken. "I suggest David, Cam and Joel go up the front while Pedro and Elsa keep an eye on the side alcoves and back. I'll make sure no-one goes anywhere near the portal room. If any of you see Tristan, cough loudly three times."

"Good thinking," David said, leading the other two down to the seats at the front. Before them stood the raised dais, with a throne and lectern placed in front of the wheel, while behind that a red glow flickered from the chasm, reminding Joel of the temple's grizzly purpose.

A young Tivinel man stepped up to the lectern, tapping the microphone to make sure it was on. "Everyone, if you could take your seats, the formal part of today's proceedings are about to begin. Dignitaries, special guests, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming our hard-working local representative, Mayor Sandford."

An elderly man stepped out from the wings as the assembled crowd clapped politely.

"A Happy New Year to you all and I hope it brings great fulfilment and joy, as unlikely as that may seem under the present circumstances. I refer of course to the growing military tension between us and the lowlanders, but in the hope that it may signal a thawing of relations, today I welcome two distinguished guests, clan chieftain Jarred of the Barungi and his son Hamati."

Hamati and his father strode down the centre aisle from the main entrance, to a mixture of gentle applause and booing from the tiers.

"These Tivinel aren't shy about expressing what they feel," Cam whispered.

"May this New Year bring us peace," Jarred said, taking up his position alongside the mayor.

"I hope so too," the mayor said. "Today our guest of honour is of course the Pasha, who this year kindly agreed to open the New Year

Festival here on our mountain. Please stand and welcome His Highness, Roly, Supreme Ruler of the Universe.”

Trumpets sounded as Roly, still dressed in just his simple black robe, walked solemnly down the aisle before ascending the steps to the dais and easing himself onto the throne.

“Your Highness, welcome, and I must say what a privilege it is to have you with us on this auspicious occasion. Let your words of wisdom shed light upon us in these dark times.”

“Praise him in great praise,” the crowd chanted half-heartedly, as if they were a bunch of children reciting the school motto at morning assembly.

Roly stood as the mayor retreated into the wings. “I thank you for welcoming me here today, but as to whether my words bring light or only greater darkness, that remains to be seen. Our world sits at the crossroads; there’s no doubt now that our climate is changing due to our use of fossil fuels, even though there are still some who deny any connection, however there is also hope for a bright and energy-rich future thanks to the efforts of our researchers in the newly-discovered field of subspace technology. I can foresee a time when everything will be powered by low-cost transducers, but before that can happen a great deal of work is needed to turn theory into practice.

“That’s my long-term vision, but in the short term we have more immediate concerns. The armed build-up by Tivinel and Barungi alike threatens the stability of our world in ways never before imagined, thanks to our thirst for greater and greater means of self-destruction. As always I counsel peace and reconciliation, but for too long that counsel has fallen on deaf ears. Let this new year bring a change of heart on both sides, for the sake of our children if not ourselves.”

As everyone focused on the Pasha’s words, Cam scanned his surroundings, thinking that, if he were Tristan, this would be the time he’d make his move. To the right of the podium and behind the fissure, jagged rocks formed a rough stairway ascending some fifteen metres above the floor. He was about to turn away when a flicker of movement caught his attention; crouching behind the rocks, a blonde-headed man inched his way up, making for a small cavern high above the fissure. Cam turned, tapping David on the shoulder and pointing.

“You stay here,” David whispered to Joel as he and Cam slipped over to the edge of the hall.

Joel waited until he saw them climbing the rocks, before coughing three times, easing himself out and following.

David crouched beside Cam at the entrance to a small cavern. Illuminated only by the glow of the lava far below, a red-haired boy sat peering through a gap in the rocks, a blow-pipe held against his lips. Behind him, but as yet unseen, stood Tristan. With surprising speed, he grabbed the boy’s hair, pulling his head back while applying a large knife to his throat.

“Drop it, Drago, there’s a good boy; you won’t be assassinating anyone today.”

Drago dropped the pipe.

“That must be some poison to be able to kill a Pasha. What is it?”

When Drago didn’t answer, Tristan tugged again on his hair.

“Ouch! All right, not that it matters now. It’s from the horn-back toad; it causes instant paralysis and death within twenty minutes.”

“Indeed, but there’s an antidote readily available, isn’t there?”

“Not within twenty minutes of here there’s not; my people made sure of it.”

Keeping the knife at Drago’s throat, Tristan let go of his hair and picked up the pipe, tipping the poisoned dart from it.

“That’s good,” he said, raising the dart to jab it into Drago’s back. “This’ll be a lot less messy than cutting your throat.”

“NO!” Cam yelled, diving into the cavern and ramming Tristan with his shoulder. The knife fell to the floor with a clatter, allowing Drago to roll away, but as Tristan fell, he turned and rammed the dart into Cam’s arm.

Cam fell limp, instantly paralysed.

“You bastard, you’ve killed him!” David yelled, now charging in and throwing wild punches at Tristan, all his cunning and self-control gone out the window. “You bastard, you terrible evil bastard!”

Tristan, out-weighting and out-muscling David by a good margin, stood, pushing him back out of the cavern and straight into Joel, who was standing there with his mouth gaping, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

Joel took a step backwards, only to find there was nothing to step back onto. Arms flailing, he slipped down the rocks, striking his head before tumbling unconscious over the precipice, beyond the point of no return, with no *singlet moment* to save him this time. Seconds later, a shower of yellow sparks flew high into the fissure as the lava consumed him.

“Well done, David,” Tristan said. “You’ve saved me the bother of dealing with that pest.” He returned to the cavern, retrieved his knife and frog-marched Drago back down the rocks, leaving David alone with Cam.

David collapsed beside him, sobbing fitfully while wrapping his arms around his paralysed friend. “I love you, Cam, I-love you so much. I’ll do anything, anything at all, just don’t die, please don’t die.”

Tristan pushed Drago out onto the dais, interrupting the Pasha’s speech. “My lord, I’ve just apprehended this assassin as he was about to fire a poisoned dart at you.” He handed Roly the dart and blow-tube.

Roly nodded slowly, a forlorn expression on his face. “Is this true, child?”

Drago spat on him.

“Onto the wheel with him!” Jarred yelled.

“No, Dad,” Hamati said, only to be swept aside as temple guards rushed onto the dais. Within moments, they’d secured Drago’s hands and feet to the wheel.

“From lava was he made and lava will he be!” chanted the crowd, who until now had almost fallen asleep under the Pasha’s droning speech. “To the core! To the core!”

Jarred stepped up to the wheel. “Before you die, child, who put you up to this? Speak the truth and you may be given a second chance at life; lie and you’ll burn in the core for eternity!”

Drago glanced left and right, frantically seeking support, but when none came he sighed, head bowed onto his chest in defeat. “It was Sandford, Mayor Sandford; he told me I could become the new Pasha if I did this!”

Jarred pushed on the axle, causing the well-oiled wheel to turn until it had rotated out over the abyss. With the pull of a handle, the

straps on Drago's hands and feet released, allowing him to fall. A moment later, another shower of yellow sparks filled the chamber.

"This is war!" Jarred yelled, marching back up the aisle with Hamati and their entourage scurrying behind him.

Pedro and Elsa, having been alerted by Joel's coughing, dashed up the rocks once the amphitheatre had cleared, only to find David still sobbing alongside Cam's body.

Pedro darted into the cavern, glancing about before returning a moment later. "Where's Joel?"

David looked up, an expression of dawning disbelief on his face. "I – Tristan pushed me into him and he, he fell. I told him to wait down there, I told him –"

It was all too much. Elsa went to comfort him, but before she could, David suddenly stiffened, his skin hardening as tiny cracks erupted all over it. Like a brittle clay statue that's been dropped, he crumbled to dust before their eyes and disappeared.

* * *

Daku woke in a cold sweat as those memories of David's last moments slowly faded back into his subconscious.

"Was it the dream again?" Warrain asked.

"Yes, the dream, always the dream. It was my own damn fault; if only I'd let Joel do it his way, but no, stupid *Davo* knew what was best and now all that once was has been lost."

Warrain placed a hand on his shoulder as his tears flowed freely once again. "There was nothing you could have done, Daku. Tristan was always too strong."

