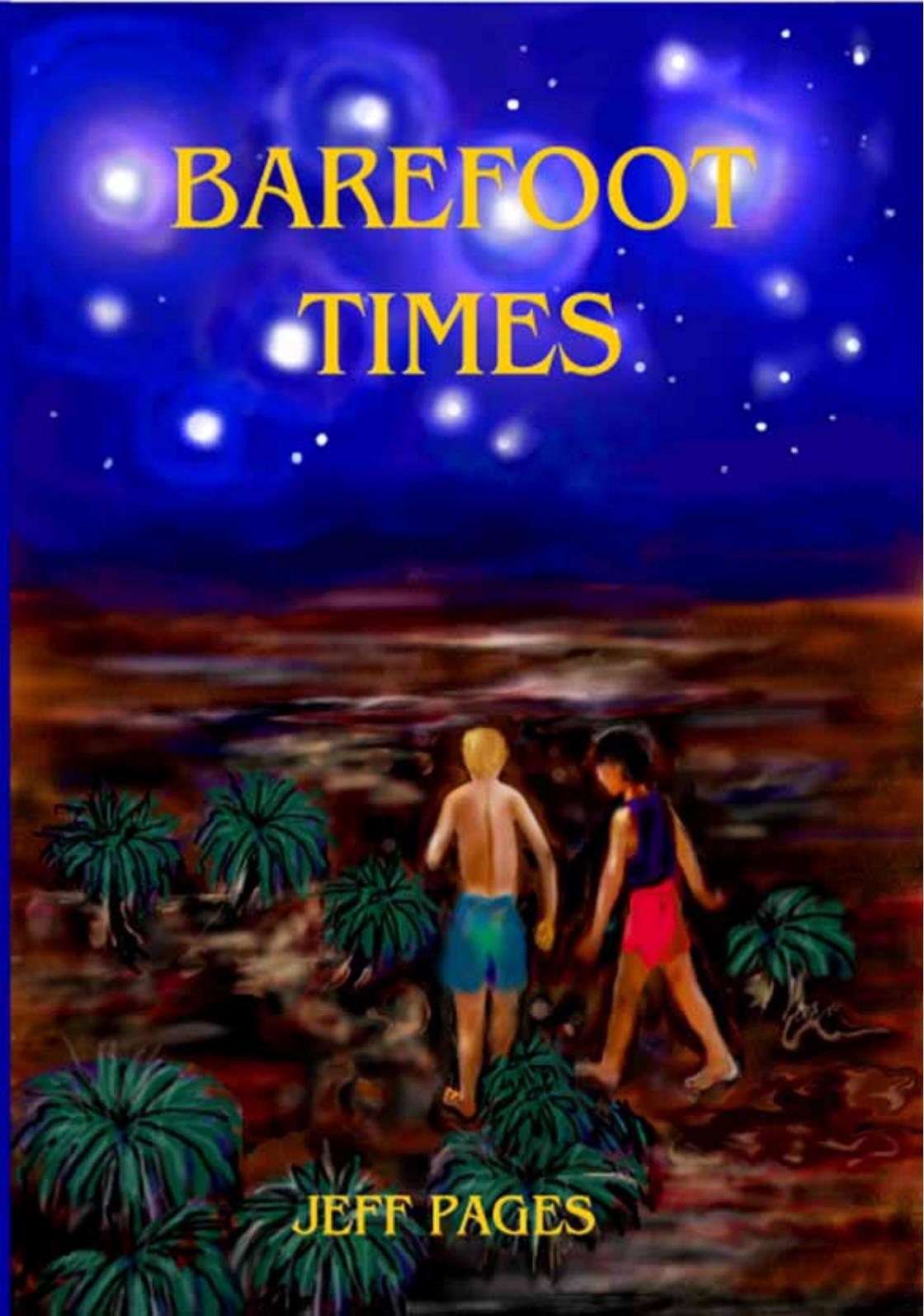


BAREFOOT TIMES

The background of the cover is a night scene. The top half is a dark blue sky filled with numerous bright, glowing stars of varying sizes. Below the sky is a landscape with a path that leads into the distance. The path is flanked by several palm trees with green fronds. In the foreground, the path is dark and appears to be made of dirt or sand. The overall atmosphere is serene and evocative of a tropical night.

JEFF PAGES

Barefoot Times

by

Jeff Pages



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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. There he joined the Tamworth Bushwalking and Canoe Club and spent many weekends bushwalking in the nearby parks and forests, including the Mt Kaputar National Park which features prominently in *Barefoot Times*. 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 his writing he brings together this unlikely combination of science and barefooting.

Table of Contents

Foreword.....	3
Part One <i>The Course of History</i>	4
Husks.....	5
The Barefoot School	7
Poles Apart.....	25
Barefoot Astronomers	42
Undoing the Past	68
Husks (2).....	72
Resolution	73
Postscript.....	78
Part Two <i>The Bane of Eridani</i>	80
The Beginning.....	81
Dead for a While	88
Shadows of the Past	97
The Bubble Bursts.....	107
Aftermath	116
Part Three <i>Emu and Dodo</i>	120
The Desert.....	121
Destiny	122
Time Out	129
The Eighth Sister.....	142
The Third Brother	149
Endgame	160
The Desert (2)	169
Part Four <i>For the Love of Jason</i>	170
Awakening	171
Sixth Sense.....	173
Interlude	181
Seeing Ghosts.....	187
A Helping Hand	198
Promises.....	207
Postscript.....	208
Part Five <i>Troubled Times</i>	209
Death and Deceit.....	210
The AusScience Conspiracy	216
The Empress.....	229
Time's Orphan	237
Journey's End.....	243

Part Six <i>In the Fullness of Time</i>	252
The Firstborn.....	253
The Son of Gallad	257
A World Reborn.....	263
The Dolphins of Sheol	272
The Enemy	282
Elf Child.....	291
Part Seven <i>A Collision of Times</i>	292
Elfstar.....	293
One Fateful Day	299
In Search of Hope	314
Bluehaven	322
The Siege of the Delphinidae.....	330
A Race Against Time.....	338
Martyr and Loria	345
Christmas	351
Part Eight <i>Barefoot Roots</i>	353
After the Game.....	354
Emu Child	357
Michael Thorpe’s Diary	364
A Chance Meeting	385
Guardian Angel.....	393
Part Nine <i>Old Ghosts</i>	398
Red Sky.....	399
Days Beyond Reckoning, Life Beyond Hope	409
Flight to Bluehaven.....	419
Pieces of the Puzzle.....	432
So Much Love.....	444
Immortality	454
Part Ten <i>Full Circle</i>	455
A Time That Never Was	456
Untangling the Web	466
Jim Hamilton.....	475
Blood on the Temple Floor	485
Curtain Call.....	497

Foreword

While holidaying in Cairns in 1998 I purchased a painting of an Aboriginal boy *Nalili* by artist Diane Sharp. With his endearing grin and deep intelligent eyes, this boy became my principal character Billy Collins and around him I wove a tale that explores some of my ponderings about the nature of space and time.

In its original form this story consisted only of the part which is now called *The Course of History*, and was intended as a contribution to the Society for Barefoot Living (www.barefooters.org). In response to the positive feedback I received from a number of members of that society I began to write further instalments until it finally grew into the complete work that's presented here.

I particularly want to thank Raymond Foret Jr, a blind SBL member from the United States of America, for his ongoing enthusiasm for this project and for suggesting the storyline behind Part 8. Ray in fact wrote the first draft of *Michael Thorpe's Diary*, for which I'm most grateful.

I also wish to thank my mother, Florence Pages, for patiently reading my early drafts and for finding many of my spelling and grammatical errors.

This work contains Aboriginal characters and makes reference to the fictitious Emu people and their Dreaming. I am a strong supporter of Aboriginal culture and reconciliation and no disrespect is intended.

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father Louis Pages and my good friends Bruce Miller and Timothy Walker, who are sadly no longer with us.

Jeff Pages

For more background information visit the *Barefoot Times* website at www.barefoottimes.net.

Part One

The Course of History

Husks

From time to time there are momentous events that change the course of history. But what would have happened if some of those events had gone the other way? Are there alternate time lines that are, perhaps, just as valid as the one we live in? Or is there something (or someone?) that makes one time line more valid, more real, than the others?

I've just been reading in the newspaper of a house fire in Brisbane last night. It was tragic enough in its own right, with two adults and a small boy burnt to death and another man, a relative, killed in a freak accident as he ran across the road to help. But I'd known one of the victims, the man killed crossing the road. Back when I was doing my doctorate in physics at the university, Todd Myers had been a research assistant on a special project for a few months. I remember him because he was always barefoot, as I too had been back then. Those were happy times for me when the world seemed solid and wholesome. Not like now.

But it's not Todd I'm mourning, nor his sister Julia who died in the fire. It's Julia's husband, an Aboriginal man whom I've never met, but should have, would have if some earlier key event in history had gone the other way. This sounds crazy, and maybe it's just me, but I know it to be true. This world, or this time line, feels wrong in some deep and fundamental way, as if its very core has been hollowed out and we're all just husks now.

I need some fresh air. I put the newspaper aside and walk out the door. The warm sunny day has suddenly become cold and overcast, and the sound of my shoes against the pavement is dull and lifeless. When did I stop being a barefooter and start wearing shoes all the time? I can't remember, and that scares me.

There's no traffic in the street and no-one else about. The whole world seems deserted and the silence is boring into me. A chilling wind blows against my face, yet in spite of the cold I'm sweating profusely. About fifty metres down the road I stop as a wave of memories washes over me, of a time that never was but should have been. I stagger and fall against an iron fencepost, lost in those memories.

The Barefoot School

The day dawned hot and sunny as it always does in Narrabri in late January. It was a day of mixed feelings for me, the first at my new school. The move from Brisbane four weeks earlier had been an enormous upheaval in the life of this fourteen-year-old boy, and our departure a very emotional one. I'd had a small circle of close friends whom I'd known forever and saying goodbye to them was, well, pretty hard. Mum kept telling me I'd soon make plenty of new ones but somehow that only made it feel worse.

My father, a research physicist with AusScience, had been transferred to the radio telescope on the outskirts of Narrabri and the weeks before Christmas were spent going through all the hassles and excitement of choosing a new house and finding a buyer for the old one. Our new place was very nice, I must admit, a veritable mansion compared to what we were living in back in Brisbane. The disparity in real estate prices saw to that. But it still wasn't home.

I'd spent New Year's Eve with my friends watching the fireworks display on the Brisbane River, although I don't think any of us really felt much like celebrating. Afterwards we rode the train home in uncharacteristic silence, then walked back to my almost-empty house where we awkwardly shook hands and said our goodbyes. I stood outside the gate watching as they slowly wandered off, each disappearing forever into the night. Eventually, as one lonely sob forced its way out, I walked inside and flopped down onto my mattress, the only thing left in the room that had once been mine. I tossed and turned for what seemed like most of the night until finally, when I'd only just fallen asleep, my mother was shaking me awake. As the first morning of 1989 arrived, we packed the last of our belongings into the removal van and departed.

* * *

My new school had only been open for three years. From what I'd been told, it had been established by a wealthy retired businessman who had originally come from Narrabri and wanted to contribute something back into the town. It was specifically targeted at the needs of Aboriginal children but was open to all-comers. In front of me was the *New Student's Guide* and I opened it again at page five just to make sure I really wasn't dreaming. My eyes went straight to the paragraph headed *School Dress*.

The school has no formal uniform and, within reason, students may wear whatever they wish. Board shorts and tee shirts in the school's colours (yellow and burnt orange) are available from several local retailers at a discount price and these have proven popular with many of the students.

Then came the paragraph that had caused me to almost drop the booklet when I'd first read it.

Thongs, and shoes with elevated soles or heels, are not permitted for safety reasons. Sneakers or securely strapped sandals are acceptable however we prefer our students to attend barefoot, particularly during the warmer months. Our grounds and floors are textured to provide stimulus, exercise and a safe environment for growing feet and we firmly believe a barefoot childhood will prevent many foot and posture problems in later life.

I'd always hated shoes but had grown to accept them as a necessary evil, at least during school hours. To find myself now enrolled in a school that encouraged its students to attend barefoot was beyond my wildest dreams and I still couldn't quite believe it was really true. But there it was in black and white right in front of my eyes.

I pulled myself out of bed and walked to the bathroom for my morning shower. When I returned to my room I saw that Mum had laid out my school clothes on the bed. There was a pair of yellow and burnt orange board shorts and a white tee shirt with the school's emblem on the front. I looked around on the floor and made sure there were no shoes or socks in sight, then pulled on the shorts and went downstairs.

"Those shorts look like they're a good fit, Peter," Mum said as I came into the kitchen. "Have you tried the shirt on yet?"

"No, not yet. I'll put it on after breakfast."

Breakfast for me was a slice of toast and a glass of milk, but I was never a big eater and if I had my own way I wouldn't have anything at all. My parents, who were generally very reasonable as far as adults go, had told me

that when I stopped growing I could quit having breakfast if I wanted to, but for now I had to endure.

Finally the moment came to leave the house. I pulled on the tee shirt, which was a comfortable slightly oversized fit, and walked down the stairs with my backpack over my shoulders. I was sure my mother would tell me to go back and put some shoes on. The front door seemed light years away and with every step forward I expected to hear the dreaded *'Where are your shoes?'*, but she just stood there watching me descend. Finally I made it outside.

I ran to the garage and grabbed my bicycle, jumped on and pedalled off towards the school. It was about a ten minute ride along mostly quiet streets and the terrain was fairly level, making for a pleasant trip. From my street, which was in a newer subdivision, I passed through an older part of town with mostly smaller timber and fibro houses and generally fewer trees. The occasional dog came out to bark at me as I slipped by.

Along the way I passed several groups of school children dressed in the regulation grey shirts, grey shorts and black shoes, and I started to wonder if maybe it was all a sick joke played on the new inmates. *'Hey, look at the new kid with no shoes on. Caught another one good and proper. Ha, ha.'* But at the next street I caught sight of the public school and realised the kids in grey were all heading there. My own school was a further half a kilometre down the road, and as I rounded the next corner I saw just ahead of me two other boys walking towards it. Both were barefoot and I relaxed again. This was going to be great.

Once I'd secured my bike I went into the front of the building and found the main office without too much difficulty. As I approached with my enrolment form the secretary looked up from her typewriter and smiled. She took it from me, hunted round on her desk for its mate my parents had submitted a couple of weeks earlier and then, after checking everything was in order, ticked my name off her list.

"Peter, when the bell sounds at eight-thirty go to the assembly hall, here," she said while pointing to the map of the school grounds she'd given me. "Go to the front row of seats which are reserved for the new students. You'll receive directions to your first class from there."

I had about ten minutes to kill so I wandered around the grassy playground area which was surrounded on three sides by the main school buildings, two storey brick and glass structures set low to the ground so as not to feel too dominating. On the fourth side and occupying the remainder of the grounds were the sporting fields, consisting of two tennis courts, a basketball court and a general purpose oval. Tucked away in one corner of the oval were the cricket practice nets and there were about half a dozen

boys honing their batting and bowling skills. I was reasonably handy with the bat and was looking forward to trying out for the school's team in the coming weeks.

The playground itself looked very attractive with plenty of shady trees, and I happily noted almost all the students I could see were barefoot. I would have guessed about a quarter of them were Aboriginal, with most wearing the yellow and burnt orange board shorts in various different patterns, along with a variety of tee shirts, muscle tops, tank tops and Hawaiian shirts. Many of the girls had bare midriffs and some wore little more than a bikini top. This was definitely a nice school.

The bell sounded and everyone started moving towards the hall. I followed the crowd. As we were nearing the door I happened to notice an Aboriginal boy who wasn't wearing a shirt at all. *'That would be really cool coming to school like that, but Mum would have a fit,'* I thought. He appeared to be about my age, or maybe a year younger, was very skinny and had longish wavy hair that looked as if it had never seen a comb.

Inside the hall were row upon row of fold-up wooden seats and to my right at the far end was a stage with billowing red curtains on either side. At the back I could just make out some leftover props lurking in the wings, and I wondered if I'd get to perform in any plays here. While acting was never likely to become my chosen career, it was something I'd enjoyed doing at my old school. That thought brought back memories of my lost friends, and my spirits fell somewhat as I made my way to the front and joined the other new students in the first row of seats. I was the only one amongst them in bare feet, and most were much more formally dressed than the general school populace. One was even wearing a tie, poor kid.

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. My mother would have said a goose had just walked over my grave, one of those adult sayings that didn't make any sense to me. For a start, why would a goose be wandering round in a cemetery? Anyway, I don't know why I reacted like that to Mr Schilling as he seemed a pleasant enough fellow.

The new students were asked to wait behind after the rest of the school moved off to their classes. Mrs Everlast, the vice principal, took us under her wing and gave us our timetables along with a little pep talk to help us on our way. There were two others in my year, a tall, thin, anaemic-looking boy named Jim Hamilton and an attractive scantily-clad Aboriginal girl named

Sarah Fields. Our first class was English and the three of us made our way through the twisting corridors to the classroom.

Jim, who was in front, knocked on the door and our teacher, Mr Fitzwilliam, came out to meet us. He was a fat, balding man with a jovial face that gave me the impression he enjoyed laughing a lot, and he beckoned us into the room.

“Everyone, please welcome three new fellow sufferers,” he said, taking our forms from us. “Class, meet James Hamilton, Sarah Fields and Peter Thorpe. James, Sarah, Peter, meet your cellmates, I mean classmates.” There was gentle applause from the group of about 25 students.

“James, or do you prefer Jim?” he asked.

“Um, Jim actually,” Jim Hamilton squeaked and then coughed.

“Okay, Jim Actually, you can sit next to David, second row across on the right.” David waved his hand and Jim walked over and sat down, carefully managing not to trip over his own feet.

“Now Sarah, you can sit with Jenny, third row back in the middle,” he said, and Sarah went and sat down. All the male eyes in the class followed her closely.

“Now Peter,” he said to me while looking around the room for another vacant seat. “I’ll put you up the back there with Billy.”

There was a deathly silence and everyone looked around to the back where the Aboriginal boy without the shirt was sitting. He grinned at me as I made my way clumsily towards him.

“Right,” the teacher said, “you can all rearrange your seating if you wish in the weeks ahead, as long as you don’t do it during my classes.”