Outside the cave, the *gugurrgaagaa* called, heralding the dawn.

Ashes to Ashes

In truth, all things are the same.

One carbon atom is exactly like any other. So is a hydrogen atom, an oxygen atom or any of the other atoms composing a human body.

At the next level down, the electrons, protons and neutrons making up those atoms are all identical; the only thing distinguishing one element from another being their quantity.

Those electrons, protons and neutrons are themselves just combinations of quarks, the fundamental building blocks of matter. But even that's an illusion, as matter in its naked form is nothing more than concentrated packets of energy, held together by quantised space-time resonances.

All things are the same.

From the chaos comes order. Patterns emerge, strands of atoms and molecules arranging themselves in greater and greater complexity. Cells form around those strands, making clusters that become organs, limbs, bodies, people. But that order is fleeting, requiring great expenditure of energy to maintain, and in the end the chaos wins, claiming back its own.

But some patterns endure. A singleton, once created, must exist in all possible time lines; it's the law, no ifs, no buts.

For hundreds of years while war raged across the planet, decimating Tivinel and Barungi alike, those atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and other elements that were once Joel's body dispersed through lava, sea and air, mingling with other atoms of their ilk. But the laws of the universe can't be ignored, after all they're the law, and a void remained that had to be filled, an irritating loose end

in the scheme of things, for the Joel Morison who died in the fissure came from the future in a different time line, one no longer existing.

So it came to pass that those atoms – not the same ones, of course, that'd be too much to ask, but all atoms are the same so there's no need – some atoms began assembling into a once-familiar pattern. Strands of DNA embraced and split, cells formed, divided and multiplied, creating a Gomerel child, an awkward boy with long brown hair and perpetually bare feet.

For eighteen years that boy went about his daily life in a countryside ravaged by centuries of war, unaware of who or what he was, while Joel's spirit, having passed into Sheol at the moment of his death, remained hidden – safe, secure and unknowing – within the dark recesses of that realm, until the time of his reawakening finally arrived.

The boy gasped as memories of another life flooded into him. At last everything made sense: who he was, what he was and why he was here on this God-forsaken planet. He ran his hands through his hair, sending it into even wilder disarray, as with that knowledge came the realisation that time was short, perilously short.

"Come to me," said a voice within his head, a familiar voice, Roly's voice. *"Bring your Tivinel friend, for he can guide you along the way."*

Without stopping to think, Joel ran off down the street to where his orphaned friend was tending the vegetable garden. "Willy, you have to come. Time is short!"

Willy stood, rubbing his back as he sauntered over to him. "Joel, what's up?"

Joel gaped. "Hey, you have both your arms now!"

"What?"

"Sorry, a bad dream, that's all. Come on, we have to go, the Pasha's calling me!"

"The Pasha? I thought he was dead."

"No, just living in exile. Come on or we'll be too late."

Willy shrugged before running off after Joel, accustomed to his friend's strange behaviour. Down the hill they ran, following the stream until reaching the bay.

"What's wrong?" Willy asked as Joel stood staring out in a daze.

“Um, there’s something I have to get. Is there an apothecary nearby?”

“Yes, just over the bridge.”

They dashed across, Joel grateful that the shop was open. He emerged a few minutes later, pushing a small package into his pocket.

“What’s that?” Willy asked.

“Something I’m going to need. Now come on, we have to hurry or it’ll be too late!”

Joel led him down the road along the edge of the bay to Ted’s boathouse. Ted, an elderly Gomerall looking like he’d be more comfortable in a raging sea than on dry land, hobbled over to them, unsure of his footing without a rocking deck beneath him.

“Joel, Willy, what are you doing down here?”

“We need a boat, Ted.”

“Do you now?”

Joel was coming close to losing his patience. “We wouldn’t be asking if we didn’t!”

“All right, all right, don’t blow a head gasket. It’s my job to ask questions; I can’t just be handing out boats to anyone who walks past, otherwise there’d be none left.”

“Ted,” Willy said, grinning, “how many passers-by have ever asked you for a boat?”

“Well, none that I can think of.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Ted scratched his head; Joel hoped he wouldn’t get splinters or barnacles. “There isn’t one, I suppose, if you put it like that. Very well, you can take that punt on the end there. Where are you going?”

“Just up the river a bit; we won’t be gone long.”

“Watch out for snipers; there’s still some crawling around up there, they reckon.”

“We will.”

Ted shuffled down to the end of the pier, checking the punt’s fuel tank before handing the rope to Joel. “Don’t sink it or you’ll have hell to pay.”

“We won’t, I promise.”

Joel jumped aboard, giving Willy a hand onto the punt before pushing off and starting the engine.

After passing through a narrow gorge, the land flattened out on the right, revealing the remains of the Barungi village of Kurramurra. After decades of bombardment and rebuilding, the last remaining Barungi had eventually abandoned it, leaving it to the elements to complete its demolition. Now little more than rubble and foundations remained, with the site off limits due to unexploded ordnance and mines.

Beyond the ruins, the gorge narrowed again, with high cliffs either side of the water. Joel slowed while Willy watched for snags and sunken boats, the river being no longer considered navigable by anything much bigger than their punt.

After rounding a tight left-hand bend, they emerged from the coastal ridge onto the wide floodplain that had once been the region's food bowl. Now, little remained but burnt stubble, weeds and the occasional downed aircraft poking out of the dirt. Even the birds had abandoned this place.

In spite of Ted's warning, no snipers opened fire on them, although Joel and Willy kept a close watch on each bank. Anything standing more than a metre high was riddled with bullet holes, so it wasn't an idle threat.

"How far are we going?" Willy eventually asked when the silence became too much for him.

"Benton."

"That's a relief; if you'd said anything further upstream we'd have had to carry the boat."

"No, we're leaving it there and walking the rest of the way."

"To where?"

"I think you know."

"Surely not; you're joking, aren't you?"

"You don't have to come if you don't want to; it's me the Pasha needs."

Willy remained silent for a few seconds before making a decision he hoped he wouldn't regret. "I'm with you all the way, Joel, you know that."

"Thanks mate."

After abandoning Ted's punt in the shallows just beyond the ghost town of Benton, they scrambled up onto the old western road, now even more wary of snipers. Little remained of the bitumen surface; tanks, explosives, gunfire and simple lack of maintenance had seen to that.

The tunnel under Deadfall Ridge was mercifully short and unoccupied, save for a few rats, but Willy and Joel still breathed sighs of relief upon emerging back into the light.

"This is creepy," Willy said.

"Not half as creepy as where we're going."

"You didn't have to say that."

"Sorry."

After a steep climb alongside a small stream, they eventually reached the first signs of life since leaving home. Small Tivinel children playing at the water's edge looked up as they approached, paying no attention to Willy but giving Joel a good stare before going back to their game.

"I guess Gomeral are a rare sight up here," Willy said.

"If anyone asks, I'm your slave."

"Okay."

None did, though, as aside from the children there were few about and those that were had other things on their minds.

At the end of a narrow street, a pathway led up into the forest, its concrete surface also showing signs of wear. A shiver ran up Joel's spine, something half-remembered about this place, he was sure.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't know; I think I've been here before in another life."

"From the sound of you, it's not a pleasant memory."

"No, not pleasant."

The path emerged from the forest onto a narrow spur, following a ledge above a shear drop-off to the right. The rusty handrail was still mostly intact, but it didn't look particularly strong and Joel hoped he wouldn't have to test it.

About halfway along he stopped, looking over the side to a smaller ledge some two metres below. "Someone fell here, I'm sure."

"Not you?"

"No, but it was my fault."

Willy placed a hand on his shoulder. “Nothing you can do about that now.”

Joel nodded, holding onto the rock face whenever he could as he made his way slowly forward along the crumbling concrete.

At the end of the spur, a stone door blocked their way, with a small keypad set into the side of it.

“I take it you know the code,” Willy said.

“Yes, it’s the first six digits of π .”

“That’s twenty-two over seven, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Willy grabbed a stick, putting his long division skills to the test as he scratched numerals into the dirt.

“Right, it’s three – one – four – two – eight – five.”