Billy offered me his hand and we shook. He had a broad grin on his face and was looking deeply into my eyes, then Mr Fitzwilliam started his lesson and we turned to the front.

As we stood up to leave at the end of the period, Billy said, “If you want you can sit next to me in our other classes.”

“Thanks, that would be good. It’s maths next, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. My second-favourite subject, next to science.”

“Hey, me too. I’m really into physics and astronomy and stuff. What about you?”

“Same with me. My father was a senior researcher at the radio telescope, until he died that is.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry,” I said. It shocked me to think of what it would be like for a boy of my age to lose his father. “My dad’s also a researcher there. We moved here just a few weeks ago.”

“It sure is a small world,” he said, but I could see mentioning his father had upset him a bit. We walked on in silence.

At recess Billy and I sat down under a shady tree. The day was turning out to be really hot and I was envying him not wearing a shirt.

“Do you like going barefoot, Peter?” he suddenly asked.

“I do, yeah. I used to hate having to wear shoes at my old school, and as soon as we were let out I’d take them off and walk home barefoot, even in winter. All my friends thought I was nuts.”

“That’s just how I feel too,” he said, now grinning broadly again. “When I was very little my parents tried to put shoes on me but I kicked and fought and, well, eventually they gave up.”

“Cool.”

After school he invited me round to his house. It was one of the older wooden homes I’d cycled past this morning and out the front was a magnificent ghost gum. The yard was planted with lots of native shrubs and the whole place had a well-cared-for and lived-in feel to it. Billy’s mother, a tall Aboriginal woman in her mid thirties I guessed, was out in the garden when we arrived, and she looked up and smiled warmly as we came in. She was a pleasant, kind lady and seemed delighted Billy had brought a friend home with him. I began to suspect maybe this was an unusual occurrence.

Billy’s room was something to behold. He had posters of all the planets around the walls, a really neat-looking telescope and heaps and heaps of books. He saw me looking at the telescope and said I should come round one night and do some star gazing. I said that would be great.

“I was given all this stuff before my father died,” he said softly. “We’re kind of poor now. Mum works part time at the library and does craft stuff that she sells but it’s, well, tough.” A lone tear ran down his cheek and I put my hand on his shoulder. He smiled.

“I think we’re going to be great friends, Peter,” he said solemnly as he wiped his face. I nodded.

* * *

The next week when I arrived at school Mr Fitzwilliam was in the playground and waved me over to him.

“I’m really glad to see that you and Billy have become good friends. He was a very lonely boy last year and having a friend like you will do him a world of good.”

I blushed.

“Be gentle with him, Peter. He’s a very special boy.”

“Don’t worry, I’m always gentle with my friends.”

“I can see that you are, Peter.” With that he waddled off to accost another student.

Over the ensuing weeks I discovered a great deal about my new friend. He was something of an outcast, it seemed. He was mediocre at sports, and then just to make things worse he was academically brilliant and had topped every class last year. He was also described by some of the kids as very quiet and shy, but with me he seemed to really open up.

Billy and I had an enormous amount in common. We liked the same books, the same movies, the same foods and, as I later found out, his birthday was the day before mine. At the radio telescope my father was actually the replacement for his dad, and in a way that should have seemed rather spooky but at the time I just took it all in my stride.

He liked to walk down to the nearby creek after school and I started following him. We’d sit on the bank talking about space ships and galaxies, skipping stones or just watching the ducks diving for fish. Those were some of the happiest moments of my life.

The months slipped by and inevitably the first cold snap of winter arrived. It never snows in Narrabri, but it gets cold enough for frost at night and when the wind’s from the south-west it feels like it’s blowing straight from Antarctica. That morning I knew even before I got out of bed it had turned cold outside. The weather front had arrived just on dusk the previous day and it had been blowing constantly throughout the night. Low cloud cover had moved in and the sky was a uniform dull grey. After showering I rummaged around to find my jeans and then went hunting even further to find a heavy pullover to wear over my tee shirt. I was determined to stay barefoot, though, for as long as I could.

Cycling to school was an ordeal as I was pushing straight into the wind and my face and hands felt like they were about to freeze solid. My feet, though, were quite warm from the exertion of pedalling. I looked around the playground for Billy and quickly spotted him sitting up against a tree reading a magazine. In spite of the cold he was still wearing only board shorts and nothing else.

“Aren’t you cold?” I asked.

“No, why should I be?” he said, sounding incredulous that I should even ask.

“I mean, it’s freezing today.”

“It’s all in the mind, Peter, really it is. My people not so long ago roamed throughout Australia and never felt the need to invent any clothing at all. Compared to places like Canada or Siberia, we have a very mild climate here and the cooler weather just doesn’t bother me.”

Then he smiled and said, "I'm glad to see you're still barefoot though, Peter."

"Yeah, it takes more than a cold wind to make me put shoes on."

The cold weather continued for several days. On Wednesday afternoon we had Phys. Ed. last period. Thus far I'd always gone shirtless for PE, as did many of the boys, so with a great deal of trepidation I decided to leave my shirt off in spite of the cold and maybe acclimatise myself like Billy. At first I was freezing and my chest was covered in goose bumps, but after I'd been running around for a bit I began to feel quite comfortable. I decided then and there I'd keep doing PE shirtless regardless of the weather.

Being last period, Billy and I rode straight down to our favourite spot on the creek and I decided not to put my shirt or pullover back on. We spent an hour or so skipping stones and generally mucking about, but then he looked at me rather seriously.

"Be careful you don't give yourself a chill if you're not used to being shirtless in this weather."

"You sound just like my mother, Billy," I said laughing. "I feel fine, really I do."

"Okay, but let me feel your back. That's where you first start to get cold."

He put his hand on my back and nodded.

"Still nice and warm. You're doing well."

The next day I took my pullover off before I arrived at school and spent the whole day in just jeans and a tee shirt. My acclimatisation had begun.

The July school holidays arrived and Billy asked me if I'd like to go hiking with him for a few days in the nearby Mt Kaputar National Park. I said that would be really nice and my parents gave me the okay, so it was at about noon on Tuesday when my mother dropped us in the car park at the top of Mt Kaputar. I'd read somewhere that from the summit you could see almost twenty percent of New South Wales, and as I gazed around at the 360 degree panorama I could really believe it was true.

After Mum had gone Billy pointed at my large pack.

"What's in there?"

I reluctantly opened it.

"Mum packed it for me," I said. Inside were several heavy jumpers, a pair of fleecy track pants, no less than four pairs of socks, a pair of hiking boots and enough food to last me a month. Billy slowly shook his head.

He motioned me to follow him into the bush and we walked about a hundred metres from the parking area to where there was a rock ledge with a narrow space under it.

“My father always taught me to travel lightly when hiking,” he said. “We never took food with us since we could always find something to nibble on in the bush, and of course we never even considered shoes or clothing. So what I’m thinking is we could hide your pack and most of the stuff in it under this ledge, and then when we return we can use some of your food stocks to have a bit of a feast. But please, Peter, feel free to grab anything you think you might really need. I have water, a first aid kit, matches, a sleeping mat, a compass and a map in my pack, but there’s room for more if you want to add anything.”

I stood thinking for a while, looking at all the stuff in my pack.

“How cold do you think it’s likely to get?” I asked.

“Well it will be frosty at night, and there’s a cold front coming through in a couple of days but I don’t think it will bring any snow, so, yeah, I expect it will be about fifteen or sixteen degrees during the day and probably no lower than minus five at night.”

“And you’ll be wearing just board shorts the whole time?”

“Of course.”

I’d been fairly successful at acclimatising myself to the winter and had been going to school in just shorts and a tee shirt for the last month, so I thought I’d be okay.

“Um, can I put in a pullover just in case, otherwise just grab my water, compass and sleeping mat and we can leave the rest here,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t regret it.

“I think that’s a wise decision,” he said, smiling. I grinned back at him.

We pushed my pack as far back into the crevice as we could and then gathered up enough bark to hide it completely. Billy marked the location on his map and we walked back to the track head.

Our path took us out along the ridgeline and then descended across a saddle point to the next ridge. It was extremely quiet except for the occasional bird call and we walked in silence. At one point Billy put out a hand to stop me and we watched as an echidna waddled slowly across no more than a metre in front of us, quite oblivious to the two barefoot boys peering down at it.

Later in the afternoon we descended into a bit of a valley and the sun dropped behind the ridgeline. The air became cooler but with the exertion of walking I was still quite comfortable. On the other side of the valley the shadows were gradually lengthening and then we suddenly came back out on top of the ridge just in time to watch a spectacular sunset.

We continued walking for another fifteen minutes or so before Billy pointed to a rock ledge and suggested we set up camp there. We collected as

much firewood as we could in the remaining light and then cleared an area for our campfire. We sat around the blazing fire for several hours just chatting and looking at the brilliant stars. We hadn't eaten anything but I wasn't hungry, and finally as I was feeling myself starting to doze Billy suggested we roll out the sleeping mats and call it a night. We stretched out under the stars, still bathed in the warmth from the dying fire, and I was quickly asleep.

I woke just as the sky was beginning to lighten. There was a rug over me that Billy must have had hidden in his pack, and I was glad he did as even with the rug I was starting to feel cold. Then I looked across at him. He'd moved his sleeping mat away from the fire and was sleeping soundly with nothing over him at all. I wished I could be like him.

He rose shortly after sunrise and wandered off into the bush while I stoked up the fire. Soon he returned with a handful of nuts that we roasted and ate, and even though it wasn't much it still felt quite filling for me. He pulled out the map and showed me the path we'd be following down into the valley along the line of a small creek.

"We should be able to make camp at the waterfall here," he said while pointing to the spot on his map.

As we walked the air warmed up but some patches of high cloud started moving across the sky from the west. At about noon we stopped for a drink and a rest but as neither of us was hungry we didn't bother scavenging for any food. The cloud cover gradually thickened and by mid afternoon it was completely overcast. The temperature started to fall.

Soon the first drops of rain began. Billy suggested we remove our board shorts as walking in wet clothes was a bad idea, so we both stripped naked and put our clothing into his pack.

"Just be careful you don't get your balls caught in the undergrowth," he said. I wished he hadn't.

We arrived at the waterfall just as the light was failing. The rain was falling steadily now and I was starting to feel a bit cold. Just below the falls was a good roomy overhang that would keep us dry, and Billy suggested we gather some sticks and as much dry litter as we could find to make an incubator to go over our sleeping mats.

"The brush turkeys do this to keep their eggs warm and it works really well," he said. He produced a large garbage bag from the depths of his little pack and we quickly filled it with leaves. Once we had enough we put our sleeping mats side by side and built an arch over them with interlocking branches. Billy poured the leaf litter over the top, using the rug and more branches to hold it all down, and it looked quite impressive once we'd

finished. We then lit the campfire and huddled round it while he roasted more nuts and some juicy roots he'd found.

The rain, which had been falling steadily for several hours, began to ease and then stopped as the cloud disappeared and stars came out in profusion. With the clearing came a cold south-westerly wind, and although the overhang faced north and was pretty well sheltered, it still swirled around us occasionally, taking away the warmth from the fire. Billy suggested we turn in.

The wind was howling outside and the rain had come again with a vengeance. I was starting to really feel cold and began shivering.

"You sound like you need some warming up," he said. "Slide over closer to me."

I moved alongside him and he put an arm over me and started rubbing his hand up and down my back. I felt a flood of warmth flowing into me and my shivering stopped. Softly, almost so softly I couldn't hear it, he started singing to me. It was an Aboriginal song, and although I had no idea what the words meant it was very soothing and before I knew it I was drifting off to sleep.

I was walking along a dusty track with a tall thin Aboriginal man who was my father in this dream. The track wound its way between a creek and a low cliff face, and he was a little way ahead of me. I stopped for a while to watch a goanna that was sunning itself on a rock and then ran to catch up with him. At first I couldn't see him but then I heard a noise and saw he was half way up the cliff face. I started coming towards him but he told me to wait on the track as he was coming straight back down. He was pushing a small package or something into a crevice in the rock.

He rejoined me on the track and pulled an orange from his pack and gave it to me. I hadn't eaten all day so I grabbed it with glee and started tearing into it. Then he crouched down, looked me in the eye and said, very softly, "When the time comes remember this place."

He ruffled my hair, then stood up and said, "Now finish your orange and we'll get going, okay?"

I looked up at the top of the cliff face and saw a man standing there watching us. It was someone I'd seen around town but I didn't know his name. Then I looked again and he was gone.

I woke up with a start. It was dark and felt like about two o'clock. Billy was asleep, still with his arm around me, and his hair was in my face. I was nice and warm now, maybe a little too warm. Very gently I moved his arm

from over me and rolled onto my back. There was a brief flash of light and about twenty seconds later the roll of distant thunder. I lay there for some time thinking about the dream I'd just had, but eventually I must have drifted off to sleep again for when I next opened my eyes it was daylight.

Billy was already up and about and had the fire going and some more nuts roasting. The cloud and rain had gone and the sky was crystal clear with an icy south-westerly breeze blowing. I didn't feel the slightest bit cold, though, which I thought was truly amazing. My acclimatisation was really working!

We drank some more water and refilled our bottles from the waterfall, then dismantled our shelter, extinguished the fire and began walking. Once we were away from the shelter of the falls the wind was a lot stronger but still I felt warm and invigorated.

As the day progressed the wind gradually eased and the temperature began to rise. Our path followed the creek down into a valley, and our plan was to walk about twelve kilometres to a point where it crossed at a ford, then camp overnight and climb back onto the ridge and return to our starting point tomorrow.

As we went deeper into the valley the vegetation grew thicker and there were lots of birds chirping away. Billy stopped to pick some native fruit and it tasted divine. Underfoot the track had gradually changed from being rocky and dusty to a thick covering of leaf litter that felt heavenly underfoot. I suppose I must have been in a state of rapture but at the time I just soaked it all in, smiling to myself and living for the moment. Later in the afternoon we came to a point where our path descended down a short slope. The rays of the sun angled across the track through the trees and caught swarms of tiny insects in their light. We stopped there just soaking up the vista.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it?" he finally said. I looked at him and there was a broad smile on his face and a tear rolling down his cheek. I nodded and put my hand on his shoulder. We stood in silence a while longer.

We reached the ford just as the sun was dipping below the ridgeline. By now the wind had dropped completely. Billy said with the clear skies it would be very cold tonight, so we set about making another shelter. Once it was truly dark I looked skywards and the heavens were ablaze with stars.

"Do you think we'll ever be able to travel out there amongst the stars?" I asked.

"In my heart I really do. The scientists will all tell you relativity will probably limit our exploration to the solar system and maybe a handful of closer stars, but I can't help thinking there must be some way around that limit, some way to get out there and zoom around the galaxy."

I had to agree. It seemed silly having such a big universe and then imposing a speed limit that prevented anyone from exploring it.

A bright spot of light caught my eye as it moved across the sky. At first I thought it was a satellite but then it suddenly changed course. It seemed to circle us and then disappeared back in the direction from which it had come. Billy said it must be an aircraft but there was no sound from it and I started wondering if perhaps I'd seen a UFO. Maybe we'd wake up in the middle of the night with little green men pointing ray guns at us. I shuddered and then tried not to think about it any more lest I gave myself nightmares.

Our campfire started to burn down and my eyelids were getting heavier. Billy was right, it had turned very cold and I was starting to feel it on whichever side I had facing away from the fire. We crawled under our shelter and once again Billy drew me close to him and started rubbing his hand up and down my back. Straight away I could feel the warmth flowing into me. I relaxed. He was singing to me again, I realised. Then sleep came.

I was standing with an Aboriginal woman who was my mother. Next to us were two police officers and we were all looking at the burnt-out remains of a car. Dad's car. The police said it had run off the road, hit a tree and burst into flames, and the heat had been so intense there was little in the remains that could be identified. I turned to her and buried my head in her dress. I didn't want to look any more. Then in my mind I heard Dad's voice saying, "When the time comes, remember this place." I didn't know what it meant.

The dream shifted and I was walking home from school, except the house I was approaching was Billy's and not mine. But then in this dream I think I was Billy. There was a big fire engine outside the house and my mother (Billy's mother) was standing outside talking to the firemen. When I approached she ran over and hugged me. She said an electrical fault in the meter box had started a small fire and almost burnt the house down. Fortunately she'd been outside at the time and saw the smoke coming from it. She'd switched off the power and called the fire brigade, and the house had been saved. The firemen said it looked like someone had been tampering with the wiring and suggested the police be called in but Mum didn't want any of that. For the first time in my life I was really scared.

I woke up and there was light shining outside our shelter. For a wild moment I thought the UFO must have landed and we were about to be abducted, but then sanity returned and I realised it was just moonlight. Again I gently lifted Billy's arm from over me and rolled onto my back.

Those dreams were getting to be really spooky. I lay awake for some time before finally drifting off again.

I woke just on sunrise and this time I was the first one up. I crawled out from under the shelter, being careful not to wake Billy, then stood up and stretched. The ground around our campsite was covered in thick frost which crackled under my soles as I walked out to gather some more firewood, but I didn't feel cold at all. In fact I felt positively radiant. There must have been something really good in this mountain air!

By the time I had the fire stoked up Billy emerged and sat down beside me.

"Well today's the last day," he said. "Have you been enjoying it?"

"No, it's been awful, I've hated every minute of it." For a moment he looked really shocked, but then realised I was joking and hit me gently on the chest.

"It's been the greatest three days of my life," I said in all honesty. "I can't thank you enough for bringing me along."

"Yes, it has been nice, hasn't it? Thanks, thanks so much for coming."

"I'm sure glad I left all that stuff in my pack behind. It's been so much more, well, intense I guess is the word, doing the walk like this."

"Yeah, it does make all the difference. My dad, my dad always said, he said that..."

He turned away from me, put his hands over his face and started crying. I immediately put my arm around his shoulder and comforted him. Gradually the tears subsided.

"I'm sorry Peter," he finally said, still sniffing a little. "It still hurts when I think about him, you know." I held him tighter and patted him gently on the back.

"Anyway," he said when he'd recovered his composure, "Dad always said anyone who goes hiking can't really experience it properly unless they do it as nature intended. And he was right."

Another sob racked him, then he wiped his eyes and stood up.

"We'd better get moving soon if we want to be back at the parking area before nightfall," he said.