Joel began keying in the numbers, but paused after the third digit.

“Are you sure the next one’s a two?”

“Yeah.”

Joel was about to press it, but paused again. “That’s not right; twenty-two over seven is just an approximation, I think. I wish I had a calculator.”

“A what?”

“Something we used to use for arithmetic; it had π built into it and I can see it in my mind’s eye but can’t read the damn numbers.”

“Perhaps I can help.”

Joel nodded as Willy placed a hand on his forehead. “Try to think of a calculation you did using π .”

Joel closed his eyes, letting his mind wander back through his past life, eventually settling on a summer’s morning at his home in Coolum Beach. His father, a whizz with numbers, had just erected a circular wading pool in the back yard and asked him to work out how much water it’d take to fill it.

“Pi times the radius squared times the height,” Joel said, feeling proud of himself. When his father nodded, he began keying the numbers into his calculator. Firstly π , that button up in the top corner.

“What do you see?” Willy asked from inside the memory.

“It’s, um, three point one four one five nine two six five three –”

“That’s enough.”

Joel opened his eyes to see Willy scratching the last of the digits into the dirt. With shaking finger, he keyed in *one – five – nine*, fully expecting an alarm to sound, but instead the door swung open.

“Well done, Joel.”

“I couldn’t have done it without your help, Willy.”

They crept inside, pulling the door closed behind them. Dim lights illuminated the stone steps leading upwards into the heart of the Tivinel temple. Joel let Willy take the lead, as it wouldn’t make sense for the master to be following the slave, but the stairwell at least was unoccupied.

The door at the top was open, with slightly brighter light emanating from the room beyond. Willy was about to step through but Joel held him back.

“What is it?”

“He’s close, very close.”

“Who?”

“Roly.”

On the other side of the opening, a robed figure approached; an *angel of rebirth* if Joel wasn’t mistaken. Another shiver ran up his spine as he recalled once wearing such clothes in this place. *Evil deeds performed by evil men.*

“Joel, Willy, follow me and keep your eyes down,” Roly whispered as he ushered them into the room. On either side, other angels sat at desks, studying books or writing notes, but those who looked up saw only one of their own leading either initiates or victims, neither of which concerned them.

At the top of more stairs, they emerged into the amphitheatre. The wheel, which had been freshly painted the last time Joel saw it, was now beginning to rust, with splotches of blood – Barungi blood, no doubt – covering parts of it.

“This way,” Roly said, hurrying along in front of the dais to the stairs on the other side.

“What now?” Joel asked as they reached the locked steel door at the bottom.

Roly pulled a key from within his robe. “I’ve kept it locked since the beginning of the war – no-one else knows what became of the key and, with the constant fighting, no-one particularly cares. My hope

was that you'd come back before anyone twigged to who I was, my fear was that you wouldn't."

He unlocked the door, pulling it open on reluctant hinges. Within the musty basement, the racks of equipment still operated, while in the far corner a metal ring enclosed a circle of absolute blackness.

"I don't like this place," Willy said.

"Neither do I, but there's a job that must be done and only Joel can do it." Roly stepped over to one of the consoles, checking readouts and making fine adjustments to the numerous controls. "Do you know what you have to do?"

Joel nodded.

"You have only the narrowest window in time; arrive a moment before your death and you'll merge with your former self, dying once more, but too late and you'll be unable to make a difference. Once you go through, every second counts."

"I know."

"Before you go, I have a gift for you." Roly pulled a knife from his pocket, using it to cut a lock of his hair. "Get the same from Drago if you can and take them back to your time. Hamati will know what to do with them."

Joel looked confused, but took the hair and stuffed it into his pocket.

Willy stared at him. "You, you're not going through that thing, are you?"

"I must; it's the reason I'm here, Willy. Thank you for all you've done for me, always."

The boys embraced, holding each other for as long as they could before Joel finally turned towards the portal.

"Remember, every second counts," Roly said as he flicked a switch, causing the centre of the ring to become transparent. "Now go!"

Turning to give Willy one last smile, Joel leapt through. After a moment's hesitation, Willy leapt through after him.

* * *

Joel emerged from the portal, finding himself in a darkened room surrounded by the racks of equipment. A moment later, his friend joined him.

“What are you doing here, Willy?”

“I thought, well, if what you’re doing is so important, you might need some help. Anyway, I was just an orphan back there, just one more mouth to feed, so I might as well make myself useful.”

Joel grinned. “Thanks mate; it’ll be interesting to see how this all pans out if we succeed, but first we have to find the way out of here. The door’s over in the far corner but try not to bump anything, okay?”

“Okay. What if it’s locked?”

“We’ll just have to bang very loudly and hope someone hears us. Charon should be guarding the other side.”

“Who’s he?”

“One of the good guys.”

Joel reached the door, pushing it open and almost knocking Charon over in the process.

“Joel, how’d you get down there and who’s your friend?”

“There’s no time to explain. Quick, grab Pedro and follow me!”

Joel ran up the stairs and across in front of the dais, where Roly was still delivering his New Year speech.

“Which way?” Willy asked.

“We have to climb up those rocks behind there. Tristan will probably be coming back down by now, so we have to take him by surprise.”

“Gotcha.”

Joel ascended the rough steps, while Willy climbed a little higher.

From just ahead, Joel glimpsed a tuft of red hair and a moment later came face to face with Tristan and Drago.

“You!” Tristan yelled. “You’re dead, I saw you fall into the lava!”

Joel grinned. “I’m still here, it seems; I guess you’ll have to kill me again.”

Tristan, forgetting he was using his knife to subdue Drago, whipped it around, taking a swing at Joel, but before he could connect, Drago kicked him in the shin. Tristan swung back, intending to plunge the knife into Drago’s chest, but at that moment Willy leapt

onto him from above, knocking him to the ground, the impact causing him to lose his grip on the knife.

“What’s that in his other hand?” Willy asked.

“My blowpipe,” Drago said. “Give it back, you horrible man.”

Tristan was about to tell him where he could stick it, but Joel held the knife against his throat. “Let go of it and then we can talk.”

Drago pounced the moment Tristan’s fingers released the pipe, snatching it from him and putting it to his lips. “Stand back, all of you!”

“No, wait, you’ll need it for Roly.”

While Joel and Drago were focused on each other, Tristan arched his back, throwing Willy off balance. With a quick twist, he pulled his neck out from under the knife and began to stand. Willy was quicker, though, regaining his balance and head-butting Tristan in the stomach.

Tristan stumbled backwards, trying to regain his balance, but made the same mistake as Joel, finding to his horror that there was nothing to step back onto. With a cry he tumbled over, bouncing off the rocks before plunging into the lava far below.

Joel, feeling suddenly dizzy, let the knife fall to the ground. Before anyone could stop him, Drago snatched it up. “Both of you get back or I’ll use this, I promise.”

“Wait, Drago,” Joel said, regaining his senses. “We’re on your side in this, I promise. Quickly, back up to your hiding place before Roly finishes his speech.”

Drago looked at Willy, who raised his hands and grinned. “Do what Joel says, okay?”

After glancing back at Joel, Drago turned, scurrying up the rocks like a mountain goat.

“We did it!” Willy said, but Joel remembered the other reason he’d come back.

Pulling the package he’d bought at the apothecary from his pocket, he dashed up the rocks behind Drago. “I hope we still have time.”

David was still sobbing beside Cam’s motionless body when they reached him, but looked up in bewilderment when he saw who it was. “You, you can’t be, I saw you fall!”

“No time, David; give me room.” Joel tore open the package, revealing a small syringe. “Help me find a vein; I can’t see properly in this light.”

“Is that –”

“Yes, it’s the antidote. Now hurry.”

“There, next to my finger,” David said.

Joel grimaced, pushing the needle point into the vein and squeezing on the plunger. “I hope we’re not too late.”

In the seconds that followed, everyone held their breath – even Drago who was peering down from his hiding hole – until Cam began to stir.

“Wh-what happened?” he mumbled, rubbing his forehead as he tried to sit up.

David wrapped his arms around him, hugging him for all it was worth, just as Pedro and Charon came up the steps.

“What kept you?” Joel asked. “You missed all the fun.”

“So I gather,” Pedro said, grinning.

“Drago’s about to fire his dart so we’d better move over to the portal room. I expect all hell will break loose here when – wait, I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“Drago, I wonder if you could do me one small favour.”

“What do you want?”

“Could, um, could I possibly have a lock of your hair?”

“My hair?”

“Just as a keepsake, you understand; something to remember today by.”

“Of course; you’re a man of honour, Joel Morison.” He raised the knife, cutting off a small lock and handing it down.

Joel bowed as he accepted it. “Thank you so much.”

David eased Cam onto his feet. “What was that all about?”

“I don’t know but I have to give it to Hamati when we get back.”

Joel pushed the lock deep into his pocket as they made their way down.

Roly looked up, smiling, as Joel led the others across in front of the dais.

“My time as Pasha is drawing to a close; I have foreseen it. Do not despair at my passing, for I’ve had a fulfilling life far beyond all expectations. A time of upheaval approaches, but don’t lose hope, for from this will spring a far greater good. Thank you, my subjects, and I wish you well.”

He closed his eyes before suddenly going limp and falling to the floor, a dart protruding from his back.

“What happened?”

“He’s dead!”

“Who killed him?”

“I did,” Drago said, bounding down the rocks and climbing onto the dais. “The rule of Roly is ended and I, Drago, am now your Pasha.”

“That’s preposterous!” Jarred yelled. “The challenge of the Pasha is a rite of passage, a test of skills both physical and psychic. You cheated, you little bastard!”

“Enough! The old ways have ended, old man Barungi. Return to your village while you still live.”

Jarred shook his fist. “This means war!”

“No, Dad,” Hamati said, but Jarred was already marching back up the aisle. He shook his head before following along behind.

“To hell with the Barungi!” Drago said. “Where are my Tivinel?”

“Right here, my lord,” Mayor Sandford said, emerging from the wings.

Drago settled himself in front of the lectern. “You heard Roly speak of global warming and the need to limit our use of fossil fuels until something better comes along. I say no, there are other ways; the Tivinel scientists have created a star dimming machine, a device to control our climate while allowing us to exploit our coal and oil reserves to their full extent. No-one need suffer deprivation while the Barungi tinker with their subspace transducers!”

“Hear, hear!” Sandford shouted.

“Praise the Pasha!” chanted the crowd, this time with much more enthusiasm. “Praise him with great praise!”

“I think we’d better leave them to it,” Joel said, ushering the others down the stairs to the portal room. He turned to Charon. “Someone

on this side will need to permanently shut down the portal after we've passed through; we can't risk another Tristan."

"I'm not sure if I know how."

"I can do it," Pedro said.

"But, but you're coming with us, aren't you?"

"No, on the whole I think not. I've found my true purpose here, as well as my flesh and blood." He pinched himself, confirming he was real. "While you were dealing with Tristan, Roly touched my mind, telling me the Gomerall will need someone with my skills in the years ahead, should I wish to remain. I told him I would."

"Gosh."

Elsa grasped Pedro's hand while kissing him on the cheek.

"I think having a pretty girl by his side also swayed his decision," David whispered to Cam. Cam grinned, putting his arm around David's shoulder.

Joel turned to Willy. "What about you?"

"I'd like to come with you, Joel, if you don't mind."

"No, of course not."

"Right," Charon said, "I guess it's settled."

Pedro scanned the readouts. "Roly also gave me a flash course on how to drive this thing. Now that Tristan's cusp has ended, the portal is locked back onto your own time. All I have to do is flick this switch –"

Joel half expected a temporal implosion, but instead the portal ring became transparent.

"Off you go and good luck, all of you."

"You too, Pedro."

Joel ushered David, Cam and Willy into the portal before following them through.

End of the Road

“Master, you’re back,” the skin-walker said as Joel emerged from the portal. “Was your mission successful?”

“Yes, um, it was.”

“Tristan?”

“He’s dead.”

“That’s a relief.”

Hamati looked up from the control console. “Other end is closing off wormhole. We must shut down also.”

Joel grinned. “Um, Hamati, would it be easier for you if we spoke in your native language? We discovered it’s very similar to Eridanian.”

“No need, Hamati now fluent in Meridian talk; speak just like you.”

A crumbling noise from behind caused them to turn just in time to see the portal collapse in a cloud of dust, before that too dissipated and vanished.

Joel scratched his head. “What happened?”

“Portal destroyed in past so no longer exists here in present.”

“So why are the consoles and racks still here?”

“They’re not part of the original equipment,” Cam said. “I think Tristan built them.”

David grinned at him while Joel glanced around the room. “Um, where’s Willy?”

“Didn’t he come through? I thought he was right behind me.”

“He was, but where’d he go?”

Joel was about to suggest dismantling the consoles in case he was inside one of them, before remembering what he’d read in Peter’s book: *the laws of the universe don’t allow there to be an eleven-year-old and a fourteen-year-old Billy walking around together and shaking hands with each other*. “The same must apply to Willy.”

“The same *what*?”

“It’s like what Peter said; there can’t be two Willies walking around together and shaking hands with each other, so they must have merged.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Come on,” Cam said, “let’s get out of here before anything else starts disappearing.”

They emerged from the top of the stairs to find the amphitheatre crawling with police. A middle-aged man in a dark suit dashed over to them, brushing aside several constables wanting to speak to him.

“Joel, am I glad to see you. I’m Superintendent Davies.”

“Yes, I remember you from that bunyip business five years ago.”

“Were you successful? Where’s Tristan? Is he down in the basement?”

“No, he’s dead.”

“Where’s his body? We’ll need to do a post-mortem I’m afraid and there’ll have to be an inquest.”

“That’ll be a tad difficult,” David said. “He died a couple of million years ago, although if you dig deep enough into that abyss back there you might find some remains.”

“Oh, I see. Well I do have some other good news for you; we’ve found enough evidence here to positively identify the people calling themselves the overlords and arrests have already begun.”

Another man came running up to them; for a moment Joel thought it was Roly, but this time it was Pip. “Joel, you’re back, excellent. Good news, I gather.”

“Yes, on all fronts it seems. Um, how’s Damon?”

“He’s still in the hospital having tests done, but Damien’s healing skills fixed most of the damage and they reckon he’ll be fine in a day or two.”

“That’s a relief, I’m sure. It was my fault he fell.”

“No, Joel, it was an accident, pure and simple. No-one’s blaming you.”

“I am,” David said, grinning.

Joel poked out his tongue, causing Cam to start roaring with laughter.

Pip was about to say something when his phone rang. "Hello? Yes, he's with me now; I'll put him on." He handed it to Joel. "It's someone named Willy."

"Hello Willy; are you okay?"

"Hi Joel, I'm glad you got back safely. Something extraordinary has just happened."

"What?"

"I was asleep, dreaming I was with you in a small village where we'd been friends for life, then we went to a spooky old place high in the mountains and confronted that overlord you were after. He fell into a pool of lava after I head-butted him, and then I woke up."

"Gosh."

"Now here's the best part. When I woke, it was as if I could remember all my life in that village and, now you won't believe this but it's true, I swear, I have my left arm back as good as new."

"Oh wow, that's fantastic and it all makes sense too. In another time line back there, I met you in that village and it was just like you said, we went through the portal and you head-butted Tristan, saving us all. You, well the other you, came back with us but you didn't appear on this side of the portal, so I guessed the two of you must have merged, but, wow, I didn't expect that. It's great, fantastic!"

"I can hardly believe it myself, but from what you just told me it kind of makes sense."

"Superintendent Davies just told me they're arresting all the overlords, so it looks like everything bad is coming undone."

"Yes indeed! I suppose you'll be going straight back to Earth now."

"Yeah, once Damon's discharged from hospital I suppose, but, um, I'm not sure if Loraine wants me back."

"She'll be over the moon and all will be forgiven the moment she sees you, I'm sure."

"I, I hope so."

"Well good luck and all the very best. Stay in touch, okay?"

"I will, yes, of course."

He handed the phone back to Pip. "Willy's got his arm back."

David and Cam both looked at him. "Seriously?"

"Yes, he merged with the other Willy and it's made him whole."

The three wrapped their arms around each other, laughing and crying with joy and relief.