Once we crossed the ford the track headed steeply uphill towards the top of the ridge. It was another beautiful winter's day with warm sunshine and a really deep blue sky. The ground underfoot had turned rocky again but the going was easy and I felt as though I was almost floating along.

We walked pretty much continuously all day, just stopping now and then for a drink of water or to admire the view. Neither of us was feeling hungry so Billy didn't bother looking for anything edible, and we just kept walking.

Finally we rounded a bend and caught sight of the trig marker at the top of Mt Kaputar.

We arrived at the car park about an hour before sunset. Dad was due to pick us up at seven o'clock so we had about three hours to kill. I followed Billy out into the bush to retrieve my pack, and when I looked inside I couldn't believe how much stuff I'd brought.

"What are we going to do with all this food?" I asked.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really. Are you?"

"No. Maybe we could just heat up some of that soup and throw the rest away," he said, and I agreed. We lit a fire, heated our soup and then sat around sipping it while toasting some marshmallows I'd found hidden at the bottom of my pack.

"You'd better put your pullover on when your dad gets here, otherwise he'll probably freak," he said. I hadn't thought of that, but he was right.

"What about you?"

"Everyone knows I never wear anything on top."

We got rid of the unwanted food in the rubbish bins and extinguished our fire just as the glow of headlights appeared. I quickly grabbed my pullover and pulled it on while Billy just sat there bare-chested as Dad's car pulled up.

"How was it?" he asked, looking obviously relieved to find us waiting there uninjured.

"Fantastic," I said as we put our packs in the boot and climbed into the car. On the way down the mountain I told him where we'd gone and all that we'd seen.

"Were you warm enough with the clothes Mum packed for you?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"What about you, Billy? Did you have anything warm to put on?"

"I was fine, Mr Thorpe, really. My people have lived around here for thousands of years and we're used to the climate."

I don't think Dad really believed either of us but he let the subject drop.

It was ten o'clock when I woke the next morning, which was Saturday. I had my shower and then walked down to the kitchen wearing only my board shorts.

"Well, Rip van Winkle finally woke up," Mum said as I poured myself some milk. "Aren't you cold?"

"No, I'm not cold. Not at all."

“Well, you’re not going outside until you put something warm on. I don’t want people thinking I let my kid freeze to death. I really don’t know how Billy’s mother lets him go around half naked all the time.”

I didn’t respond.

“Oh, that reminds me,” she said. “Dad’s cooking a barbecue lunch and you can invite Billy around if he’d like to come. Now go upstairs and put some proper clothes on.”

I relented and went back to my room. I changed into a pair of jeans and found an old threadbare pullover that I put on without a shirt underneath. I hoped Mum wouldn’t notice such a small detail. I then dashed back down the stairs and headed for the front door.

“I’m going round to Billy’s to let him know about lunch,” I said as I dashed past the kitchen and out the door.

“What about your breakfast?” I heard her say, but it was too late, I was already heading for the road. I’d managed to escape breakfast and that cheered me up even though I was actually feeling rather hungry. My stomach could wait until lunch time, I decided.

My bare feet slapped on the pavement as I ran towards Billy’s house. The cold south-westerly wind had sprung up again and the sky was overcast so it really was quite a cold day, but I didn’t particularly notice or care.

As I approached I saw him out the front pushing a lawn mower around, and of course he was in just board shorts as always. I sat on the porch until he’d finished and then he invited me in for some juice. I passed on the lunch invitation and he said he’d love to come. He went and told his mother and she gave him her approval.

We decided to fill in the time before lunch by going for a walk down along the creek. As soon as we were away from civilisation I removed my pullover and tied it around my waist. The cold wind felt refreshing and invigorating on my chest and I was starting to understand now why Billy never wore a shirt.

As we walked I told him about the strange dreams I’d had while we were camping out. When I’d finished he stopped walking, turned and looked me in the eye with a very serious expression on his face.

“I think you were dreaming my memories,” he said. “I remember the walk with my father but I don’t recall him hiding that package in the cliff face. The smashed up car I remember only far too well.” His voice started to waver and I thought he’d start crying, but he controlled himself. It’s very uncool for a fourteen-year-old to cry in front of his friends, but I felt only sympathy for him.

“Do you know where that cliff face is?” I asked, trying to turn his mind away from the wreck.

“Yeah, I do. If you keep following this track along the creek for about another five kilometres you come to it. We don’t have time now, but maybe tomorrow we can walk down there and take a look. It would be funny if there really was a package hidden there.”

I said that sounded good, and we skipped a few more stones before heading back to my place for lunch.

The barbecue was excellent and the smell of cooking meat really aroused my dormant appetite. The same must have happened to Billy because he ate and ate until I thought he’d explode. We all had a great afternoon.

The next morning I woke shortly after sunrise. My parents were still in bed so I just stuck my head in to tell them I was going round to Billy’s. I’d managed to escape breakfast again and was in a very buoyant mood.

When I reached his place he was already up and waiting for me. The wind had died down and the sky was clear again although the air was still cold. I took my pullover off and left it in his room, and we then went off on our hike to find a cliff face and any secrets it might conceal.

It was almost noon when we arrived at the spot. I pointed up at the rocks where I thought his father had hidden the package and he started climbing. I stayed down on the trail and watched, hoping he wouldn’t fall. He didn’t, and he also found a brown waxed cardboard envelope that had been pushed right back into a crevice. He came back down before tearing it open.

Inside was one of those funny pictures that has a three dimensional image hidden in it.

“My dad had a book of these,” he said absently while staring at the picture. I moved closer to him and put my arm around his shoulder.

After about a minute he suddenly smiled and said, “Got it!”

The light dimmed momentarily as if a cloud had passed over the sun, and a chill went up my spine. It was suddenly as quiet as a graveyard. Billy looked up at me and I could tell he’d sensed something too. Then I felt something brush against my foot and when I looked down the dusty fire trail had disappeared and we were standing in long grass. I gasped and was about to say something but Billy motioned me to be quiet.

He 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.

“We wait here now,” he said. “It shouldn’t be long.” I asked him what he meant but he’d say no more.

We’d been sitting under the overhang for about twenty minutes when I realised it was starting to get dark. It couldn’t have been any later than about one o’clock and yet night was falling. That was finally it. I wanted to be brave and true like the heroes in the stories I loved to read, but I couldn’t. I was scared. My home, my town, everything had disappeared and now it was getting dark at one o’clock in the afternoon. I started to cry. I just sat there, staring into space and bawling my eyes out like a baby. Billy came quickly to my side and put his arm around my shoulder, but I just kept on crying. Slowly I slid down until my head was buried in his lap. He held me there and started singing softly. My sobbing diminished and I fell asleep.

Poles Apart

I woke next to a dirt road. A utility truck had just rumbled by, leaving a cloud of dust behind it. I stood up, feeling sore and stiff all over. I looked down and my jeans were dirty with a little bit of blood soaking through them where my left knee was, and it was then I realised that my knee was stinging. As my line of sight slowly moved upwards I observed that the front of my pullover had a big hole torn in it and the exposed skin of my stomach was covered in scratches. Mum wouldn't be too pleased when she saw me.

I walked out onto the road and followed in the direction of the truck. My shoes were kicking up dust behind me as I shuffled along, but as I walked the stiffness gradually left me. I had no idea where I was or what I'd been doing out in the bush, but from the look of me I must have taken a fall and probably hit my head.

The dirt road soon met the highway and a conveniently-placed sign informed me that Narrabri was three kilometres to the left. I shuffled onwards.

As I entered the town I walked past the vacant block where a house had burned down a few years ago. I'd seen it often enough on my way to school, but for some reason today it really spooked me. In the end I turned away and ran until it was out of sight.

When I arrived home Dad was working in the garden out the front.

"Peter, what's happened to you?" he asked when he saw the state I was in, and rushed out to meet me.

"I don't know. I must have had a fall I guess." My knees became very shaky and I more or less fell against him. He put his hand on my forehead and I saw that look on his face that all kids know means a trip to the doctor.

"I'd better take you down to the doctor," he said, confirming my fears.

By the time we reached the surgery my temperature had returned to normal. After cleaning and bandaging my wounds the doctor said I was

probably just over-exerted but he was a bit concerned my weight was well below average. He told Dad to make sure I was eating properly and then let me go without prescribing any horrible pills or medicine. He was right - I hadn't been eating properly because Matthew the bully had been stealing my lunch every day since the start of term and I was too afraid to tell anyone.

After we'd returned home I sat on my bed and started taking my shoes and socks off. I noticed how my legs were quite brown but my feet were very pale by comparison. But I knew I always went barefoot and never wore shoes and socks. So what were the things I was pulling off my feet? Why, shoes and socks of course. I never went barefoot. I started feeling dizzy...

...and then suddenly it was dark and my bed had turned to stone. I sat up, gasping. In front of me was a campfire and on the other side were an Aboriginal man and boy. For an instant I didn't know who they were, but then a wave of memories came rolling over me.

I continued gasping as if I'd just run a marathon. Billy and the man looked towards me and dashed over to where I was sitting. Billy held me and said, "What's wrong Peter?"

I calmed myself (maybe I *could* be brave and true after all!) and described my dream to them. Except it hardly seemed like a dream. It had been more like an alternate reality and, as I was about to find out, that was pretty close to the truth.

I looked more closely now at the man who was with Billy.

"You're Billy's father, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Nice to meet you, Peter," he said as he shook my hand.

"Nice to meet you too, Mr Collins, or should I call you Dr Collins?"

"Just call me Tom."

"Um, okay Tom," I said, although it was going to be hard getting used to calling a friend's father by his first name.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Is this heaven?"

"No, not really. Let me explain. Some time ago I was working at the radio telescope on what was called the SETI program, the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence." I'd heard of that and nodded. "Well we actually succeeded, and made contact with an extraterrestrial starship that was visiting our solar system."

"So what happened?" Billy asked.

"Something went wrong. Strange men in dark suits started turning up. Then there was a death, one of our research assistants was killed in what was supposed to look like an accident."

“But how did you end up here?”

“To answer that I need to tell you a very different tale. It may sound totally unrelated but bear with me as there is a connection. This goes right back to the Dreaming. Our creation legend has it that back at the beginning of time a great spirit bird gave birth to two chicks, but they couldn't fly and fell to Earth. One landed in Australia and became the emu, while the other landed in Mauritius and became the dodo. Emu spirit is strong in my family and it's strong in your mother's family too, Billy, so it's doubly strong in you. Dodo, alas, has gone, but it's said his spirit is still carried in a few European families. Emu is powerful and his strength is clear to see, but he's also kind, fair, noble and ultimately fragile. Dodo appears weak and dull-witted, but his strengths lay hidden deep within. According to legend, some day Emu and Dodo will be reunited, bringing great joy and wonder to the world.

“But that's beside the point. A lot of this may be merely tribal folk legend, but there's a very real physical trait that's associated with Emu. In our people there's something in our genes, something extra. It gives us a source of body heat we can tap into, something I call autothermia, and it also gives us the ability to flip across to this planet and back.”

I looked at him, and then at Billy, with great awe.

“Two days before the accident that brought me here, Billy's mother and I had a visit from an old man, an elder of the Emu people. He was someone I'd met before, firstly when I was ten years old and then again shortly after Billy was born. He said he feared our family were in danger and advised us to transport ourselves across to this world if we were threatened. He told us you were too young to do this by yourself so he wanted to implant a subconscious trigger in your mind that could be used in an emergency. He saw the book of 3D pictures that was open on my desk and said one of those would be ideal. The next day I took you out into the bush and concealed the picture in that crevice where you could find it if things turned bad.”

“*When the time comes remember this place,*” Billy said solemnly, and his father nodded.

“The next night I was driving home and one of the suits was hiding in my car. There was a struggle and I lost control of the vehicle. At the very last moment I flipped across, and that's when things really went wrong. According to the old man, this planet and Earth are synchronised by whatever force it is that allows us to flip between worlds. It's like a very minute tidal force. Over the eons the topology of each world has become aligned, so that mountains, rivers and seas on Earth correspond almost exactly to mountains, rivers and seas here. But there's one very big difference. The period of rotation of this world is only eighteen hours. What

happens is that time on this world is stretched by the linkage, but it can only stretch so far before there's a slippage. The slippage only lasts a few seconds each day, but if someone happens to be flipping over at just the wrong moment, well bad things happen."

"What do you mean 'bad'?" I asked.

"Well, for a start I'm stuck here. I can't flip back to Earth no matter how hard I try. This is because of a thing he called a time cusp. Time itself has split. For example, it's only been about one month since I came here, by my reckoning, but I can tell just by looking at Billy that at least two years, maybe three, have gone by on Earth."

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." I gave him a puzzled look and he stared skywards again for a few moments before continuing.

"It was about four weeks after the car accident and I was walking home from school. When I rounded the corner into our street I saw a fire engine, ambulance and two police cars parked close to my place. I ran up the road, but then froze when I saw my house was now just a blackened ruin. As I watched, two ambulance officers came walking down the driveway carrying a stretcher with a large black plastic bag on it. I recoiled in shock when I realised that inside that bag was the body of my mother. Then a voice, Dad's voice, spoke up inside my head, saying '*when the time comes remember this place*'. I turned and ran down to the creek, then followed the fire trail until I reached the cliff face Dad had brought me to the day before he died.

"I climbed up and quickly found the package he'd hidden. I tore it open, removed the folded-up piece of paper it contained and pushed the envelope back into the crevice. I clambered back down to the trail, unfolded the page and saw it had been torn from Dad's book of 3D pictures. I stared at it and a moment later an image of a dog with a bone in its mouth popped out at me. At the same time the light dimmed momentarily and I felt a slight sideways slippage. I knew I was in a different place now and, presumably still under the influence of that post-hypnotic suggestion, made my way up onto the ridge, found the cave and, well, here I am."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"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."

"That dream I just had," I said as I tried to visualise the various time lines. "It was me in the other version of reality back on Earth."

"Yes, I think it was," he said.

"So what happens now?" Billy asked.

"The old man said time cusps don't usually last very long, and sooner or later all the time lines come together again. Peter, in your dream, do you know what date it was?"

"No I don't, but if it happens again I'll try to remember. It was winter time, I know that much, and it was before the school holidays, maybe two or three weeks before."

He nodded but said no more on the subject.

The fire by now was burning low and Tom suggested we walk down to where he'd made his camp. I looked up at the sky and the stars were a lot brighter and more plentiful than on Earth. I wondered if maybe one of those stars was Earth's sun and shuddered at the thought of being so very, very far from home.

"Are you okay?" Billy asked, sounding concerned.

"Sure, just looking at the stars made me realise how far from home we are."

"Yeah, it's a long walk back," he said.

We walked down the hillside and finally reached a clearing next to the river. Tom had built a hut of sorts and inside was a thick sleeping mat made of interwoven grass.

"You two can have the mat and I'll rough it tonight," he said. "Tomorrow we'll make a couple more."

Billy removed his shorts and flopped down onto the mat. I did likewise and within moments I was asleep...

... and woke as my clock radio burst into life. I pulled on my jeans and stumbled out into the kitchen where breakfast was already well underway.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Dad asked.

"I'm fine. I could have done with a few more hours of sleep but, yeah, I'm fine." In truth I'd forgotten completely about my trip to the doctor yesterday.

After a nice big breakfast of bacon and eggs I pulled on my school shirt and pullover, put on my shoes and socks and cycled off down the road. It was a bright sunny morning but as I approached the school my happy mood darkened. Matthew had been stepping up his terror campaign against me in recent weeks and it was with a feeling of dread that I entered the classroom.

I sat down at my desk but Matthew's seat was empty. Perhaps this was going to be a good day after all. But no sooner had this thought passed through me than in came the bully with a particularly mean expression on his face. As he sat down beside me I could almost feel his angst washing over me. I cringed.

Our first class was English and we were studying 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. The class was going to perform the play and I hoped to be chosen as Puck. Yesterday we'd read passages out loud and I'd been given Puck's lines to read. I thought I'd done a pretty good job.

The teacher started calling out the names of the kids chosen to be in the play.

"Peter Thorpe, I have a special role picked out for you." Here it comes, I thought... Puck.

"Peter, since you did such a good job with the readings yesterday I've given you one of the most difficult characters. You'll be playing Bottom."

The class roared with laughter as my heart sank into my stomach. Matthew had lost his gloomy look and was laughing loudest of all.

"Peter, this is a big responsibility," the teacher went on, ignoring the laughter. "Do you think you're up to it?"

"Um, yes sir," I replied, trying to stay focused.

"Good. Now Matthew, I've given you the role of Puck. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah, that's great," he said, smirking.

Once all the parts were assigned we were sent back to our desks to study our lines. Matthew sketched a huge bottom and pushed it across in front of me. I blushed then turned the sheet of paper over.

"Thorpie, the arse of the class," he said with that perfect degree of voice control only bullies have, so that the entire class heard but the teacher didn't.

After English we had a maths period. The teacher kept everyone busy and I was spared any further embarrassing moments. I began by writing the date in my book and as I did a very strange feeling came over me. I don't know what it was but it soon passed.

Following maths we had PE and today we were playing touch football. Now I'm not much of a sports person but touch is usually okay. Today, though, the teacher told us the oval was still a bit damp and to avoid

chopping up the ground or messing our clothes we had to take our shirts and shoes off. Even in summer the only time I take my shirt and shoes off is when I have to go swimming, and as this was the middle of winter I wasn't impressed!

We ran out across the playground to the oval, my tender soles screaming from the cold hard bitumen. As we lined up to start playing a large cloud moved across the sun and a cold wind sprang up. My pale chest was covered in goose bumps.

At least running around soon warmed me up. The match was evenly poised. I was on the wing and unmarked. The ball came out along the line as we pushed forward, and suddenly I had it with the try line wide open in front of me. I sprinted for the line. Thirty metres, twenty metres, ten metres, and then it happened.

From out of nowhere came Matthew, his legs like tree stumps thumping on the ground and his big feet throwing up divots. But instead of tipping me he dived towards me and grabbed my shorts, pulling them down around my ankles. I went over and slid about five metres across the muddy grass.

He leapt up and yelled at the top of his voice, "Hey everyone! Get a look at Bottom's bottom!"

I was covered in mud from head to toe. The teacher let me go in for an early shower, and as I was walking from the field the whole class started chanting, "Arse of the class, arse of the class".