“Before I forget,” Joel said, reaching into his pocket and turning to Hamati once they’d separated. “I was supposed to give you these.”

“What are they?”

“Hair from Roly and Drago; Roly said you’d know what to do with them.”

For a moment Hamati looked puzzled, before his face lit up like a Christmas tree. “This fantastic, Joel! You just saved galaxy!”

“What? How?”

Hamati rubbed his chin. “This might be easier if I use my native tongue. Can you understand me?”

“Yes, perfectly.”

“Now that the Barungi are back on Huntress and the Tivinel refugees on Ignus are free to travel, there’s a good chance they might start entering into relationships, opening up the risk of them inadvertently or otherwise creating a new Pasha.”

“That’s what Tristan was on about, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, what he said was true enough, even though his solution was abominable.”

“So what’s with the hair?”

“From what we’d been able to learn, there were only two family lines from which the Pasha came, one Tivinel and one Barungi. Usually they’d alternate one to the other.”

“Like Roly and Drago.”

“Exactly. We reckoned there had to be a specific genetic trait responsible, but didn’t have the technology needed to confirm it and then the apocalypse destroyed all our records anyway.”

“So the hair samples —”

“They give us full DNA sequences of the two clans, so we can now trace any survivors here or on Ignus.”

“What will you do if you find any?”

Hamati scratched his chin again. “It’ll be difficult, and I expect the civil libertarians will be up in arms, but we must do whatever it takes to prevent any unions.”

“I hope you succeed.”

“Everything you’ve just done will be for naught if I fail; I must meet with the leader on Ignus as soon as possible.”

“That’ll be Joseph, the head of the Settlers’ Association. Good luck with him; he’s pretty stubborn and full of himself.”

“He’s a Tivinel; what do you expect?”

Joel sighed, wondering if there could ever be true peace between the two species, but Hamati grinned, looking just like the young Barungi he’d met in Kurramurra.

“I’ll do whatever it takes, Joel; trust me. I’m not like my father.”

“I know and I’m sure the galaxy’s in good hands. You should talk to Willy, Luke and Carla’s son; they have a farm just over the ridge from Lake Placid. I think he’s earned a lot of respect from the settlers and you’ll find him pretty easy to get along with.”

Hamati nodded. “Even if we reach an agreement, it’ll require long-term vigilance, but, um, there’s no other choice.”

“Good luck and let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“You’ve already done far more than your share, Joel, but thank you for the offer.”

Joel shook his hand, which earned him a hug from the elderly statesman.

“Hamati go now,” he said, reverting to the common tongue. “Much to do.”

* * *

Damon looked up from his bed as they entered the ward, causing the machine probing his head to make a reprimanding beep. “Damn tests, they know everything’s fine so I don’t see the point.”

“They need to make sure I didn’t miss anything,” Damien said, standing and walking over to welcome everyone back. “Anyway, the tests will be done in a couple of hours and if nothing shows up you’ll be free to leave.”

Damon turned to Joel. “I guess you’ll want to get back to Earth as soon as possible, so why don’t you all head over to the seminary, freshen up and grab something to eat, and as soon as they release me we can go.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Of course, I’ve never felt better; anyway, the ship practically flies itself once we jump to subspace.”

Pip’s phone rang again just as they were leaving the hospital. “Yes, he’s with me now; I’ll put him on.” He handed it to David.

“Hello?”

“David, it’s Kim Sanders here, Vice Chancellor of Apogee University.”

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to apologise for the way you and Cameron were treated by the Dean of Astrophysics and to let you know you’re free to return to your classes. Given what you’ve been through, though, I imagine you’ll want to spend some time with your families so let’s say we put you down to restart at the beginning of next semester.”

“That’s great, thank you, but what about the Dean?”

“He’s no longer with us, as it looks like he’ll be facing a lengthy prison sentence over his involvement in Minerix.”

“Oh, right, that’s good.”

“We’ve also decided to offer you both honorary scholarships as a form of compensation for the distress and hardship you suffered.”

“Gosh, thank you.”

“Good, that’s settled then. Have a safe trip home and we look forward to having you back on campus soon.”

“Thanks.” He handed the phone back to Pip before turning to Cam. “That was the Vice Chancellor; we’re restarting our courses next semester, the Dean’s been sacked and we’re both to receive scholarships to make up for the distress and hardship we suffered.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. We have a couple of months till we go back, so, um, I suppose you’ll want to return to your family on Hazler.”

Cam grimaced, his lower lip starting to tremble. “No, not really, I think they were glad to be rid of me. In my family, if you’re not an astute businessman rolling in the big bucks, you’re worthless scum.”

David wrapped him in a hug. “Hey, no, Cam, no way. You just saved the universe, didn’t you?”

“Me? All I did was almost get myself killed.”

“Yeah, but if you hadn’t leapt at Tristan when you did, he’d have jabbed Drago with the dart and it would’ve all been over then and there. You’re the bravest person I know, Cam, and that’s the truth.”

“What about Joel?”

“Yeah, I suppose he’s pretty brave too, for a git, but his bravery is reactive whereas you were proactive.”

Cam sniffled. “Um, Davo, did you, um, when I was paralysed, I was still conscious, you know, so, like, did you mean what you said?”

“What did I say?”

“You said you loved me. Did you really mean it?”

“Don’t be daft, Cam. Couldn’t you tell I was overjoyed at the thought of getting a new room-mate?” David grinned, hugging him even tighter. “Hey, why don’t you come back to Earth with me and we can hang out together on a quiet beach somewhere?”

Cam straightened himself up. “That sounds good to me, Davo.”

“Great, I’ll call my parents when we get to the seminary and let them know what we’re doing.”

Joel thought he was having another *déjà vu* attack when he entered the dining room in the seminary, as millions of years on, it didn’t look all that different. He ordered the grilled fish, making sure it couldn’t be served either separate or stirred, before collecting his cutlery and joining Cam, Pip and Cloe at a table in the far corner.

A minute later David joined them. “Sorry, I’ve just been speaking to my parents, letting them know to expect Cam and me in a few days. Loraine was there so I had a quick word with her too.”

Joel could feel the terrible loneliness monster from his childhood creeping up behind him, its mouth gaping as it prepared once more to swallow him whole. “Wh-what did she say?”

“She was glad to hear you’re still alive, so that’s the good news I guess, but she doesn’t want to speak to you yet as she still needs time to think.”

Joel could feel the monster’s icy breath on the back of his neck. “Oh, I see.”

“The problem is, Joel, she loves you too much and can’t bear the thought of losing you again. I know it sounds silly, but –”

“It’s not silly at all, it’s just that I don’t know what I can do to make things right. Either she loses me by pushing me away or lives in fear of losing me, which is a lose-lose scenario if ever I heard one.”

“Give her time,” Cloe said, “and show her stability. She knows Tristan is dead, she just needs to realise that all her fears died with him. You can’t tell her that, don’t even try or you’ll just rile her, but you have to show it in everything you do. You have to be solid, grounded and secure; no traipsing off around the universe at the drop of a hat.”

“But I never wanted to in the first place –”

“That’s right, but what happened has left deep scars in both of you. You must let her find her own way back; don’t hound her or make ultimatums or anything, just be there when she’s ready to find you again.”

Joel covered his face, trying to stop himself crying.

“Cry all you want, Joel, and don’t think for a moment you’re embarrassing yourself in front of us. You have scars to heal as well and crying is part of that.”

“Th-thanks.”

David leaned over the table, taking Joel’s hand in both of his. “I know I’ve been teasing you a lot when I really shouldn’t, but that’s just how I am; don’t take it personally, you know that. I’ll be hanging out with Cam on Earth for a couple of months before we go back to Cornipus, so feel free to use me as a mediator as much as you like.”

“And if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I’ll be there in a jiffy,” Cam said. “Make that half a jiffy. I owe you my life, Joel, but even if I didn’t, I know first-hand how terrifying the loneliness monster is.”

Joel nodded, sniffing, as Pip placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know that monster too, particularly in the years leading up to my confrontation with Drago, and much of the sorrow the Black Dolphin speaks of stems from loneliness, as he was the last of his kind. But he also speaks of *sunshine, warm seas and love; of a simple life, lost long ago but perhaps even now still redeemable*. There’s much sunshine and love inside you, Joel, you just have to let it out.”