I stood under the cold shower (the water heater had expired last year and hadn't been repaired). I was cold, sore and totally miserable. Then suddenly from behind a hand fell on my shoulder ...

... and I woke as Billy was gently shaking me. For a moment I was totally disoriented, the dream had been so real. In fact, I realised, the dream had been real. In the other time line I was still standing under that cold shower. I shivered.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a worried look on his face.

"Yeah, it was the dream again," I said and told him about my experiences in that other reality.

It was light outside so I pulled on my shorts and walked out. The sun was shining brightly and warmly. 'Except that isn't the sun,' I thought, 'it's some other star you probably can't even see from Earth.' I shivered again in spite of the warmth.

Then I remembered.

"It's the 27th of June in that other reality," I said to both Billy and his father.

“Excellent,” Tom said. “So what date was it yesterday when you flipped across?”

“The 12th of July.”

“Peter,” he said after a few moments pondering, “do you think you’re experiencing that other reality in real time?”

“I think so, yes. It’s like I’m just switching back and forth between this reality here and the other one there.”

“Good. That means time here is aligned with that in your dream. If that’s the case then in about two weeks from now this time line and the one in your dream will catch up with the original one you both flipped out of, and I think that will be the moment when the cusp ends.”

“What will happen then?” Billy asked.

“I don’t know, I really don’t,” he said.

Billy was over at the edge of the clearing and called me to help collect some more firewood.

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you,” I said when we were well away from his father.

“Yes, I have, although I’d completely forgotten about it until we arrived here yesterday. It would have been four years ago, I guess. One day Dad took me out into the bush, then held my hand and flipped us both over here. We spent the whole day exploring. He took me down to the creek and showed me the cave where we were last night. I remember him telling me that if I ever became lost over here to go to that cave and wait for him there. That’s why I took us there last night.”

We collected as much firewood as we could carry and then headed back. It felt like about ten o’clock but when I glanced up the sun was due north.

We spent the afternoon making another sleeping mat and then before we knew it the sun had set and darkness descended on us. The campfire was lit and Tom cooked up some stew. I began to wonder what was on TV tonight, and then shook my head in disbelief. No TV here, kiddo.

Even with the short day I soon became very weary, and when Billy started to yawn I suggested we turn in for the night. I snuggled onto my newly-made sleeping mat, and straight away...

...I jumped around but no-one was there. The cold water from the shower froze my back so I turned it off and dried myself down. I escaped from the change rooms before the rest of the class arrived and had myself an early recess.

Between recess and lunch we had a double science period, and that was okay because Matthew was in a different class for science. Also our science

teacher, Mr Schilling, was really great - this was one part of school I really enjoyed.

Lunch time came and I wandered down to my usual spot under the trees at the edge of the playground. I pulled the lunchbox out of my backpack but before I could open it Matthew pounced and grabbed it out of my hands.

“Mm, nice turkey, Bottom, but, um, tell your mum to put a bit of cranberry sauce on next time, would you,” he said as he devoured one of my sandwiches in two enormous mouthfuls. The other one disappeared just as quickly. Oh well, I was getting used to not having any lunch now, and usually if I wasn’t upset by him taking it he’d leave me alone for the rest of the day. Thankfully that proved to be the case today.

After school I went for a walk down to the creek. I don’t know why I did that, I really wasn’t thinking about it but before I knew it that’s where I was. I sat down on the bank and skipped a few stones off the water. I couldn’t help feeling that something important was missing from my life, but I didn’t know what it was.

I stayed by myself until it started getting dark, then went home, had some dinner, did my homework and went to bed. As I was lying there waiting to drift off to sleep the feeling came over me again that something or someone was missing. Finally sleep came ...

... and the sunshine on my face woke me up. I looked across to Billy’s mat but he was already up and about, so I stretched and dragged myself upright, ready for another one of this world’s short days.

Billy was waiting for me just outside the hut. He’d woken only minutes before me and as soon as I joined him we wandered off to collect some more firewood. Again it was a warm and sunny day.

“I wonder if it ever rains here?” I asked him.

“It must do, otherwise where would all the plants get their water from?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

I told him as much of my dream as I could remember.

By the time we returned Tom had breakfast on, but I wasn’t hungry and Billy also passed. The short days were really screwing up our metabolism. Tom suggested we go for a walk up along the ridgeline where there were some nice views back towards the river. It sounded good so we headed off.

We returned to camp just as the sun was setting and helped start the fire going. Again Tom cooked up a stew. I still wasn’t really hungry but I ate a little just to be sociable. Billy took some, played with it over the course of the next half hour or so, then when his father wasn’t looking scraped it all into the fire.

Again the day's activities had tired me out so before long I was back on my grass sleeping mat. I started slipping off to sleep...

...and was woken again by my clock radio.

I had a strange dream last night. I'd arrived at school and sitting next to me wasn't Matthew but an Aboriginal boy. He was wearing only a pair of board shorts even though it was mid winter, and what's really weird is that I was also barefoot and dressed in just shorts and a tee shirt. This boy was a close friend, and at lunch time I was sharing my lunch with him rather than having it stolen by Matthew. Speaking of the bully, there was no sign of him anywhere. This was a nice dream, and I was sad when I woke and realised it wasn't real.

After breakfast I headed off to school again. More teasing from Matthew and some of the others, but nothing serious. At lunch time my sandwich disappeared out of my hands before I could even see what was on it, but I was expecting that. I kept thinking back to my dream and wondering what life would be like here without Matthew. It was a pleasant thought.

I was still spooked by the burnt-out remains of the house I passed every day on my way to school. I saw one of my other friends later and asked him what he knew about it. He told me an Aboriginal family had lived there, but about three years ago the father was killed in a car crash and then a few weeks later the house had burned down, killing the mother. They had a boy the same age as us and he just disappeared after the fire. No-one knew what had become of him. When my friend told me the boy's name was Billy a chill went up my spine and I broke out in a cold sweat. I told him I had to go, then dashed away out of sight and threw up.

I have no doubt this Billy is the boy in my dream. I think maybe he's dead and I'm seeing his ghost.

“You and your father were right about what happened in that other time line,” I said as I told Billy about the latest instalment of my dream. “Your house burned down and your mother was killed, then you remembered what your father had told you, retrieved the picture and flipped over here to join him. Just as you're here now, a month after he arrived. Then, three years later on Earth I moved to Narrabri with my parents, but this time there was no Billy Collins to take me under his wing and be my best friend. Instead in your place at the school was Matthew the bully. It all fits.”

“So what do you think will happen after the cusp closes and all the time lines merge together?”

“I suppose,” I said, forcing back tears, “you'll probably be left here with your father and I'll end up stuck in that school with Matthew.”

“But hang on, there’s one thing your theory doesn’t explain.”

“What’s that?” I asked, my hope returning.

“In that other time line you’re always wearing shoes. It doesn’t fit. On the very first day of school, remember, you were barefoot before you even met me, and you said you’d always loved going barefoot. That other time line is flawed!”

“I hope you’re right,” I said, still not really convinced.

The two weeks passed here and in that other reality. The other me I was dreaming about kept dreaming about Billy. Matthew’s bullying was getting worse, too. I hoped against hope that when the time cusp ended I wouldn’t find myself trapped in that reality.

Over there the school holidays had started and I’d gone bushwalking with another friend from school, following the same loop track that Billy and I had done. But in that time line I’d carried my big pack the whole way, worn the track pants, jumpers and hiking boots, and eaten all the food. By the end of the walk I was stiff, sore and, quite amazingly, hungry.

I was home again. Dad cooked a barbecue lunch and I ate and ate until I thought I might explode. All the time I’d been walking I kept thinking about the Aboriginal boy in my dreams. Once, when the sun was just setting, I thought I saw him out of the corner of my eye.

I was scared about tomorrow but I didn’t know why. It’s like I was being pulled toward some unseen destiny. Would I find the boy, or his ghost?

The next morning I slept in. It was nine o’clock when I jumped out of bed, hastily pulled on a pair of jeans and ran barefoot and shirtless out of the house. I had to get down to the creek, but when I reached there I was confused. This was the middle of winter and here I was standing out in the middle of nowhere with barely a stitch on!

But something was happening. Without even thinking about it I started walking along the bank to where the fire trail started. The trail. This was my path, my destiny. The boy was waiting for me...

This was the day the cusp would end, and I now had a pretty good idea of what would happen. Billy and I would have to go back to the point at the base of the cliff where we’d flipped across to. In the other time line I was making my way to the same point on Earth.

When we arrived at the cliff base Billy pulled me aside and looked deeply into my eyes. I felt transfixed by his gaze.

“I don’t know quite what to say,” he began, “but I suppose ‘thank you’, for being my friend and for being brave and true throughout all of this. With

any luck we'll still be together when the cusp closes, but if not I'll try to return to Earth somehow and find you. I hope things work out for you at school. Don't let Matthew wear you down. You have a good head and a kind heart, so make sure you finish school with good grades and you'll be okay, I'm sure."

"We'll get through this together, Billy," I said, trying hard to stop my voice from wavering. "We have to."

I could literally feel myself getting pulled into position as the cusp was about to close. Then for a moment I had a vision of my other self...

... walking along the rutted and overgrown fire trail. There was a noise in the undergrowth alongside me and I was momentarily startled. It was just a lizard, though, and I bent down to look at it. I could feel a growing uneasiness inside me as I continued walking slowly along, scuffing my tender bare soles in the dust and loose gravel.

There was a rough cliff face alongside the track now. It wasn't very steep, though, and I thought I could probably climb up there without too much trouble. I started making my way through the fallen rocks at its base, and I guessed it was probably about midday.

There was a small crevice in the rock with something brown wedged in it. I pulled it out and it was the remains of an old cardboard package someone had thrown away. I opened it but it was empty.

I looked up. It was very still and quiet. The birds and insects had all become silent.

The boy in my dreams, I could almost feel him standing next to me. Was he a ghost? Was I a ghost?

I was ...

... putting my arm around Billy's shoulder now, just as I'd been doing when he was looking at the picture. The light seemed to dim momentarily, as if a cloud was passing over the sun. An echo inside my head was saying 'Got it!'. I held my breath. I was...

... suddenly very scared. The old envelope had fallen to the ground. A shiver ran through me and I held my breath. Inside my head an echo was saying 'Got it!'. I knew that voice, it was the boy from my dreams! My right arm reached out involuntarily as if I was placing it around the shoulder of my invisible friend. The light seemed to dim momentarily, as if a cloud was passing over the sun.

“Got what?” I asked as Billy was standing there looking at the crazy picture. Then it all came rushing back to me. I could remember all three time lines! I looked up at him.

“It’s a dog with a bone,” he started to say, but then paused. He was remembering too! He looked up at me just as I was looking at him. We stood there silently looking into each other’s eyes, each knowing the terror of what might have been had passed.

“We made it,” I finally said in hushed tones.

“Yeah,” he whispered back and hugged me tightly. There were tears in his eyes and in mine too.

There was a noise behind us and we both looked around. Tom was standing on the fire trail behind us. We turned and ran down to him. “Let’s go home,” he said.

As we were walking back towards town, Tom said, “Peter, way back before this all happened, when you were seeing into Billy’s memories of the day I hid the picture, you said you saw a man looking down on us from the cliff top and you recognised him. Do you still think you’d know this man if you saw him again?”

“Yes, I’m sure I would.”

I’d seen that man about town quite often and while I didn’t know his name I was sure I’d recognise him again. Then the shock of sudden recollection made me stop dead in my tracks and I gasped out loud.

“What is it, Peter?” Billy asked with a look of alarm on his face.

“It just struck me. I know who the man is, from my life in the other time line. He’s Matthew’s father.”

I approached Matthew’s house under the pretext of collecting money for Youth Bushcare. I knocked on the door and Matthew opened it, but he didn’t recognise me. That other time line really was flawed! I gave my little speech and he called out to his father.

Billy, Tom and my father were in the car across the street hoping to get a look at him. While Matthew’s father was coming through the house I started looking more carefully at Matthew. He didn’t look like the bully I remembered from the other time line. For a start he wasn’t fat like my Matthew was, rather he was quite the opposite. He had a downcast and half-starved look about him and the tee shirt he was wearing was torn.

Matthew’s father finally came to the door. I gave him the spiel and he gave me a dollar. I thanked him and walked off, but just as I reached the gate Matthew came shuffling out of the house asking me to wait a minute. I

almost freaked out, expecting I was about to receive a bashing, but I managed to control my panic and stood steady.

When he finally reached me he looked up and timidly said, “Do you think, um, well maybe, I mean is there, you know, any chance I could, um, join your Bushcare group?”

He had a dejected look on his face but for a moment there was just a glimmer of hope. I opened my mouth to reply but then the penny dropped. I hesitated and the glimmer of hope on his face died. He looked down at his feet. Finally I gathered my wits and said, “Of course. It’s Matthew, isn’t it?”

He looked up at me and nodded, a bewildered expression now on his face.

“Great,” I continued. “Come around to the library on Saturday afternoon at about one o’clock. We’d love to have you along.” The grin on his face almost moved me to tears. He sprinted back to the house.

“What was all that about?” Billy asked when I’d returned to the car.

“Matthew’s not a bully in this reality, he’s a victim. He’s so much like I was in the other reality it’s uncanny. He’s desperate for friendship, I’m sure of that, so I’ve invited him along to our Bushcare group on Saturday.”

I half expected a rebuke from Billy but he just nodded, placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled. He understood.

“William Hardcastle,” Tom said. “I should have guessed. He was, and probably still is, a security officer at the telescope. I thought...”

He was interrupted by a tap on the window. It was Matthew’s father! He’d seen Tom and now all our hopes had been dashed. My dad, having no alternative, wound the window down.

“Hi Michael,” Mr Hardcastle said. “Is that really Tom in there? Boy am I glad to see you alive. That car crash was pretty convincing.”

“That was no act. I was lucky to get out alive.”

“The body they thought was yours, was it...?”

“Yeah, one of the suits.”

“Things are still pretty edgy around here, even now, so I’d stay low if I were you. And there’s some low life at the school that’s been bullying my Matthew and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it was connected with this stuff. Speaking of Matt, I don’t know what Mike’s boy said to him but when he came back inside he looked the happiest he’s been in ages.”

“Do you know who’s bullying him?” Dad asked.

“There are a couple of boys, they’re new at the school and a bit older than him, and he doesn’t know their names. They’ve been pretty mean and I’ve spoken to the principal a couple of times but no-one seems to care.

Matt's taking it pretty hard, and I'm trying to find him another school but there are no vacancies anywhere."

* * *

It was Saturday afternoon at the Bushcare meeting. There was a timid knock on the door and Matthew was standing there, barefoot and wearing a torn Hawaiian shirt with all the buttons ripped off. The work of the bullies, no doubt.

"Come on in Matthew, we've been waiting for you," I called as cheerfully as possible. He grinned and came sprinting over, his shirt flapping behind his pale skinny chest.

"Guys, this is Matthew," I said. "Matthew, this is Jim, Chris, Simon, Gary and Billy." My friends all shook his hand and Billy gave him a pat on the shoulder as well.

Soon he'd lost his timidness and joined in our plans for planting some grass trees in an eroded section of the riverbank. I found it amazing that the person who was bullying me in the other reality had suddenly become one of my friends over here. The universe works in mysterious ways.

We left the library and Billy and I were walking together, with Matthew a few paces ahead of us. We rounded the corner and were immediately confronted by two tall muscular boys.

"Hey, it's Mattie, and he's with his prissy little friends today," one of them said. He grabbed him by the arm and flung him over against a shop wall. There was a sickening thud as his head hit the bricks. Without even thinking, Matthew swung a leg free and kicked the bully in the groin. He yelped and then the other bully punched Matthew in the face. His head thudded back against the wall and his nose started to bleed.

"Leave him alone!" Billy yelled and charged at the bully who had thrown the punch. He casually flicked out his arm and swatted him in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards onto his bottom. If there was a downside to being a skinny little kid then this was it.

It all happened so fast and I felt like I was glued to the pavement, unable to move. Finally I forced myself over to where Billy lay sprawled on the ground and helped him up.

"You'll pay for that, asshole," the first bully said, still clutching at his groin, and then without warning pulled out a knife and plunged it into Matthew's chest. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and turned away in shock.

“You idiot!” the second bully screamed. Then the light dimmed, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. I looked back at Matthew and the bullies, and something very weird was happening.

The bright red blood on his face and chest started to lose its colour. The knife quivered for a moment, then popped out and fell to the ground. The wound sealed over and the blood turned as pale as water and disappeared. I looked around at the bullies and they were standing as if frozen into statues. The colour was fading out of their hair, skin and clothing, and then a whole lot of tiny cracks appeared all over them, a sort of crazing effect.

A gust of wind blew and they just collapsed into a pile of dust. It swirled around for a few seconds and then it was gone. I looked down and the knife was gone too.

Matthew started rubbing his eyes.

“That whirlwind blew dust into my eyes. Ouch, that hurts!”

I turned towards him. He looked different now, he was no longer as skinny as he’d been a few moments before and his whole demeanour was a lot more confident. His shirt was still unbuttoned but it now had buttons and the holes where it had been torn were gone. I went to say something to Billy but he shushed me.

We walked in silence for a few more blocks and then Matthew turned down his street.

“See you guys down at the creek tomorrow,” he said as he waved.

“Yeah, see you,” I said and Billy waved back to him.

Once he was out of earshot I said to Billy, “Did you see that?”

“I did. It was another time cusp. Now in this time line the bullies never existed and Matthew has no recollection of them. I wonder how it is that we remember?”

“This is really weird.”

Billy stopped walking and turned around. He looked scared.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“This time line is all wrong, I can feel it somehow. I think it’s unstable, Peter, and I don’t know how long we have but I think when this change comes it’s going to be the big one.”

Now I was really scared too.

“If this time line unravels and we’re separated,” he continued, “I’ll try to find you again, I promise. And even if I fail, in my heart I’ll always know your friendship. What you’ve given me can never be taken away.”

“Peter, remember this,” he added. “*The Dodo spirit is in you.*”

I couldn’t help it. I started crying again and leant over on his shoulder. He put his arms around me, but I felt a cold shiver go through me and the light dimmed. Then suddenly I was outside my body, watching as Billy

looked up at me and saw me crumble to dust in his arms. He put his hands over his face and moaned a most mournful wail as he slowly collapsed to the ground.