Your soul shines brightly, let it shine!

“Let it shine,” Joel said, smiling as he took a bite of fish. “Damn, this has gone cold.”

“That’s easy fixed,” Cloe said. “Give it to me and I’ll put it in the microwave.”

They were just finishing dessert when Damon walked in, a rucksack in his hand. “All the tests are clear so I’m right to go whenever you’re ready.”

Cloe turned to Joel. “Do you want to leave now or stay the night?”

“I’d like to go now, if that’s okay. I’m dead tired and if I can sleep on the ship, that’s less time I’ll be pacing up and down asking *are we there yet?*”

“That suits me,” David said.

“Me too,” Cam added.

Damon nodded. “My ship’s parked out the back, so whenever you’re ready.”

Joel embraced both Cloe and Pip. “Thanks for all you’ve done; you’ve been wonderful.”

“It’s us who should be thanking you,” Pip said. “You go with the Black Dolphin’s blessing; that much I know.”

A few minutes later, the *Renewal* rose into the night sky over Huntress, entering the subspace transfer orbit before disappearing in a flash of orange light.

* * *

Joel slept for most of the thirty-six hour flight to Earth, and even when awake his mind felt blissfully numb. The shine in his soul had dulled to a low ember; warm, comforting and peaceful like a snug fireplace on a cold rainy night. Damon, Cam and David floated around him, saying little but exuding a calming aura of friendship; the kind that doesn’t need words or actions but is just *there*.

They say that in space, no-one can hear you scream, but no-one can hear you laugh either. It’s best to just go with the flow, he thought, *just go with the flow*.

The count-down timer on the console had reached its final seconds when Joel sauntered into the cockpit, looking bright and relaxed.

“Are we there yet?”

Damon turned as a flash of orange light enveloped them. “Yep, we’re there.”

Far below, Earth’s seas and continents spread out beneath them as the navigation screen burst into life, locking one by one onto the Milky Way’s subspace beacons.

“Renewal, this is Orbital Control, please hold your position.”

“Roger, *Renewal* standing by.”

“What’s that about?” Joel asked.

Damon shrugged. “Maybe there’s a freighter heading in or out; they always have priority over civilian traffic.”

“Renewal, on my mark drop to orbital level twenty-three and proceed to the customs station.”

“Wilco.”

“Three, two, one, mark. Orbital Control out.”

Damon engaged the retro-thrusters, dropping the nose of the ship towards the planet. “*Renewal* out.”

“That was very terse and formal,” David said. “Usually they’re a lot more laid back and chatty. I wonder what’s happening.”

Damon pointed to the customs station looming up ahead. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

“Renewal, this is Customs, proceed to docking bay five.”

“*Renewal*, wilco.”

Joel gulped. “Maybe we did something in the past that’s changed things here.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing but a formality.”

Two men in dark suits came forward to meet them as they stepped from the ship.

“I’m Claude le Grange from the *Brigade Criminelle* in France and this is Detective Inspector Kent from Australia. We’ve been investigating Joel’s kidnapping and have just a few formalities to complete, if you don’t mind.”

David shrugged while Cam and Joel looked each other.

“I understand Tristan Gosling is dead, is that correct?”

“Um, yes,” Joel said.

“Which of you killed him?”

“None, actually; it was someone from Ignus. Is he in trouble?”

“No, not at all, it’s just for the files, you understand. Speaking of Ignus, I believe you also instigated the political and financial upheaval there, is that right?”

“I guess so, but I was just trying to help the people.”

“I understand perfectly, Joel. You’re not in any trouble, this is purely for my curiosity, but now Inspector Kent has something for you.”

“Come through here,” Kent said, leading them into a side room where he pulled a backpack from a large evidence bag. “We found this while searching Gosling’s premises and believe it to be yours. It contains some board shorts and a tee shirt, which we’ve washed for you, along with your wallet, passport and Camino credential. There was also a bag of apples, bananas and oranges but I’m afraid they’d gone putrid by the time we found them.”

“Thanks so much, that’s great.”

“You’ve also helped resolve a mystery that’d plagued my grandfather right up to his death. He was the desk sergeant at Katoomba Police Station and encountered some Tivinel in the course of an investigation, but thanks to you I can finally mark that case as closed.”

Joel scratched his head, having no idea what he was talking about.

“Damon, David and Cam,” le Grange said, “you’re free to go now, but I need to take Joel back to France to tie up some loose ends of my own. It won’t take long, I promise.”

David bristled. “Now just a damn second. How do we know you’re not another kidnapper?”

Kent and le Grange both showed him their warrant cards. “Here, David, use my phone to call your parents; they’ll vouch for me, I’m sure.”

David placed the call, a grin slowly spreading across his face. “Dad said everything’s above board and you should go with him, Joel. Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Excellent, thank you, gentlemen,” le Grange said.

“What’s going on, Davo?” Cam asked.

“I’ll tell you once we’re on board.” David wrapped Joel in a hug. “It’s fine, Joel, really; just some bureaucrat in France with a form to complete. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks. See you.”

Damon and Cam each shook Joel’s hand before the three returned to their ship.

“Over this way, Joel,” le Grange said, leading him to a small shuttle in the corner of the docking bay. “Don’t forget your backpack.”

Joel followed, wondering what else could possibly go wrong.

“Fear not, Joel,” le Grange said as his shuttle descended over the Mediterranean Sea. “The detective sergeant from Montpellier is a stickler for details and wishes to speak with you at the scene of the crime, as it were. She has just a few simple questions to complete her report and then you’ll be free to go.”

Free to go, but where? Would he be welcome back in Coolum Beach? Who’d get the house if the divorce went through? Where on this planet could he possibly live that wouldn’t haunt him forever with his loss?

Below, Joel could see the Pont du Diable and the stream flowing from that dreadful gully Loraine had fallen into. He turned away from the window as a shiver ran up and down his spine, wishing he could be anywhere but here.

As the sun crept over the horizon on a clear summer morning, le Grange circled the village of Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert before gently setting down atop the abbey tower. Joel stepped from the shuttle, drawn back to that moment here when his ordeal had begun. At the time, he’d vowed to return and complete his pilgrimage with Loraine, but although he was back, he still seemed as far from fulfilling that oath as ever.

“Come on down,” le Grange said, leading him into the stairwell and along a cold damp corridor in the monastery’s basement. Before him stood the door he’d seen so often in his nightmares. “She’s waiting for you in there.”

Once more, Joel felt an insane urge to turn on his heels and run, but didn't, instead gritting his teeth, opening the door and walking though.

On the other side of the room, facing away while studying something of interest in the corner, stood a barefoot woman dressed in colourful shorts and a tank top, surprising Joel as he'd have expected the French police to be more formally attired. Her long blonde hair shimmered under the cold electric light, causing the butterflies in his stomach to all take flight.

As she turned, he suddenly felt pulled inside out; it was dead rats and turds all over again. *Could this be real, could anything be real?*

"L-Lorraine?"

She glided towards him, engulfing him in a hug and squeezing for all it was worth. "Oh Joel, my sweet, adorable and utterly gullible Joel."



Lorraine led Joel up the stairs to where the abbot was waiting.

"Monsignor."

"Bless you, Joel, you can't imagine the relief in my heart from seeing you here alive and well after all this time. Please allow me the honour of signing your credential."

Joel pulled the document from his backpack, looking at the last entry from the hotel in Montpellier. It seemed so long ago; it'd been another person, another life, so much had happened, and yet –

He didn't dwell on the thought, instead anchoring his mind in the here and now. "Thank you, Father Abbot."

The signing completed, Lorraine led him from the nave and down the steps into the early morning sunshine. Across the road, a café owner beckoned them over. "Madame, monsieur, it would honour me greatly to give you breakfast before you continue on your pilgrimage."

Hand in hand, they followed him into the courtyard where a table had already been prepared.

“So, um,” Joel said to Loraine as the owner dashed inside, “if you don’t mind me asking, how much of that charade with the policeman did you have a hand in?”