Barefoot Astronomers

“Peter, are you okay?” someone was saying to me. It was David, the lecturer who was leading the Sydney University Physics School’s *Great Telescope Tour*.

“Yeah, I had a strange dream last night, that’s all. I don’t know why but this place is giving me the willies.”

I was a postgraduate student in the final weeks of my Ph.D., and had decided to join the undergraduate’s tour to get away from my thesis for a few days. I’d been fine and was enjoying the trip until the bus had arrived at Narrabri, but now everywhere I looked in this town I had a sense of *dèja vu*. For example, we’d turn a corner and I’d know there’d be a red building with a big sign saying ‘*Tumbleweeds*’ on it, and sure enough there was. Yet I’d never been here before.

We had dinner at the leagues’ club and I was okay there, but on the way back to the motel I saw a nice old house that spooked the hell out of me. Then when I fell asleep there were the dreams.

In one night I lived through about six months of a childhood that wasn’t mine. And it was no ordinary childhood either. There were multiple time lines, bullies who became victims who became friends, and through it all a skinny little Aboriginal boy named Billy who was my best friend. It was the craziest dream I’d ever had, and even now as we were travelling out to the radio telescope, I was still haunted by it.

We arrived at the telescope site, about twenty kilometres out of town, and then settled into the conference room for a series of talks by some of the research staff. I’d enjoyed the presentation on quasars, even though it was well outside my area of research, and then the final speaker for the morning was introduced.

“Please join with me in welcoming our senior researcher, Dr Tom Collins, who’ll be talking to you about little green men. Tom, of course, heads up our SETI efforts, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence,” our host said. I was dumbstruck.

Dr Collins was an Aboriginal man in his late forties, as I knew he’d be. His hair was greyer and shorter than it had been in my dream but I had no trouble recognising him. But don’t ask me anything about Tom’s talk as I didn’t hear a word of it. My head was spinning.

Afterwards the telescope staff put on a barbecue for us. I was still standing round in a daze with an uneaten sausage sandwich in my hand and absent-mindedly scuffing my bare feet in the dust, when suddenly Tom Collins was talking to me.

“Our sausages not to your liking?”

I looked up, startled, and almost dropped it on the ground.

“No, no, I’m sorry, I was miles away. Um, Dr Collins, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Not at all. Fire away, and please call me Tom.”

“Ah, okay, Tom,” I replied, still trying to get my tongue to work properly. “You wouldn’t by any chance have a son, would you? About my age, 26?”

“Yes, I do. Do you know him?”

I took a deep breath while Tom kept staring at me.

“His name, would it be Billy by any chance?” I could feel the perspiration on my forehead.

“Yes, Billy finished his doctorate about twelve months ago and is back here working with us. He’s down at the main dish if you want to catch up with him. You might as well tell him to come up and grab some lunch too - he’d never eat anything if someone didn’t shove food in front of him occasionally.”

I must have looked like I’d seen a ghost, because Tom’s smile faded and he asked me if I was okay. It was the second time someone had asked me that this morning. Maybe I needed a shrink.

“Yes, I’m fine, really,” I managed to reply. “It’s just I may have known Billy about twelve years ago. It’s a long story and you wouldn’t believe it even if I tried to explain.”

It was then he looked down and saw my nametag. He gasped.

“Oh my God, you’re Peter! Oh my God! Come with me, Peter, I’ll take you down to Billy now. And eat your goddamn sandwich before all the sauce runs down your leg.”

It took about ten minutes to walk down to the main dish, and in that time I managed to eat my sandwich and wipe the sauce from my shin. My head

was really spinning now. What was Billy like in real life? Would he know me? Of course, I knew the answer to that since Tom had recognised my name. Billy must have had the same dream I did and told his father about it. Could we become friends in real life?

The door to the control room at the base of the dish was half open.

“You there son? You have a visitor.”

“Coming in just a minute,” replied a faint voice from inside the bowels of the building.

We waited. I noticed I was scuffing my feet in the dirt again and made myself stop. Finally I saw a shadow approaching the doorway and then Billy emerged into the sunlight.

“Who is it, Da...” he started to say and then froze in his step. He looked at me, staring in disbelief, just as I was staring back at him. He was the same Billy as in my dream, only all grown up now. He was about my height, neither tall nor short, very skinny and with longish wavy hair that was totally dishevelled. He was still wearing only a pair of board shorts.

“Peter?” he said, almost in a whisper.

I nodded, and he sprang forward and wrapped his arms around me.

“Peter, Peter, I can’t believe it’s really you!” he said, almost lost for breath. “You remember the other time line too! I thought I was the only one. Dad, Matthew, none of the others remembers anything.”

“I didn’t remember until last night when I had a crazy dream. But I guess it was more than just a dream, wasn’t it? Now here you are, just like I remember you, only the board shorts are new.”

He took a step back laughing, looked down at his shorts and then across at my bare feet.

“Still as barefoot as ever, I see,” he said, still laughing and now with a tear rolling down his cheek.

We walked back up to the barbecue and Tom forced a sandwich into his hand, then kept at him until he finally took a small bite.

“Peter,” Tom said, “do you think you could get away from your group for the rest of the afternoon?”

“Yeah, no problem. David’s officially responsible for this mob, I only came along for the ride. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I was thinking I might give Billy the rest of the day off. I’m sure he’d love to take you down to that spot on the creek he keeps on about.”

Billy grinned, and if his face had been a few shades lighter I’m sure I’d have seen him blushing.

“Yeah, sounds great. I’ll just tell David what I’m up to, then I’m all yours. Wow, I just can’t believe this is happening!”

As Billy was walking me over to his car I said, “This spot on the river bank, I take it that’s the place where we used to hang out all the time, in the dream.”

“Yeah, that’s the place,” he said, but then his expression became more serious.

“For me it’s more than a dream. I have two distinct sets of memories, one with a boy named Peter Thorpe and one without. But the memory that’s haunted me right to this day is of me standing there in the street watching my best friend turn to dust in my arms.” He snuffled and wiped a tear from his eye.

“That was the most terrible moment of my life,” he said, “seeing you crumbling away like that. It was as if someone had cut the core out of my soul. At first I thought you were dead, but then when I discovered your parents had never come to Narrabri I managed to convince myself that maybe you were now living somewhere else, probably still in Brisbane. I was the only one who retained any memory at all of that time line and after a while those memories started to fade until it was almost like a half-forgotten dream. But I never forgot you, Peter, and from time to time I’d search the Brisbane telephone directory and the Internet looking for clues to your whereabouts, but always drew a blank.”

“We moved from Brisbane to Sydney at around that time. I guess I’ve managed to keep a low profile.”

We arrived at the car park. Billy went to reach into his pocket for his keys and discovered he had a sandwich in his hand, still with only one small bite taken from the corner. He looked at it, pondered whether to take another, then decided he’d eaten enough and dropped it in the bin.

As we drove we continued chatting about our school days and university life. It seemed he and Matthew had ended up sitting together through high school and remained good friends. Matt had gone on to do law at Armidale University, and in the new reality was neither bullied nor a bully. According to Billy, he’d turned out to be a really nice kid.

“This place looks a lot better than it did before,” I said as we arrived at his spot on the creek. “Your Bushcare group must have been very active.”

“Yes, the little group we had was very enthusiastic. I always had a soft spot for this particular location as a lot of my memories are anchored here. I remembered how you were fascinated with grass trees so I planted a little grove of them, just there.” His cheerful voice suddenly sounded forced.

I looked up at him and there were tears were rolling down his face. “Oh Peter,” he said, his voice wavering. “All these years I’ve been coming back here, trying to keep those memories alive.”

He sat down and placed his hands over his face, embarrassed by his emotions. I sat next to him and put my arm round his shoulders like I used to do when we were kids. Except I never did, because really we'd never been together as kids. Then he raised his head and looked directly into my eyes, and slowly that familiar Billy grin spread across his face. "Those were good times," he said, and I nodded.

We started chatting about our lives since we'd last 'met'. Billy's time at school sounded rather sad. Matthew was his only real friend and his only social life was the little Bushcare group. I couldn't help wondering how different it would have been for him had the other time line not collapsed.

At university he was something of a loner. He spent most of his free time in the physics library, trying to bend the laws of physics around the experiences he'd had when he was fourteen. In his honours year he teamed up with a student named Todd Myers who also had an obsession with space travel, and then fell in love with his sister Julia. They had some nice times together, he said, going bushwalking and driving around north Queensland, but in the end they drifted apart. Later he learned she'd married an American and was now living in Seattle. He told me he'd cried himself to sleep that night.

There was never any doubt that Billy would end up with a doctorate. He finished top of the class in all his undergraduate years and was awarded the university medal and the Sumner-Miller scholarship upon graduation. In his four years as a postgraduate student he became something of a landmark in the Physics department. In spite of his quiet and reclusive nature, or maybe because of it, he was very popular with the students in his tutorial classes and had a following of a dozen or so disciples. He enjoyed their company and often gained inspiration from their ideas, but had no truly close friends. Listening to him talk filled me with both admiration and sorrow and several times I found myself with damp eyes.

He finished his doctorate in record time and was offered postdoctoral fellowships at Cambridge and Stanford. He also received a job offer from his father and followed his heart back to Narrabri. Ten months later I turned up and turned his world on its head.

My own life story was much less dramatic. When I was fourteen my parents moved to Sydney, taking me with them of course. I quickly settled into my new school, built up a small circle of friends, played a bit of cricket, took up surfing for a while, did well at school, enrolled as a science student at Sydney University, was awarded an honours degree at the bottom of the first's and then plodded through my doctorate. All pretty boring really but Billy was fascinated and asked me heaps of questions.

It turned out I also knew Todd Myers. He'd spent a few months working with a group of honours students on a special project. We never really met but I remembered him because, like me, he was always barefoot. I told Billy that shortly afterwards there was a story going round that he'd disappeared while holidaying in Cairns. It was said his car and all his belongings were left behind and he'd just vanished from the face of the Earth, but I never found out whether it was true or not.

"It was true enough," he said. "Julia rang and told me Todd was missing, believed drowned, but she didn't really believe it because he was a strong swimmer and in any case his beach towel was still in his room."

There was another student in my group of postgraduates that Billy was very interested in. His name was Andrew Schilling and he was very tall, very skinny and, unlike Todd, always wore a long sleeved shirt, jeans and hiking boots. He had very pale skin and looked like he never went out in the sun. Everyone called him the vampire. Nobody knew what he was doing his research on, he was just sort of hanging around on the periphery.

As I said, Billy was fascinated by this. At Brisbane University, where he'd studied, there was also an Andrew Schilling, very tall, very skinny, pale skin, long sleeved shirt, jeans and hiking boots. Billy had no idea what he'd been doing, he'd just been hanging around on the periphery. A couple of times when he'd been studying in the library he'd suddenly get goose bumps, and when he looked round there'd be Andrew, sitting at a desk on the opposite side of the room and just staring at him. He said that in some fundamental way he couldn't explain, Andrew frightened him.

"Hey, wasn't there also an Andrew Schilling at the school in Narrabri?" I asked as another memory from that time line suddenly surfaced.

"There was, he was a science teacher, but he wasn't there any more after that time line collapsed. So, we have two mysteries. Firstly there's the enigmatic Andrew Schilling who was a science teacher at Narrabri, then years later was simultaneously a post grad student at both Sydney University and Brisbane University. Then there's the disappearance of Todd Myers."

"Do you think they're related?"

"Do you think Andrew was an alien?"

We both nodded.

Billy invited me to join him and his parents for dinner, which I gladly accepted. While we ate Tom asked me about my research work and both he and Billy seemed keenly interested. My thesis had started off looking into the problem of dark matter, the stuff astronomers believe must make up ninety percent of the universe in order to account for the observed gravitational effects. But my research took an unexpected twist when I

stumbled upon the idea that there might be another level of existence in which matter interacts quite differently. If I'm right, this so-called subspace is folded over on itself about the axis of the galaxy.

Then I remembered something from the dream about us flipping to another planet, and suddenly a whole lot of things fell into place. That other planet must have been Earth's twin on the other side of the subspace fold, as you could presumably go there through subspace without moving.

Billy and his father had also been working along similar lines, although they had arrived there from a different starting point. They had read about anomalies in certain hybrid crystal structures that couldn't quite be explained in normal three-dimensional geometry, and their research suggested these 'fractal' crystals might hold the key to reaching out into this subspace.

Over coffee Tom asked me if I had any plans for employment after submission of my thesis. When I told him I didn't I observed a smile start to spread across his face.

"This isn't official, Peter, but we do have a vacancy on our team that I think you'd be well qualified to fill. You'd be working under Billy, but if that doesn't bother you too much I'm pretty sure I can talk administration into making you a formal offer."

"Gee, I don't know," I said. Billy looked momentarily horrified but then he saw through me and grinned. I smiled back at him and said, in all seriousness, "For me, working under your son would be the greatest privilege imaginable. Where do I sign and when do I start?"

"Don't be so eager," Tom said, trying to suppress a chuckle. "The kid's as mean as hell when it comes to subordinates."

As we continued chatting I sat there looking at Billy. Even though he was twelve years older than the boy in my dream, he still had all the little nuances and expressions I'd remembered. My thoughts returned to the dream and to the great times we'd had together. In real life I'd never had a friend quite like him, and I sat there just looking at him with a sense of wonder and fulfilment inside me.

The next morning I had to bid farewell to my new-found friend as I boarded the bus for the remainder of the tour. Billy gave me a copy of his PhD thesis and assorted notes that more or less described the work he and his father were doing, and I spent most of the trip to Parkes reading through them. The more I read, the more eager I became to get my own thesis out of the way and move to Narrabri.

When I returned home there was an e-mail waiting for me from Billy.

'Hi Peter,' it read. 'Dad says to tell you you've been accepted and a formal letter of offer will be in the mail. I'll send you down the real estate section from the local newspaper next week! This is going to be great - I'm just so excited to be having you working with me.'

A couple of days later there was an envelope waiting for me containing the real estate lift-out from the *Narrabri Times*. I started skimming through it and then froze when I reached the third page. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. There in front of me was the very house I'd lived in with my parents in the other time line. I immediately rang Billy, and he said he was surprised he hadn't noticed the advertisement himself as he remembered the house well. He said he'd hunt round for another copy of the lift-out and then call me back to confirm my recollection.

Five minutes later the phone rang and Billy sounded as excited as I felt. Yes, it was definitely the house. I told him to have his guest room ready, then put aside my thesis work and jumped in the car for the six hour drive to Narrabri.

I arrived at the Collins' household just before midnight and Billy was waiting out the front for me. Tom and Sarah put on a miniature feast of cakes and biscuits and I nibbled away while we looked over the advertisement again and compared our memories of the house.

I woke at about seven and stumbled out into the kitchen. Tom and Sarah were having breakfast while Billy was sitting on the couch reading a magazine.

"What would you like for breakfast, Peter?" Sarah asked.

"Ah, just some coffee, if that's okay. I'm not much of a breakfast person." Billy looked up at me.

"Just like Billy," she said with an air of resignation. "He never has breakfast and often goes for days on end without eating anything at all."

"Me too," I said sheepishly. She shook her head as she handed me my coffee, and I went and sat down next to Billy.

"Like peas in a pod," she said as she disappeared from the room, and her remark started me thinking.

"Remember that story your father told us about Emu and Dodo?"

"Of course," he said, now grinning expectantly.

"Just before the other time line ended you told me the Dodo spirit was in me."

He nodded, then our eyes met and I felt myself drifting away.

I'm standing on the edge of a bay and small waves are breaking on the shore. It's a warm night and in the sky to the east is a huge ball of stars,

bright enough for me to cast a shadow onto the sand. It's a place I've seen many times in my dreams, but in the past I've always been alone and afraid, looking for someone but unable to find him. Now that someone is here, standing beside me on the water's edge. He's my twin brother.

The vision faded and I was back on Billy's couch. I gave him a questioning look and he nodded.

"Emu and Dodo?" I whispered.

"Yes, Emu and Dodo."

By nine o'clock we were at the real estate agent. I told him which house I was interested in and he showed me more photos of it, all of which looked very familiar, and then drove us around to inspect the property.

From the outside it was exactly as I'd remembered it from the other time line. Around the back was the decking where we'd all sat having our barbecues. The inside looked a bit different, due mainly to the furnishings, but it still felt like home to me. The owners had kept the place in very good order and their asking price seemed reasonable, so the deal was done there and then.

The next step was to find a solicitor to draw up the contract of sale, and when Billy suggested Matthew Hardcastle I had no hesitation agreeing. Matthew was the new junior partner with the firm Nightingale and Pritchard in the main street of town, and Billy called him and suggested we meet over lunch.

Matthew looked different. He was big. Billy and I were adult-sized skinny little kids, but Matthew was tall and solidly built. He had a pleasant confident expression on his face as he was introduced to me and when he spoke there was a warmth and competence in his voice that was so different from either Matthew the bully or Matthew the bullied he seemed very much a stranger.

I showed him the details of the house the agent had given me. He was flicking through them and then paused, a troubled expression crossing his face. He looked up at me, then at Billy and then back at me.

"Peter Thorpe," he said softly and with none of the confidence that had been there moments before. "I think the mother of all geese has just walked over my grave."

He sat there silently, trying to put the pieces together. Finally he said, "This may sound crazy, but I think I know you. You were a friend of Billy's and you helped me when, when, oh my God, what's happening to me?"

"You're remembering!" Billy said, now unable to contain his excitement. "Twelve years ago there was another reality, another time line if you like.

Peter lived here in Narrabri and was my best friend at school. You went to the public school and were being bullied by two older boys, and then Peter invited you to join the Bushcare group.”

“Yes, that’s right. I remember all of that now, even though I know it never happened. We went to a Bushcare meeting and then I was stabbed and, and, oh my God!”

“It’s okay, Matt,” Billy said, now with his arm around his shoulder. “It all happened, but in a time line that became unstable and crumbled away. Up until last week I thought I was the only one who remembered anything at all about it, but then Peter turned up and saw it all in a dream. It was real, Matt, but it was a different reality to this one.”