“All of it, of course. Cloe called me just after you left Huntress and we had a nice long natter. Most of it was her idea and Inspector le Grange was happy to play along.”

Joel covered his face, trying to decide whether he was furious or delighted, as the owner returned carrying a large platter. “A special treat for you, monsieur.”

Joel stared at it, now unable to contain his laughter. “Wild berries and yams!”

“The best wild berries and yams in all of France, monsieur.”

* * *

Three months later, with autumn drawing to a close, Loraine and Joel stood before the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in the Plaza del Obradoiro, the culminating point for pilgrims on the Paths of Saint James.

“Gosh, what an amazing building,” Joel said, looking up at the spires. “Do the Delphinidae have anything like this?”

Loraine turned to him. “There’s the temple on Bluehaven, but it’s a stone hut compared to this. Just standing here makes the fifteen hundred-kilometre walk worthwhile, don’t you think?”

Joel looked at the sole of his left foot, now as tough as any boot leather but still perfectly supple. “Yeah, it does, but I’m not sure I’d want to walk all the way back to Arles.”

Joel’s thoughts turned inward, reflecting on the experiences they’d shared since resuming their journey in Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert. For the first few weeks, they’d both been plagued by nightmares, much to the consternation of their fellow pilgrims. But as they’d slipped into the routine of walking through the peaceful fields and villages of western France and sleeping on the bottom bunk at youth hostels or in welcoming farmhouses, those dreams subsided, replaced by a happy weariness.

Joel had been dreading the crossing of the Pyrenees, having heard reports of snow and blizzards, but Loraine had been reassuring,

telling him that someone who'd passed through a volcano should hardly be troubled by a little ice. In any event, the weather gods turned on a late burst of summer for them, with Joel able to comfortably complete the crossing without having to even don his tee shirt, let alone the heavy cloak everyone insisted he'd need.

Once into Spain, it had been a delightful walk along tree-lined roads, with autumn putting on a fine show of cool nights and warm still days under a cloudless Mediterranean sky.

On one particularly clear moonless night in a remote patch of countryside away from city lights, Loraine had been able to spot the Triangulum galaxy, the place of her birth. The sight had upset Joel, though, stirring up too many ghosts, so she'd quickly led him back into the farmhouse where they'd made love in their sleeping bag in front of a huge open fireplace.

"Let's go inside before the crowds arrive," Loraine said, snapping Joel out of his introspection.

He was about to put on his tee shirt, but she stopped him. "You've come all this way in just those shorts, so you owe it to yourself to finish like that. You're a pilgrim after all, don't forget; you're not supposed to be dressing up."

"Yeah, you're right." He stuffed the shirt back into his pack before following her up the steps through the wrought-iron gates marked with a seashell, the symbol of Saint James.

"Oh my," Loraine said as they passed through the magnificent Portico de la Gloria.

The three doorways before them were adorned with a mass of sculpture depicting the Last Judgement, with Christ in His glory high above the central arch. Below Him, on the column of the middle door, was Saint James himself, sitting with his walking staff and holding a scroll saying *Misit me Dominus*, the Lord sent me.

Joel stared at the saint, depicted barefoot and wearing a simple robe, his thoughts turning immediately to Roly, the gentle Pasha of Huntress. A tear ran down his cheek as he remembered Roly's selfless sacrifice for what he called the Greater Good, and but for that noble act, none of this here, the cathedral, towns, villages and farms, would have ever come to pass.

Loraine placed her hand on his shoulder but said nothing; sometimes silence really is golden.

Passing through the entrance and into the nave, they stood in wonder looking at the huge columns supporting the high vaulted ceiling, everything adorned by statues of biblical figures. Above the altar stood another representation of Saint James, with a queue of pilgrims passing up a narrow passageway to kiss his mantle. Loraine and Joel joined the line.

Below the altar was the crypt, the pilgrims' final destination where the saint's relics were housed in a silver reliquary behind an incongruous barred steel gate. Joel wondered whether Roly's remains had been similarly entombed, hoping that somewhere in the vaults below the Black Delphinidae seminary on Huntress, they had.

On an impulse, he knelt and kissed the marble floor, the closest he'd come to paying his last respects to both the saint and his beloved Pasha.

When he stood, Loraine took his hand, leading him quietly out and across the courtyard to the registry office around the corner, where pilgrims gathered to record the final stop in their credential and receive the much-coveted holographic Compostela, a proof of their pilgrimage. For Joel it was an anticlimax, a trivial keepsake; the true meaning of his journey was in the walking, the solitude and the companionship of the Camino. *It's all about the journey, not the destination*, he thought, nodding to himself.

"It's Joel and Loraine, is it not?" an elderly priest said as they turned away from the machine.

"Um, yes."

"Follow me, please."

The priest led them through a side door to an ancient office deep within the building, where he pulled down a musty old book from the shelves along one side. "It would please me greatly if you would allow me to record your pilgrimage in the old-fashioned way."

"Of course."

They each handed him their credentials while he filled a quill pen from an ink bottle. "Loraine and Joel Morison," he said as he wrote, "such ordinary names for such extraordinary people. May the blessings of the Lord shine upon you."

“Thank you, Father.”

“No, I thank you.”

The registration completed and the book returned to its shelf, the priest led them to another room at the back of the building. Waiting there, grinning in eager anticipation, were Jack and Jill Morison along with all the Collins family and friends.

“Hip-hip!” Jack shouted.

“Hooray!” responded the rest.

Lorina dashed forward, wrapping her arms around her daughter and son-in-law. “You’re both looking so wonderful and radiant; we’ve been waiting for this moment for months now.”

“We thought it best to leave you in peace while you completed your pilgrimage,” Mark said, walking forward and embracing them both.

“Thanks,” Loraine said. “We really needed the time to ourselves, didn’t we, Joel?”

“Yes indeed, thank you.”

Jack stepped forward, still with a goofy grin on his face, before placing his hands on Joel’s shoulders. “Look at you, son; fancy that, pulling off the greatest financial sting in the history of the universe. You bloody beauty!”

“I love you, Dad,” Joel said as they embraced, “really and truly. In the darkest of times, you were always there, whispering the wisdom I’d never wanted to hear before. You were right, Dad; you were always right.”

“No, Joel, it’s you who was right; you’ve shown me something I’d never wanted to see in you before: humility, compassion and self-sacrifice. I’m so proud, just so proud to be your father.”

David and Cam stepped forward once Jack and Joel had separated. “You timed this well to coincide with the mid-semester break,” David said. “Look at you both, official pilgrims of the Paths of Saint James.”

Loraine kissed her brother on the nose. “Thanks for coming, David; we both appreciate it. We never expected anything like this.”

“It’s the least we could do, and anyway Damon wanted to test-fly Cam’s invention.”

“Huh?”

“Remember that experiment Hamati had set up in his room back, you know, whenever that was?” Cam asked.

Joel scratched his head. “Yeah, he was trying to unravel the mysteries of subspace, wasn’t he?”

“His method of exciting the crystals was something I’d never seen before, so when we returned to the university I arranged with one of the lecturers to do some experiments.”

“What did you find?”

“A higher order resonance in intergalactic grade crystals; one that works, well, better.”

“We did the flight from Huntress to here in just eighteen hours,” David said. “The freight companies are falling over themselves to purchase the rights.”

Cam blushed. “I’ll be using the proceeds to set up educational trust funds on Huntress and Ignus. Hamati and Willy are organising everything.”

Joel embraced them both. “That’s wonderful! I hope everything goes well.”

“We’ll blame you if it doesn’t,” David said, grinning while poking Joel in the ribs.

“I’m sure you will.”

Loraine gave her brother a dirty look before turning to see an elderly man in a wheelchair. “Mr Red Wolf?”

“Joey, please. It’s wonderful to see you both again.”

Joel shook Joey’s offered hand. “I’m so glad you’re here, Joey, as I wanted to thank you for what you told me when we first met at the airport.”

“Your soul shines brightly in the spirit realm, Joel; it does indeed, brighter now than ever if I’m not mistaken.”

“It was the key to defeating the skin-walkers, or at least the things controlling them.”