* * *

Six weeks had passed since I was in Narrabri and my thesis had finally been submitted. It was settlement day for the house and my parents were with me in the rental truck I was using to transport my meagre belongings. We were halfway to Narrabri when Dad suddenly said, “The chief scientist at the Narrabri telescope, did you say his name was Tom Collins?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“I thought the name was familiar. He and I were friends at university and I worked with him for a short while. It would have been around the time you were born. We’d both just completed our doctorates and were eager to establish ourselves.”

“What an amazing coincidence,” I said. He glanced at Mum, giving her an odd look, but she just shrugged her shoulders.

“Yeah,” he said. “I remember now, um, hearing he’d been appointed head of the facility at Narrabri. It caused a bit of a stir at the time, particularly amongst the older fuddy-duddies.”

“Why? Because he’s Aboriginal?” I was genuinely, and probably naively, shocked that this could happen in a respectable scientific institution like AusScience.

“Well, perhaps, but really it was mostly because of his involvement with SETI. It was considered a bit of a joke back then, but now under Tom’s guidance it’s actually drawing in a significant amount of money from the USA, so the bean counters are happy and these days they’re the ones that really matter.”

“Did you know he had a son? His name’s Billy and I’ll actually be working directly under him.”

“Yeah, he was born at about the same time as you, the day before as I recall, and there were some pretty bad complications. Sarah almost died and

the boy, well they all thought he was stillborn until he suddenly screamed and scared the life out of the doctors. But the boy's even more brilliant than his father, so they say."

"I hope it hasn't gone to his head," Mum said. "People like that can make life miserable for everyone around them."

"No, he's not like that at all," I said. "He's very quiet and unassuming actually. But Dad's right, I've been reading through the great stack of notes he gave me and he certainly has the gift."

"Well I just hope he doesn't expect too much of you, Peter," she said, doing her best to shatter what little self-confidence I had.

We arrived in Narrabri early in the afternoon and went straight to the real estate agent to collect the keys to my new home. When we reached the house Billy and Matthew were there waiting for us. Matthew was in jeans, a Hawaiian shirt and bare feet, while Billy was just wearing his usual board shorts. Introductions were made all round, and then I nervously walked up the front steps and unlocked the door.

By the time we'd unpacked everything from the truck it was seven o'clock and Billy offered to take us all to dinner as a small token of his welcome for me. We gladly accepted.

"Did you bring any shoes, Peter?" Mum asked, as if this was the most important thing in the universe.

Before I could answer in the negative, Billy said, "It's okay, Mrs Thorpe. The restaurant I have in mind is very casual and they don't mind bare feet." This wasn't surprising coming from him. My mother couldn't come up with any counter-argument, after all Billy was the host and my new boss, so we boarded our respective vehicles and followed him down a series of side streets until we arrived at the restaurant.

Called *The Tropical Retreat*, it was built on a sweeping bend of the river with most of the outdoor tables overlooking the water and shaded by massive palm trees. Billy led us in along a fern-lined path and was greeted at the entrance by a tall woman.

"Billy, good to see you again, and welcome, all of you," she said.

Billy introduced us to Margaret, the owner of the restaurant. She escorted us to a table close to the riverbank and he ordered the drinks. I started looking through the menu and was delighted to see all my favourite dishes were there plus a whole lot of other delicious-sounding offerings.

Dad quickly struck up a conversation with Billy about his parents and AusScience politics while I sat quietly soaking up the beautiful

surroundings. Now that the sun had set there was a pleasant coolness in the air and I felt totally relaxed.

Margaret returned a few minutes later to take our orders, and then over the next hour or so we enjoyed her magnificent cooking.

We'd just ordered coffee when Tom and Sarah arrived.

"Michael, Rachel, it's so good to see you again," Tom said with a broad grin on his face. "You have a mighty fine boy there, Mike, I can assure you of that." I blushed and Billy giggled.

As our parents chatted over old times, Billy rose and beckoned Matthew and me to follow him down to the edge of the river. There was a stone wall along the bank and he sat there dangling his feet in the water. Matthew and I did likewise.

"Your parents are pretty much as I remember them," he said.

"I didn't know until today that our fathers both worked together back at around the time we were born. It sure is a small world."

"A bit too small, really. There just seem to be too many coincidences happening here. My parents are always telling me I have a sort of sixth sense and if that's true then it's telling me something momentous and wonderful is just around the corner."

"The twin brothers?" I asked.

"Yes, Emu and Dodo."

"What on Earth are you two talking about?" Matthew asked. We both laughed.

We sat in silence, looking up at the brilliant stars. I caught a glimpse of movement out the corner of my eye and when I turned my head I saw a beautiful orange shooting star blazing a trail across the sky. A few moments later another one followed and then a third. I know it's silly but I made a wish. I'll tell you later if it comes true.

"Now, slave," Billy said with a chuckle in his voice. "I want you in the office by eight-thirty sharp on Monday morning. We have lots of work to do if we're going to go off and visit some of those stars out there."

"Your will, oh Great and Powerful One," I said while making a mock bow. Matthew laughed.

* * *

I arrived at work right on eight-thirty and Billy was waiting outside the main building for me. He took me in through a side entrance, then down a long corridor and finally into a room marked *Research Staff Only*. Behind the door was a central laboratory area with four partitioned-off offices around the perimeter. He led me into what I presumed to be his office and

put me in the visitors' chair while he sat on the desk with his feet dangling. His office was much as I expected it to be - a PC, shelves of books, a desk cluttered with scribbled notes and a whiteboard covered in mathematics.

"How much of my notes did you get through?" he asked.

"Well, all of them actually."

"Excellent. Did it make any sense?"

"Well, yeah, most of it. Your conclusions about the nature of subspace pretty much tally with mine. I do have one question though."

"Fire away," he said, now with his legs swinging freely and his toes spread well apart to catch the air movement.

"Well, we agree that to enter subspace you need a ninety degree quantum phase shift. Now your fractal crystals do that, but it isn't clear to me whether it would be plus ninety degrees or minus ninety degrees."

Billy's legs stopped in mid swing and he sat just staring at me for what seemed an age but was probably all of five seconds.

"Oh shit. So that's why it doesn't work."

He pulled up a three-dimensional image of the fractal crystal molecule on his PC and started rotating it. He then clicked on an option to show the mirror image of the molecule and rotated that for a bit.

"Well I'll be damned," he said. "The fractal crystals have optical isomers, mirror images of the same molecule. There's a left-handed version and a right-handed version and I guess the ones we grow in the lab will have equal numbers of both. No wonder there's no net phase shift."

I sat there, dumbfounded.

"Okay, so we need to separate out the isomers," he said to himself. He reached for the phone and called someone who was presumably involved in making the crystals, and said he wanted them separated into left- and right-handed ones and didn't care how hard that was or how much it cost. I thought his father may have something to say about the latter but I held my tongue.

Once he'd finished his call he said, "I've spent the last month trying to figure out why my portal doesn't work and then you come along and give me the answer not thirty seconds after you walk in the door. I think we're going to make a great team!"

I stood and shook hands with him and he clapped me on the back, all the while grinning profusely.

"Right," he said. "Maybe I should just introduce you to your office while I let the ramifications of this sink in. We've put you in the booth next to mine. I hope you don't mind."

“You’re the boss,” I said, and followed him into my new abode. It was much the same as his with two chairs, a desk, a PC and book shelves, except the shelves were empty and the desk and whiteboard were clear.

Just before ten Tom came into the laboratory.

“Welcome aboard,” he said as I came out of my office to greet him. “I’d guessed you’d be barefoot, but I see the kid hasn’t gotten rid of your shirt yet.”

“Give me time,” said Billy from the far corner of the lab.

“Anyway,” he continued, “while you still have a shirt on, I’d like you to come up to the tea room and I’ll introduce you to everyone. And you can get yourself a cuppa too if you like.”

I followed him back up the corridor and into the tea room. The outer wall of this room was entirely glass with a door leading out onto a balcony. The view took in much of the radio telescope array and I was suitably impressed. There were about ten other staff members present and I joined Tom on the end of the queue to the coffee dispenser.

By the time I had my coffee a few more people had arrived. Tom stood, straightened his shirt and loudly cleared his throat. Everyone looked towards him expectantly.

“If you can just spare a moment, we have a new member of staff joining us today.” I stood up. “This is Peter Thorpe, soon to be Dr Thorpe, and he’ll be joining the kid in the subspace research area.” There was polite applause from everyone.

During the tea break most of the staff members came past and introduced themselves. With me names tend to go in one ear and out the other but I suppose eventually they’ll all stick.

When I returned to the lab Billy was busy setting up the computer simulations of his fractal crystal portal. He beckoned me over and started running through it all. Everything he’d done looked quite reasonable and I could see no reason why it shouldn’t work once we had all the crystals pulling in the same direction.

At about one o’clock he came up to me and said, “If you want to grab some lunch now would be a good time. I never eat lunch but I still like to get out of the lab for a bit and stretch my toes.”

I wasn’t hungry but I said I’d go with him and grab something to drink, so we wandered out of the building and around to the open-air cafeteria. We both bought some apple juice and then grabbed a table under the shade of an ancient ghost gum. The sky was a deep dark blue and a hot north-westerly breeze was drifting across the fields. I peeled off my tee shirt. Billy grinned but said nothing.

The next few days were spent incorporating some of my ideas into his simulation software. This proved to be a useful exercise for both of us in getting a better feel for the nature of subspace. In some respects subspace is a lot simpler than real space. There's no speed of light, and therefore no light or other electromagnetic waves. The virtual particles of real space (photons, gravitons, etc) become real particles in subspace. The crunch is that as physical particles they have a whole lot more grunt than they do as virtual particles, and it was this that initially led me into the field when I was searching for the elusive 'dark matter'.

Finally the crystal-growers came good and separate batches of left- and right-handed fractal crystals arrived on Friday morning. We spent several hours mixing up Billy's special goo that acted as both a matrix for the crystals and the frame for his subspace portal. We made two left-handed and two right-handed frames from the available stock.

By mid afternoon the goo had cured. The next stage was to plate electrodes onto each side of the frames, and he had the plating solutions ready and waiting. The process took about an hour and then finally we were ready to connect everything up and give it a try.

The first test was to connect a network analyser to each of the frames to confirm they had the expected electrical characteristics. The sweep showed a sharp resonance at 57.8MHz, precisely where our computer modelling predicted. So far so good.

Billy connected the high-power signal generator to the frame, set it to that frequency and began increasing the power. For a moment nothing happened, but then I started to see a shimmering effect in the centre of the frame. He increased the power further and the effect increased, then suddenly there was a loud popping noise and the space enclosed by the frame turned black.

"Eureka!" he yelled and we both leapt in the air.

Once we'd settled down he picked up a sheet of paper from the desk, screwed it up tightly into a ball and threw it gently into the frame. We watched in amazement as it passed through and then stopped, hovering in defiance of gravity about five centimetres into the opening.

I walked round behind the frame, expecting to see the ball floating there, but it wasn't. Then I looked down on the desk and gasped.

This side of the frame was behind where the setting sun would be if the building were transparent, and there was blue light coming through the frame. I placed my hand in the light to check the direction it was coming from.

“No, don’t,” Billy said, now sounding very serious, and I pulled my hand away. “There may be x-rays and gamma rays in that.”

I looked at my hand, half expecting to see it covered in radiation sores. It wasn’t though.

The spectrometer later showed there were indeed x-rays and gamma rays in the blue sunlight streaming through the frame, but not enough to have caused serious injury in the few seconds my hand was exposed to it. Had I done what I’d been about to do next, which was to have looked at the sun through the frame, it could have been a different story and I shuddered.

So instead we used a camera to look at the sun and made an amazing discovery. It looked a whole lot smaller.

“I knew it would,” Billy said almost smugly. “The light coming through the frame is directly from the core of the sun where the fusion is taking place. It’s the only part energetic enough to leak energy into subspace.”

“Ouch,” I said, looking again at my hand.

The next experiment he wanted to try involved placing a second frame with the opposite handedness immediately behind the first one. This was quickly set up and when it was energised we could look through both frames and see the other side of the laboratory as if nothing was happening.

“Just as I expected,” he said. “The phase rotation of the first frame is cancelled out by that of the second one. Now let’s try moving them further apart.”

As he did I watched and observed that the view of the laboratory wall shrank in size until finally there was a popping noise and entire interior of the frame went black. The spacing was now about 0.7 metres and he checked through his notes to confirm this was as expected.

“On the other side of the frame there’s a bubble of realspace,” he explained. “With the frames close together this bubble forms a corridor between them, then as we move them further apart the corridor starts to narrow down until it finally pinches off.”

“I guess the bubble is what stops the air from rushing out into the vacuum of subspace,” I said.

“Yes, but it’s probably debatable as to whether subspace can rightly be called a vacuum.”

The next experiment was to repeat the previous test but using two frames with the same direction of rotation. When they were energised I gasped. Instead of seeing the wall of the laboratory I was looking at a forest.

“Do you know where that is?” he asked.

I thought about it for a few seconds and then knew.

“It’s that planet where we found your father.”

“That’s right. With these two frames we’re creating a 180 degree rotation which brings us back out into realspace but on the other side of the subspace fold.”

When I came closer to the frames I could feel some air movement. “There must be a slight atmospheric pressure difference between worlds. Not much, though, otherwise it would be blowing a gale through there.”

Satisfied now with the results of his experiments, he called his father on the phone and told him to come around and bring anyone else he could find with him. About five minutes later Tom and about a dozen other staff members wandered into the lab and Billy and I went through the procedure once more.

“Well I’ll be,” was all he could say.

“Son, this is absolutely incredible,” he finally added. “This is probably the most significant scientific advancement since Einstein.”

The other staff members then all started congratulating us and telling us how proud they were of our achievement.

Tom took us for a celebratory dinner at the *Tropical Retreat*. Billy was really stoked. In my recollection of the other time line he was always the calm and steady one but not tonight. I sat quietly watching him bouncing around, the impact of what had just happened having still not quite hit me.

The meal was delicious and the champagne plentiful. As none of us were fit to drive we all walked back to Tom’s house, a distance of about three kilometres although by then we were all too hyped up (or drunk) to notice. We sat around over coffee chattering away excitedly and Tom suggested I bunk down in their guest room for the remainder of the night, which sounded good to me.

Sleep came quickly. I dreamed we’d made a pair of frames big enough to walk through and began exploring the other planet, but when we tried to come home we couldn’t find the portal. Darkness fell and in the undergrowth I caught glimpses of menacing eyes flashing green with reflected starlight. That’s when I woke with a scream all but bursting out of my throat.

I got up, poured myself a glass of water and went outside to sit on the verandah for a bit. I almost tripped over Billy who was sitting there staring at the sky.

“I had a nightmare,” we both started saying at once.

“Tell me yours,” Billy said, and I did.

“Mine was the same,” he said after I’d finished. “Except in mine we finally found the portal and I went through first. Then when you followed

you came out like a clay statue, fell into my hands and turned to dust.” His voice started to waver as he told me this part and he was close to crying.

“It was only a dream,” I said, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, but I didn’t really believe it. For us both to have had the same nightmare at the same time was much more than just a coincidence. We sat in silence until the sky began to brighten, looking at the stars and half expecting to see flying saucers come zooming down at us. They didn’t. Not yet, anyway.

When the sun rose so did Billy. He led me into the kitchen and prepared coffee for us.

“I guess we’d better wander back to the restaurant and collect our cars,” he said. By now his father was up and about so he told him where we were going as we stepped out the door.

The walk back to the riverside was very relaxing in the cool of the morning. There was absolutely no wind, and wisps of mist were rising off the water. We walked in silence until Billy finally said, “I’m really scared, Peter. That dream, I wonder if it was a warning. Are we to stay away from that planet, or from subspace, or what?”

“I’m scared too,” I said. He turned towards me with a solemn expression on his face and nodded.

“I think there’s a very real danger of setting off another time cusp if we do anything stupid. We know that subspace is essentially Newtonian locally, but this folding business across the galaxy means things aren’t quite as simple on a larger scale.”

“The folding may well cause relativistic instabilities,” I said. “There was a paper I came across a year or so back that hinted at such things. With any luck it will be in one of the boxes stacked in the spare bedroom at home.”

“If you like, once we’ve collected the cars I might come round to help you look for it and see what ideas we can come up with.”

“Then,” he added, “we can forget all about work and go bushwalking.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, grinning.

It was mid morning when we arrived at my place and I brewed up another cup of coffee. Much of my research paraphernalia was still stacked in old supermarket boxes piled on the floor of my spare bedroom, but I thought I knew which box the paper in question was likely to be in.

It turned out I was right, although it was at the very bottom of the box. The paper, written by Jill Henderson, was entitled *Time Instabilities in Hodgeman Hyperspaces* and was one of a number of responses to Mark Hodgeman’s definitive paper on the theory of quadrature spaces. Hodgeman had begun by postulating that our universe was but the real part of a greater complex-valued reality, and when he applied a ninety degree phase shift to

the quantum wave equations for all the fundamental particles he came up with some surprising results.

If the hyperspace was a closed region and folded over upon itself, the virtual particles of our universe became physical particles in the hyperspace. These came to be known in the literature as Hodgeman Hyperspaces. With no virtual particles there'd be no 'action at a distance' forces, the electromagnetic, gravitational and nuclear forces, and as a result there was no speed of light and no relativity. It was Hodgeman's paper that drew me into investigating whether such a space could solve the riddle of dark matter, which it did very neatly.

Henderson's paper pointed out that Hodgeman's hyperspace relied on an implicit assumption that space remained static or was expanding uniformly. When she made allowance for local variations in the rate of expansion due to gravitational effects she observed time fluctuations between overlapping points in the folded hyperspace. She suggested possible effects such as split time lines and recursive time loops.

"Do you think," Billy said after skimming through the paper, "that something as tiny as someone flipping across from one side of the fold to the other could be enough to trigger these time instabilities?"

"I couldn't say just from looking at the equations, but there's certainly the potential for chaotic behaviour there. You know, butterflies flapping their wings and all that. I'll see if I can graft this stuff into the simulations on Monday."

"I bet that's what caused those time cusps. It all happened after Dad flipped across in that car crash."

"Okay," he added, "enough of work. Let's go walking."

Our walk took us out into the Pilliga scrub. It was another hot, sunny and still day and we took a relaxed pace. We said little and stopped frequently to check out wildflowers and the occasional glimpse of wildlife. After about three hours of walking we came to a waterhole and took the opportunity to jump in and cool off a bit.

After our swim we stretched out under a shady tree.

"Peter," Billy said nervously. "I was wondering if, well, if you'd like to stay out here tonight. I think it would be rather nice."

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing. Being out here reminds me of that hike we did up on Kaputar in the other time line."

He grinned with relief. "Yeah, that was really good."

We started looking round for a suitable hollow in which to make camp and soon found the ideal spot at the base of a small rock overhang. We then spent the rest of the afternoon gathering sticks and leaves to make our

incubator mound and also gathered enough dry wood for a small campfire. At dusk we had another swim and then stoked up the fire to dry ourselves off.

We sat quietly around the fire as it slowly burnt down, eating the roasted nuts he'd gathered and watching as the last of the daylight disappeared and the stars came out in profusion. Then, as only astrophysicists can do, we had a 'name that star' competition. Billy won, but only by a whisker.

By about ten o'clock my eyelids were growing heavy, so we drank some water from the stream and then crawled under our canopy of sticks and leaves. I was quickly asleep.

An old Aboriginal man woke us, or I dreamed he did. He led us out of our nest and down the trail to the waterhole. Next to it was a shuttle craft which we boarded. He closed the hatch and sat down in the driver's seat, then pulled forward on a lever and we jumped into subspace.

There was no sensation of movement but a little while later he pushed back on the lever and we came out in orbit around a planet. At the top was a white icecap, then surrounding that a blue ocean and further south a mixture of green forests and lakes. Below the equator was all desert.

"This world is called Eridani," he said. "It's about sixteen light years from Earth as the crow flies." I chuckled as I tried to imagine a crow flying through subspace, but then for all I knew maybe they did.

A larger spacecraft came out to meet us and we drifted into its docking bay. We were met by a group of aliens, although here I guess they were locals and we were the aliens. They took us down to the surface in a subspace microjump.

We walked through a village. There were no cars, but lots of people walking or riding something akin to a bicycle. The roads were 'sealed' with a type of thick matted grass that felt slightly springy underfoot. Beside the road was a park and there were many children playing ball games. Everyone I saw was barefoot.

The old man led us into a building. Inside was a classroom and we sat amongst a group of about thirty students. The instructor explained how a subspace craft was made using rings of fractal crystals, and how propulsion could be achieved by phasing the excitation along the rings. He showed us various designs where the shape of the rings was modified to enhance the propulsion effect. It all made perfect sense to me.

When the class ended we left the building. It was dark but softly glowing lamps illuminated the roadway. We walked a short distance before the old man led us away from the road and into a grassy field, where we sat and gazed up at the stars. Some of the patterns looked familiar but others were

distorted or completely changed. He crouched down beside us, put his hands on our foreheads and said, “*Remember*”.

I opened my eyes in the first of the morning light, feeling wonderfully refreshed. Billy was still asleep. A kookaburra called, soon joined by another, and he stirred a little but didn’t wake. His slow steady breathing almost lulled me back to sleep until they started again, this time about ten decibels louder.

He opened his eyes and looked deeply into mine, pulling me closer until our foreheads almost touched. He lay perfectly still, just staring into my eyes and seeing right down into my soul. For a moment my vision of the twin brothers on the beach returned and then a feeling of wholesome goodness washed over me. An English teacher once told me, in another time line, that Billy was a special boy. I thought I knew then what he meant, but only now did I really understand. Within him was a powerful and potent spirit, Emu spirit. ‘*Be gentle with him,*’ the teacher had said. A powerful spirit, but at the same time very fragile.

He closed his eyes and slowly sat up, pulling me up with him, and then scratched his head, sending his normally dishevelled hair into even wilder disarray. He saw me watching him and then ruffled my hair into an equal mess. I smiled and he chuckled.

“Was that a dream last night or did it really happen?” I asked.

“Maybe both,” he said and I thought perhaps he was right. “So, do you reckon we can make ourselves a ship?”

“Piece of cake,” I said, and then suddenly realised I’d eaten nothing but roasted nuts since Friday night. A piece of cake would go down well just now, I thought.

* * *

The next morning when I arrived at work Billy was in his office having a discussion with his father. As I came in Tom waved me over to join them.

“The kid’s been trying to talk me into spending lots of money making a subspace ship. What are your thoughts, Peter?”

“Well, initially I think I’d build a really little ship with a video camera and radio link in it, plus the electronics to execute a series of microjumps. Send it out in jumps of, say, a hundred thousand kilometres, then each time it re-enters realspace look for its signal with the radio telescope since, um, we have one of those here anyway.”

I glanced at Billy and saw he was smiling at me, so I took this to be a good sign.

“That’s not as grandiose as the kid’s plan but it sounds a hell of a lot cheaper. Would you be prepared to accept Peter’s proposal, son?”

“Yeah, sure Dad, it sounds like a better way to go at this stage than my idea anyway. Good thinking Peter.”

“Okay, if you two can come up with a costing I think I can probably push it through.”

“What was your idea for the ship?” I asked after Tom had left.

“Oh, something akin to the USS Enterprise only without the phasors and photon torpedoes.”

We worked throughout the day designing our ship and putting together a complete inventory of our requirements. It was about seven o’clock when we finally thought we’d completed the list as well as we were ever likely to.

“Let’s leave it there,” Billy said, “and if neither of us think of anything else overnight we can give it to Dad in the morning.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Tom approved our proposal and we began ordering the parts and materials needed. Billy predicted we should be ready for the test flight in about six weeks.

“Does it bother you that your father always calls you ‘The Kid’?” I asked during a quiet moment.

“No, not at all. In my mind I’m still very much a kid, I guess, and probably, hopefully, I’ll still think like a kid when I’m fifty.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said, smiling. “I just thought it seemed a bit demeaning, that’s all.”

“Quite the opposite, actually. Just as well you didn’t try to become a psychologist, Peter. It’s Dad’s way of saying how proud he is to have me working here, and how much he loves me. Every time he says it I’m so proud to be his son.”

I pulled my head in, but he slapped me on the back and grinned his famous disarming grin.

* * *

We spent two days meticulously checking over every aspect of the ship. We had no way of retrieving it at the end of its voyage and if it failed there was little chance of getting funding to make another one, so it absolutely had to work first go. It was scary to think that the future course of history may well depend on this one little ship.

Launch time was two o’clock on Wednesday and all the telescope staff came to watch. The first jump was to a point in space a hundred thousand

kilometres straight up and the telescope was aimed to receive its signal. Billy initiated the jump and I held my breath.

There was a rippling effect around the ship for a moment and then a loud bang as the air rushed in to fill the void left behind. Within moments the telescope had acquired lock on the signal and we watched in amazement at the picture of Earth that appeared on the monitor screen.

The telemetry data showed all systems were fine so Billy executed the second jump which would take it out a further hundred thousand kilometres. We held our breath again while we waited for the telescope to re-acquire lock. When it did the picture of Earth had shrunk to half its size, while the telemetry reported all was still well on board the vessel.

Billy then took it out to three hundred thousand kilometres, or one light second. The delay between loss of signal and re-acquisition seemed consistent with that distance. All systems still reported okay.

“The next jump will be out to three million kilometres, or ten light seconds,” he said. “I’d ask everyone to note carefully the two second delay between when I initiate the jump and the loss of signal, that’s one second for the command to reach the ship and another for its effect to be observed back here. After the signal disappears there’ll be a delay to re-acquisition. If the probe were to be moving at the speed of light, it would take eight seconds from then to reach its new position and another ten seconds for the signal to get back to us. So if the delay is less than eighteen seconds, you’ll bear witness to the first time a manmade object has travelled faster than light.”

There was a hushed silence as Billy initiated the jump. Two seconds later the signal disappeared, and everyone had their eyes on their watches. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine ...* and the signal was back!

The picture of Earth was now a tiny blue dot in the centre of the screen.

While everyone was congratulating the kid I happened to glance back at the monitor and saw another object in the corner of the image. It was too far from the camera to make out any detail but it had a metallic appearance. I pointed and had my mouth open to say something when the picture suddenly disappeared. The indicators on the telescope’s receiver confirmed the signal from the ship had been lost.

I said nothing about the other object until everyone else had left and only Billy and I remained.

“I guess we’ve been spotted,” he said, and I could tell from his body language he was as frightened as I was. What do the galactic police force do with little kids who meddle in things (like subspace) that they shouldn’t?

He asked if he could stay the night at my house, and I was glad he did. I didn’t want to be alone. My rational mind was telling me not to be stupid,

but all the same there was a tingling fear running down my spine I couldn't quite shake off.

We sat out on the deck until almost midnight, looking up at the stars and half expecting the flying saucers. I gasped when I saw a shooting star out the corner of my eye, but Billy quickly had his hand on my shoulder and I could feel a sense of calm passing into me.

Before going to bed I locked the doors, something no-one ever did in Narrabri while they were inside their homes. Sleep came quickly, though, and mercifully there were no dreams of aliens.

Sunlight on my eyelids woke me. I staggered out towards the bathroom, noting as I passed the guest room that my guest was still asleep. My ablutions completed, I made my way to the kitchen and put the kettle on, and just as it started to boil Billy came wandering in rubbing his eyes.

"Sleep okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, fine. No alien dreams."

"Me neither," I said and he smiled, but the smile seemed forced.

I handed him his coffee, picked up mine and headed out to the deck. I opened the door, took one step out and then froze. Billy bumped into me and I spilt my coffee all down my leg, but I was too stunned to notice.

Sitting on the deck right in front of me was our little ship.

"Oh shit," he said and put his arm around my neck, holding me back. My coffee now sloshed onto my bare stomach, causing me to cry out and jump back into him. Not knowing the cause of my sudden pain, he pulled me back into the house with a grip like a sumo wrestler.

"It's okay," I said, trying to make him release his grip. "I spilt my coffee all over myself, that's all." Finally I got through to him and he let go of me.

"Go and wash it off in the shower. I'll stand guard."

I don't know whether he expected an army of miniature E.T.s to come marching out of the ship or what, but I obeyed and went to wash myself down.

While I was under the shower he called his father. Tom arrived just as I was emerging from the bathroom and had with him a large ancient-looking box covered in brown leather. Inside that was an ancient-looking Geiger counter.

The counter showed no radiation coming from the ship so we carefully carried it out to Tom's car.

"Just put it on the bench in the lab," Billy called out as Tom was leaving. "Peter and I will be in shortly."

The ship appeared to be undamaged. Indeed there was no indication that it had even left the laboratory. Billy connected the data port to the PC on the bench and began scrolling through the code.

“Oh shit,” he said.

“What is it?”

“An extra jump has been programmed into it.” He opened the galactic star chart on the PC and keyed in a set of co-ordinates.

“Oh shit,” he said again. He was becoming rather repetitive this morning.

“Let me guess.”

“Eridani,” he said before I had a chance. I’d have been right anyway.

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“It’s a bloody invitation, that’s what it is,” said Tom, who had entered the lab unseen and was standing behind us. We both jumped.

Six hours later we were all set up to send the ship on its way again, and this time Tom had invited representatives of the press to witness whatever happened. Billy initiated the first of the jump sequences and it vanished with a plop.

When it had reached the three million kilometre point Tom asked him to hold it there while he explained to the press about the ship and the final jump that had been programmed into it by the E.T.s. We were all looking at the tiny blue dot in the centre of the screen as Billy initiated the jump.

Twenty seconds later the screen went blank. We waited.

Suddenly an image reappeared. It was a planet, but not Earth.

“How can that be?” Tom said. “Eridani is about sixteen light years away, and in any case the transmitter’s far too weak to reach us from there.”

“Maybe they’re relaying the signal through a subspace link to one of their ships,” Billy said, “probably sitting out near to where our ship last was.”

“The one that captured it yesterday, perhaps,” I surmised.

The planet on the screen was the same as I’d seen in my dream in the Pilliga. It had an icecap surrounded by ocean at the pole, then a green northern hemisphere and a brown southern hemisphere. The Eridanians were real.

I happened to glance up at the crowd of reporters and saw a face at the back of the room I recognised. It was Andrew Schilling, and he was holding a glowing device of some sort.

“This has to stop, NOW,” he yelled as he stepped forward.

Then the lights dimmed.

“Quick, Peter, it’s another cusp!” Billy cried. “Maybe we can stop it though. Take my hands and look into my eyes.”

I dashed over to him, took hold of his hands and looked deeply into his eyes. The room shimmered and disappeared.

Undoing the Past

Billy and I found ourselves standing on a beach. There was a humid breeze blowing in off a slightly choppy sea. About fifty metres away a man was walking towards us, and as he drew closer I realised it was Todd Myers. Then from out of the dunes Andrew Schilling came running towards him, and I knew we were about to witness Todd's murder. I tried to call out to him but I had no voice.

Billy ran out crying '*Emu!*' and tried to tackle Andrew, but he was bigger and stronger and easily fended him off. Then I ran at him from behind, crying '*Dodo!*', and managed to get hold of his shirt tail. He spun around and tried to grab me but I danced out of his reach.

"*You're Dodo?*" he yelled at me. "All this time you were right under my nose and I didn't know it. Shit! I could have finished you off back at that stupid school in Narrabri and this whole stinking mess would have been cleaned up then and there."

"Oh well," he went on, but now in a calmer voice. "It doesn't matter. I'll just take you out now."

He pulled out a large knife and charged at me. I ran, and he ran after me. He was bigger, stronger and faster, and would have most certainly caught me except Billy, who was still sprawled out on the sand, reached up and got a finger on the toe of his boot as he went past, and he tripped.

With a sickening thud his head struck a rock that was all but buried in the sand. I turned around and watched, horrified, as he tried to stand up but then collapsed back onto the sand with green blood streaming from a head wound. Then, as the light dimmed ever so slightly, the colour faded out of him and he turned to dust.

I looked up and saw Todd walking past, unaware anything had happened on the beach in front of him. We'd saved him! I turned back towards Billy but he was gone.

The world shifted. At a table in an outdoor café a slightly younger Billy was sitting opposite a very attractive young woman. They were having a rather heated discussion and as I drifted closer I started to hear what they were saying.

“Why won’t you come to America with me?” she said. “It will cost you nothing, my parents are buying the tickets, and you can put off your studies for three months. You said yourself you’re way ahead of schedule.”

Billy looked flustered, but then Todd walked up to them and sat down. They exchanged greetings.

“Look, Billy, go with Julia. You’ll have a great time and I’ll fill in for your teaching duties while you’re gone.”

Billy shook his head and raised his arms in defeat. “Okay, you’ve talked me into it, but now I’ll have to go and buy a shirt and some shoes because I’m sure they won’t let me on the plane like this.” Todd and Julia both laughed.

The world shifted again and now Billy and Julia were riding the roller coaster at Disneyland. I hardly recognised him with his long-sleeved shirt, jeans, athletic shoes and short haircut. They looked like they were having a great time.

That evening they were having dinner in a small romantic restaurant, and had just finished their main course and ordered dessert when Billy reached over and took her hand.

“Will you marry me, Julia?”

“Yes, oh yes, dearest one,” she replied without hesitation. They both stood, leaned over the table and kissed, and one by one the other patrons began clapping.

Eventually they returned to the hotel room, both showing the effects of slightly too much wine.

“Should we wait until after the ceremony or do it now?” Billy asked.

“Why wait?” Julia said as she was undressing. They climbed into bed and began making love.

“This is my first time,” Billy said.

“Me too.”

Their love-making continued well into the night.

Then I was back in Australia. It was the day before the wedding and Billy was waiting at Brisbane airport for his old school friend Matthew. The gate opened and the passengers began streaming through.

Matthew, looking very un-lawyer-like in a half-unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, board shorts and bare feet, almost walked straight past before recognising him.

“Hey man, what happened to you? I mean your hair, the shirt, the jeans, and shoes even.”

“Married life, I guess,” Billy said, grinning.

“But you’re not married yet.”

“So, marriage is non-causal. Maybe someone should do a doctorate on that.” They walked out of the terminal building to Billy’s car, chatting about old school times.

The wedding ceremony took place in the park that was once the World Expo site. Todd was Best Man and there were crowds of people present. Billy’s parents, who had arrived earlier in the week, were sitting with Matthew in the front row, but I saw no-one else I knew.

Eight months later and a baby boy had come into the world. Billy was sitting by the bedside, holding Julia’s hand while she nursed the infant.

“What are we going to call him?” she asked.

“How about Peter?” Billy suggested and she nodded. I gasped and they both looked in my direction, but couldn’t see me.

I shifted forward three years and was at Todd’s house in Brisbane. He was on the phone to Tom Collins and, while I could only hear one side of the conversation, it was pretty clear Tom had offered him a position at the radio telescope. It was the position Billy would have otherwise taken had his research not slipped so far behind.

I then found myself in Billy and Julia’s house. Three-year-old Peter Collins was sitting on the floor of his bedroom playing with a box of matches he’d found while exploring his father’s cupboard in the garage. After several attempts he managed to light one and was mesmerised by the pretty flame. I couldn’t bear to watch.

The match burned down and suddenly his fingers began to get too hot. He flicked it away and it lodged in the curtains. They flared up, giving off thick black smoke. He backed away but was soon overcome by the fumes. I was stricken with grief but was forced to watch.

Now the bedding was alight. More smoke was billowing out. The smoke alarm was blaring. Julia and Billy came running into the bedroom, coughing. Julia rushed to where Peter was lying on the floor but just as she reached him the blazing curtains fell on her. Billy ran in to try to help but a part of the ceiling collapsed and they were trapped.

Mercifully I found myself outside the house. The fire brigade were pouring water onto the smouldering timbers while the paramedics carried three bodies into the waiting ambulance. A car screeched to a halt opposite the house and Todd came running across the street. He didn't see the taxi, and the taxi driver was too busy watching the fire brigade to see him. There was a thud. The paramedics put down their burden and rushed over to where he was lying on the road, but the angle of his neck made it clear he'd not survived the impact. They were all gone now.

This wasn't how it was all supposed to end.

Husks (2)

The wave of memories is receding now. I pull myself upright against the fencepost and wipe the sweat from my brow. The street is still deserted and I start walking again. It's getting colder and I start to shiver.

I look up, and away in the distance everything is hazy and grey. It's becoming grainy too, like an old photograph.