Joey nodded. “Such things can never be fully vanquished, for they’re not of nature, but no, this is a happy occasion and we mustn’t speak of them. Ashley and I have brought you a gift.”

Ashley opened the bag on the back of the wheelchair, lifting out an oak carving, a totem in the form of a platypus. “Since you’re a nature boy at heart, we wanted to make you something from the natural

world. We thought an Australian animal would be best, so Joey spoke to Billy who suggested the platypus. I hope you like it.”

Joel blushed. “Thank you so much; it’s not only beautiful but also my favourite. I always keep an eye out for them when I’m near any creeks or rivers, but they’re very hard to find.”

“There’s platypus spirit in you, Joel, I’m sure of it. I hope your path continues to follow the *nature ways*.”

“I’ll make sure it does,” Loraine said. “Thanks for such a wonderful and thoughtful gift.”

“It’s our pleasure.”

She turned to see Peter Thorpe approaching, arm in arm with an attractive elderly woman. “Peter, thanks for coming!”

“We couldn’t miss it, Loraine, and anyway my fiancée wanted to tour Europe before we became too old for such things.”

“Fiancée?”

“Yes, this is Elsa; we met at that symposium in Sydney just before your wedding and have since discovered how much we have in common. It’s like we’ve known each other all our lives without actually knowing it.”

“That’s true,” Elsa said. “I’m sure he’s always been there, an empty space inside me waiting to be filled.”

“We have lots of lost time to make up for,” Peter said, kissing her. “Now after all these years I finally feel complete; it’s as if a terrible sadness has been lifted from my soul.”

“I’m so happy for you both,” Loraine said, hugging them.

“Yeah, me too,” Joel said. He turned to Loraine after they’d stepped away. “Did he really say her name was Elsa?”

“Yes; it’s a common enough name but even so, it seems too much of a coincidence. I wonder; could Pedro have done something, some subtle change to the course of history, that’s brought them together in this time?”

Joel nodded. “I think perhaps he did.”

Epilogue

Hamati dropped a handful of soil onto the coffin, before Pedro and Elsa did the same. Other Barungi and Gomeral from the nearby village formed an orderly queue, quietly paying their respects to clan leader Jarred.

“I can never replace him,” Hamati said to Pedro as they stepped aside.

“And nor should you; you have different qualities, Hamati, qualities that’ll be sorely needed in the years ahead.”

“Careful, Pedro, you don’t want to say anything that might mess with the future.”

“Don’t worry, I have only the vaguest notion of what’s coming and even that’s third hand and most likely inaccurate.”

Another of the Barungi stepped over to them. “Excuse me, Hamati. The Pasha, curse his name, has called for parley and wants both you and the Tivinel leader to meet with him on the island.”

“Tell him I’ll be there.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Hamati grimaced as soon as he’d left. “I hate it when they call me that.”

“So what are you going to do?” Elsa asked.

“I have little choice but to accept whatever terms he dictates. Our army is spent; those still alive have barely the energy to stand and if the Tivinel destroy our crops we’re finished.”

Pedro grinned. “I know the Pasha’s supposed to be an all-seeing telepath but Drago’s still a boy and from all accounts didn’t see Tristan sneaking up on him until he had a knife at his throat. Do you think you can shield your innermost thoughts from him without it looking like you’re doing it?”

“Of course, that’s easy.”

“Excellent. Body language is everything, so what you should do is talk and act as if you hold the upper hand; make it sound like agreeing to his peace is a concession on your part.”

“I see, yes, but the Tivinel will know I’m bluffing.”

“They might *think* you’re bluffing, but they can’t know for certain. You must keep them guessing.”

Hamati nodded. “I want you both to accompany me, but you’ll have to be disguised as slaves.”

“Why?”

“Free Gomeral are no longer permitted on the Pasha’s island.”

Elsa spat on the ground before blushing as she remembered where she was. “Sorry, uncle, but that’s disgusting.”

“It’s something we’ll all have to get used to, I’m afraid.”

On his previous visit to the island, Pedro had thought the household staff looked like actors and actresses performing in some great dramatic work, but now they were more like prison guards. In place of the Count, it was the Screw who led them through into the Pasha’s hall.

Hamati gasped, staring at the walls, for where there had once been beautiful frescos of corals and sea grasses, amongst which a Black Dolphin reputedly hid, there were now only fanged creatures like winged lizards or dragons on a sooty grey background.

“The ashes of hell,” Elsa whispered to Pedro.

“Hush,” Hamati said, walking forward to bow before Drago who was seated on Roly’s throne atop the dais. Behind him hung a huge portrait of himself, a black-skinned boy with bright red hair and pupils like frozen pitch.

More prison guards ushered Hamati to a seat on one side of a large table set before the dais, with the Tivinel mayor Sandford sitting opposite. Hamati grinned at him, showing as many teeth as possible, and Pedro was pleased to see Sandford look away.

“Hamati, what are these Gomeral doing here?” Drago said.

“They’re my personal slaves, sire.”

“I don’t recall Jarred ever needing slaves, but then you’re not your father.”

“No, I’m not.”

Drago cleared his throat. “This war you two are fighting serves no purpose other than to destroy valuable resources, *my* resources, and will henceforth cease. You’ll both withdraw your forces to your respective bases immediately.”

“But sire, the Barungi started it,” Sandford said.

“No,” Hamati said, “you started it by conspiring to kill our rightful Pasha. I wouldn’t trust a Tivinel as far as I could throw one!”

“I didn’t come here to listen to Barungi insults!”

“Enough!” Drago said. “There’ll be no more bickering; my word is final and my word is law, is that understood?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Sandford?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I need you both working productively, not fighting each other, for I have great plans for this world, yes, great plans. So, since you’re unwilling to cooperate with one another, I hereby decree that from this day hence, the Barungi will be confined to the coastal lowlands. Any Barungi found standing on ground more than fifty metres above the Geodetic Height Datum will be immediately executed.”

Hamati leapt to his feet. “That’s an outrage! Sire.”

Drago grinned. “Yes, it is, but you have only yourselves to blame. Now Sandford, I’m granting the Tivinel free rein over the rest of the planet, but in return you’ll build a network of fine cities and roads for me, filled with factories and industry like never before seen. For too long my predecessor stifled development of this world; now things will be different.”

Sandford grinned. “Thank you, my liege.”

Drago turned back to Hamati. “Such development will require much greater food resources, which the Barungi will supply. Your farm production must increase tenfold or you will starve.”

“That’s impossible; we don’t have the workforce, particularly now the Tivinel have killed so many.”

“Indeed, which brings me to the third element of my master plan. We all know that the Gomeral, while lacking any of our telepathic ability, have great manual dexterity, therefore, from this day forward, any Gomeral over twelve years of age and not otherwise indentured will be enslaved into my service, from where they’ll be sent to work with the Tivinel industrialists or the Barungi farmers as I may see fit.”

Elsa looked about to protest, but Pedro restrained her. “Not now, not here,” he whispered.

Drago looked firstly at Sandford and then Hamati. “Are there any questions?”

Hamati shook his head while quietly fuming.

“You are most kind, sire,” Sandford said.

“Kindness has nothing to do with it. I want results, Sandford, and that’s all that matters.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Excellent, you’re both dismissed.”

The Screw led Hamati and his entourage back to the portal room, standing guard until they’d all passed through.

“So what do we do?” Elsa asked once they were back in Hamati’s house.

Hamati sighed. “We have no choice but to obey the Pasha.”

“What about us?” Pedro asked.

“I’ll have you both indentured to me; Drago’s already seen you with me so to do otherwise would look suspicious.”

“Very well, but I take it we’re to be more than mere slaves.”

Hamati stared into space for a moment. “Those three Gomeral who came with you from the future, Joel, David and Cam, appeared intelligent, resourceful and compassionate, am I right?”

“Yes indeed.”

“The future’s perhaps not as bleak as it seems and Gomerai have a part to play in it, an important part. No, you and Elsa won’t be mere slaves, as you put it. I want you to form a secret Gomerai society, one that to all outward appearances is only concerned with the well-being of Drago’s slaves, but there’ll be another agenda known only to us.”

“What’s that?”

Hamati drew them close. “The Rise of the Gomerai.”