Those memories of a time that never was are haunting me. Billy, killed in a house fire in Brisbane, and I never even met him, never knew him at all. I know now the root of my loneliness. He was supposed to have been my best friend at school, my co-researcher in what would have been the greatest scientific discovery of all time, and in a way he was supposed to have been my twin brother. *Emu and Dodo*. But it all went horribly wrong, and now here I am, alone, at the end of it all.

History seems to have had a lot of trouble deciding on its course during my lifetime. Its final choice is hollow and empty, for me at any rate. All of our work, all of our dreams, all of our love, has come to nothing at the end. Maybe someday someone else, another Emu and another Dodo perhaps, will take up the challenge of subspace and make the breakthrough. Or maybe not.

The pavement under my shoes feels softer now, and when I look down I see I'm kicking up dust with every step. The cuffs of my trousers are getting covered with cement dust. When did I start wearing trousers instead of board shorts? I can't remember that either, and it scares me again.

The world is shrinking. Everything is grey and lifeless now. The concrete has turned completely to dust. I'm covered in dust. I think maybe I'm turning to dust myself. It's getting darker.

I stop walking and the darkness finally descends on me.

Resolution

My eyes opened and the darkness receded. The world slowly swam back into focus. I had a headache like you wouldn't believe.

I was lying on the floor of the laboratory in Narrabri and Billy was lying next to me, unmoving. Tom bent over to help me up.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. The lights dimmed, then Andrew Schilling with that glowing thing in his hands rushed forward and yelled '*This has to stop, NOW!*'. At the same time you and the kid grabbed each others' hands and then a sort of black mist engulfed the three of you."

"You know Andrew Schilling, Tom?"

"Yes, of course. He's the AusScience Director of Astrophysics and flew in from Canberra this morning. We were actually in high school and university together, but I didn't think you or Billy had ever met him, at least not since you were babies."

"We've crossed paths with him a few times. He was an alien."

"An alien?" he asked, but I suspected this wasn't really a surprise to him.

"Yes, with green blood. But he's dead now. He died back on that beach in Cairns, just before he was about to kill Todd."

"Todd, yes. The black mist was only there for a few seconds, then it all turned grainy like the fine ash you get after stirring up the remnants of a fire. When it had all condensed out and disappeared Schilling was gone, you and Billy were lying unconscious on the floor, and Todd Myers was standing there wanting to know what had happened to the beach he was walking along."

I looked across at Billy. He was breathing shallowly but was otherwise unmoving. He had a blank vacant look on his face.

"The ambulance is on its way," Tom said softly to me as I stood up. "Are you feeling okay?"

“Yeah, I guess so, just the mother of all headaches. Billy and I went back in time to when Todd was murdered by Schilling on that beach near Cairns. We saved him and Schilling hit his head on a rock and died in the process, but then I saw all the ramifications our actions had caused. It was awful. Todd, Billy, Julia and their son all died.”

“Their son?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“Yes. Todd convinced Billy to go the USA with Julia, and while they were there he proposed to her and they married not long after their return to Australia. They had a son named Peter, and then about three years later he was playing with matches and accidentally set fire to the house.”

I sniffled, then tried to steady myself for the final part of my tale.

“Billy, Julia and little Peter died in the fire. Todd arrived on the scene, too late to help, but then he too died in a stupid road accident. I saw all this in a sort of dream, I suppose, and then I came to, leaning against a fencepost in the street where I lived in Sydney. I’d just read about the fire in the newspaper, and had gone out for a walk to try to clear my head when memories of all the other time lines came crashing over me. Then that reality crumbled away and the next thing I remember is lying here on the floor.”

Tom held me tightly for a few moments, as if I was his son, then looked down at Billy. We stood in silence.

The paramedics eventually arrived and gently placed him on a stretcher. He was still unconscious.

“Physically he’s fine,” the doctor said, “but he’s showing no sign of higher brain activity. In layman’s terms, I’d say the lights are on but nobody’s home.” I nodded grimly.

I sat in the chair next to his bed and took hold of his hand, but I could feel nothing of that once-powerful Emu spirit inside him. I started thinking back over the past tumultuous months, of a friendship found, of happy times, exciting times, and now this.

Todd walked into the room.

“Any change?” he asked glumly. I shook my head.

“He died in the fire in that aborted time line. I think we’ve lost him.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and nodded.

The patient in the bed next to Billy’s had a few visitors with him and they were talking about an upcoming interstate football match. At first I didn’t pay any attention, but then it seemed to trigger something in my subconscious and my ears pricked up. *The match they were talking about hadn’t been played yet, but I knew Queensland were going to win. Shit, I even knew the score. I couldn’t miss it, since it was right across the front of*

the newspaper. The newspaper I'd been reading when I saw the report of the fire.

A sudden inspiration struck me. "What's the date, Todd?" I asked, startling him.

"It's the 10th, Peter."

"The newspaper I was reading in that time line was dated the 14th, I'm sure, the day after the State of Origin game. That means the fire must have been on the night of the 13th, so in that time line it hasn't happened yet."

"I see where you're going," he said, now smiling. "Do you think, that, maybe..."

"Yeah, it's a long shot, I know, but it all kind of fits."

Todd and I were allowed to remain in the ward overnight on the 13th. It had been a long wait. I didn't know what time the fire had started in that other time line, only that it was late at night. It was now just after eleven.

I felt something. The lights seemed to brighten, just momentarily, but I may have imagined it. For a few moments nothing changed. Then Billy suddenly started coughing.

"Help me, my wife and son are burning!"

He broke into an extended coughing fit and for a moment I was sure I could smell smoke.

Then he opened his eyes, looked at me and his coughing stopped.

"Oh God," he said, shaking his head in confusion. "You're still here, Peter. I'm still here. I think we did it. We stopped the cusp."

"Yes," I said with tears of joy streaming down my face. "We stopped it."

"How long was I out for?"

"Almost two weeks."

"Oh shit. You must have thought I was gone for good."

"I did, but then I remembered the date of the fire and figured out what was happening."

He looked puzzled, so I told him what I'd experienced during our mind meld. When I reached the part about the fire I could see the tears start running down his cheeks.

"It wasn't real, Billy. You must remember that." He nodded but still looked very sad.

"Yeah, you're right, it wasn't real," he finally said. "After all, I was wearing a shirt, jeans and shoes even, so it can't have been real." He was smiling again.

Todd and I stayed with him right through the night. In the morning the doctors took him away for all manner of tests and were astounded when the

results were perfectly normal. They discharged him, but were still scratching their heads.

We spent most of the day with Billy's parents, then Billy asked me to join him for dinner at the *Retreat*. Winter was almost upon us and it was a chilly night, but he was still wearing only his board shorts and out of respect for him I was similarly attired. When we arrived we were told there were two others waiting for us. They were Todd and Julia.

"Hi Billy," Julia said awkwardly.

"Hi. How's America?"

"Well, there's something I need to tell you. I'm divorced."

There was stunned silence.

"Things started turning sour about a year ago," she explained. "Richard was smart, rich, well dressed and had all the right social connections, but I discovered I really didn't want that kind of life. I began to realise it was you, my beautiful, sweet, hard-headed Billy, that I really and truly loved.

"I used to be really embarrassed about the way you dressed, or perhaps didn't dress would be a better phrase, your messy hair and your single-minded obsession with your work. I wanted you to be like the other guys. I didn't realise then what I really loved about you was the way you were different from the others, and I've paid the price. Billy, can you forgive me?"

Without saying anything, he stood up, walked around the table and kissed her. Todd and I walked down to the riverbank to let them be alone together. When we returned they were sitting holding hands and just staring into each others' eyes.

Billy and Julia were married on the winter solstice, and in spite of the season it was a warm sunny day. The reception was held outdoors at the *Retreat* and a wonderful group of friends and relations attended.

"I still don't understand why the time line where I was saved from Andrew Schilling collapsed, and, given that it did, why I'm still here," Todd said to me.

"I don't think we'll ever really know, but my belief is that it's because it was just plain wrong. Things just weren't *supposed* to end like that.

"Then, I guess you became a paradox. You weren't killed by Schilling because Billy and I intervened, but the time line in which you convinced Billy to go to America collapsed so that didn't happen either. In the end you were just pushed forward four years in time."

“I suppose you’re right, but you know, I think maybe it was you, and that Dodo spirit within you, that forced the flow of time back onto its rightful course.”

I shuddered.

Postscript

Ten years have passed since the events chronicled here. A lot has changed, and Earth is now a fully-fledged member of the galactic community. I think we're a lot better off. For a start almost all our energy now comes from subspace receptors, so fossil fuels have gone and greenhouse is no longer an issue. The pace of life has slowed remarkably and people are a lot happier. These are good times.

Billy and Julia bought the house next to mine when it came on the market soon after their wedding. They now have a nine-year-old son, but his name's Jason, not Peter. He's a bright boy, dark-skinned like his father, and also never wears a shirt or shoes, even in winter.

There are no matches in their house and they have smoke alarms in every room. The building is as fireproof as they can make it. They're taking no chances.

Billy and I still look like grown-up skinny little kids, and we still work together at the radio telescope. The research facilities have grown enormously over that time and we now have half a dozen junior physicists working under us. We're trying to expose another layer of reality beyond subspace that may allow travel between galaxies. It's exciting stuff.

Billy's also solved the physics behind time cusps, and there's now a good understanding of what causes them and how to avoid them. We can all rest a lot easier now, and I no longer cringe every time a cloud passes over the sun.

"Uncle Peter," Jason calls from just outside my front door. "Are you coming bushwalking or not?"

"Yes, I'll be right there," I reply as I grab my little backpack and walk out the door.

The four of us, Billy, Julia, Jason and myself, walk off barefoot towards the creek and the fire trail beyond.

Peter Thorpe

Part Two

The Bane of Eridani

The Beginning

I was born and raised in Coolum Beach on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. My parents owned an enormous house that was one street back from the beach, so it was almost taken for granted that I'd end up involved in water-based activities. What did take my parents by surprise was my insatiable appetite for anything astronomical. When not bodysurfing or paddling a surf ski, I could be found either with my nose in an astronomy book or my eyeball attached to a telescope, depending on whether it was day or night.

Growing up in a small beachside community, my early childhood was spent entirely barefoot. At primary school bare feet were the norm and it really wasn't until I reached high school that I was inflicted with my first pair of shoes. I tried very hard to avoid wearing them but the school administration was deaf to my protests. My desire for barefootedness wasn't destroyed, though, but merely went underground. I never wore socks and always made sure I bought the cheapest and flimsiest shoes, preferably one or two sizes too big. If a shoe fell apart or was lost then I could go barefoot for a little while until a replacement could be obtained, and I developed a real knack for weakening the stitching between the sole and the upper, or getting a shoelace to break, or finding new and ingenious ways of simply losing footwear. My best effort was getting a dog to eat my shoe on the way to school one Monday morning, and as punishment I was made to wear only the one remaining shoe for the rest of the week. By various means I managed to string out my semi-barefooted existence for almost a month before a new pair was forced onto me.

When I finally got through my six years of high school and made it into Brisbane University as a science student, I reverted to an almost full time barefoot existence. Shoes were required in the chemistry laboratory and

occasionally I'd have to participate in some formal occasion requiring me to wear more than my perennial board shorts and tank top, but for the rest of the time my one and only pair were kept safely locked away in the cupboard at home.

As I said, my other passion was astronomy. I loved Star Trek and dreamed of zooming round the galaxy in the starship Enterprise. The transporters and the holodeck were cool, but what really grabbed me was the concept of warp drive. For most of my life I'd been drawn to the stars only to be thwarted by the realisation that even if I could travel at close to the speed of light I'd never be able to visit them. If there was any way at all to achieve warp speed I was determined to find it.

My first year class was full of bright-eyed budding young scientists like myself. Not all were into astronomy. Not all were into physics even. But there was one. At first I didn't even notice him. The astronomer amongst us always sat at the back of the class, and in the dim light of the lecture theatre his dark skin made him almost invisible. Eventually I did notice him, though, and it wasn't only because, like me, he never wore shoes. There were about a dozen regular barefooters in my class, and while that made us a minority, bare feet weren't such a rare sight as to attract any particular attention. No, the astronomer stood out because he was the only one in the class, and maybe the only one in the whole university, who never wore a shirt.

While his manner of dress made him conspicuous, everything else he did seemed to be a conscious effort to achieve the opposite. He never spoke unless asked a direct question, and never made eye contact with anyone. At the end of each lecture he'd disappear as quickly as possible and was never seen hanging around the cafeteria or any of the sporting facilities. The only place I ever saw him outside of class was in the physics library with his head buried inside a book. For most of my first year at university I paid no attention to him.

When the exam results were published I was happy with the distinctions I'd earned and particularly pleased with my high distinction in physics. But I didn't top the class. That honour went to my fellow astronomer. In every course. For all his weirdness he was, by anyone's definition, brilliant.

In second year we began to specialise a little. I abandoned chemistry and the other general studies subjects, concentrating instead on maths and physics. The astronomer followed the same path and was in all my classes. As the year progressed the diminishing group of physicists became more intimate and I finally began building new friendships away from my old school mates. I finally started getting to know the astronomer, Billy Collins.

Billy was an Aboriginal boy of average height, and was all skin and bone. To look at him you'd think a gust of wind would blow him away. He was the quietest, shyest person I've ever met, but as I started to take notice of him, to discover something about his interests and background, I became more and more determined to break through his reclusive exterior and build a friendship with him. Little by little, I succeeded.

I began sitting next to him in class. Before long I'd revealed my secret dream of warping around the galaxy, and rather than mocking me he seemed genuinely interested and even recommended a couple of papers to me. I read them and for the first time began to believe maybe my dream could become a reality. Shortly after that something very strange happened.

We were leaving the lecture theatre after the final class for the morning, and I was discussing one of the faster-than-light papers I'd just been reading. I asked Billy if he'd like to join me for lunch in the cafeteria.

"I'd like to Todd, but I never eat lunch. At home I rarely eat more than one meal a day, and here at uni it's usually considerably less."

I was taken aback. I'd been brought up on three square meals a day, and my first reaction was that he must be anorexic. But what happened next was totally unexpected.

"I have a really strange metabolism," he said. "Most of what people eat goes into maintaining their body temperature. In me it's different. My body heat comes from some other source, but I don't know what that is. That's why I never wear a shirt. If I did I'd quickly overheat."

"Here," he said, grabbing my hand. "Place your hand on my back."

I did, and suddenly felt a wave of warmth going up my arm and into my body. Within moments I was starting to perspire. I pulled my hand away and started peeling off my shirt, the cold winter's day suddenly feeling like mid-summer heat.

"Do you have any idea what causes this?" I asked.

"It's hereditary. Both my parents come from the same ancestral tribe, what we call the Emu people. There have always been strange traits associated with Emu blood but in me it seems to have all come together in concentrated form. The doctors have a name for it, though. They call it autothermia, but there's no known cause and no cure. My father says some great destiny awaits me, but it's kind of hard being different from everyone else."

I put my hand on his shoulder, hesitantly at first as I feared another outpouring of heat, but when that didn't happen I held it there firmly and looked him closely in the eyes. I said nothing, but hoped he'd accept me as a

loyal friend who didn't care about his differences. As if reading my thoughts, he smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"I'd better let you go and have lunch," he said.

"No, I can skip lunch for one day. I want you to look at this paper I found. I think there are some real possibilities here."

And so our friendship grew as winter became summer, and then before we knew it our classes were over for the year. Billy went back to Narrabri to spend the summer with his parents, while I went back to my summer job guarding the surf at Coolum Beach.

Billy sent me a Christmas card, and I wrote back to him telling him some of the ideas I'd dreamed up while keeping watch over the beach or riding the waves. To tell the truth I was eager to return to university so we could continue our lengthy discussions about ways to beat the galactic speed limit.

First semester slipped by quickly and uneventfully. In the mid year holidays I asked him if he'd like to come and spend a week with me at Coolum Beach, and he agreed on the condition I come back to Narrabri with him immediately afterwards. The deal was done, and as soon as the exams were over he moved into the guest room at my parents' home.

It was the first time he'd seen the ocean. This in itself I found incredible. For Billy it was love at first sight. Within days he was body-surfing like a pro and by the end of the week he was getting the hang of board riding too. My sister came down to watch and was quite impressed. Julia was usually the world's greatest critic when it came to my friends but with Billy it was different. At night she'd often talk to him about life in Narrabri, Aboriginal culture, politics and all sorts of things I'd never even dream of discussing with him. He seemed to delight in her attention, which also struck me as strange considering how shy and reclusive he was at the university.

Before we knew it the week was up and it was my turn to travel out to his part of the world. The first thing that struck me was just how far it was from Brisbane to Narrabri. We took turns doing the driving and stopped overnight in Goondiwindi. We finally made it into Narrabri early in the afternoon.

Billy's parents, Tom and Sarah, were delightful people and made me feel right at home. Tom was the senior researcher at the AusScience radio telescope not far out of town. His specialty was the search for extraterrestrial life, and he told me that while they'd detected a few momentary signals that could have been E.T.s, nothing concrete had shown up yet. He was still very enthusiastic, though, and was convinced it would only be a matter of time

and patience before the question of other intelligent life in the universe was settled once and for all.

Billy took me for a walk down to the local creek and then out along a fire trail through the bushland on the outskirts of town. He said when he was at school he was part of a Bushcare group that tried to stop some of the erosion in the creek system around the town. They'd had some success, and the group was still active with the present generation of environmentally-aware teenagers.

We walked barefoot, and the texture of the ground was quite different to what I was used to on the coast. He was very interested in the sensations I was feeling through my soles.

Of course I was given the full tour of the telescope facility and I was very impressed with the quality of the research work they were doing. I warned Tom I hadn't brought any shoes with me, but he said it was okay for me to come in bare feet, and that for years Billy had been a regular barefoot visitor. I asked him if he was likely to have any job openings for fresh young physics graduates and he said he'd let me know if anything came up.

On my last day Billy took me walking out into the Pilliga scrub, a vast nature reserve between Narrabri and Coonabarabran, and showed me a cave covered with Aboriginal art. Many of the paintings were of emus. He said this was a sacred site for his people, and the paintings told the history of his tribe. Even though I'm usually sceptical about things spiritual, I felt a powerful and disturbing presence in the cave and was somewhat relieved when we came back out into the sunshine.

We stood in silence for some time, until Billy finally spoke.

"There's another world, somewhere out there in the galaxy, just like this one except there are no people. My father's been there, and even took me there once. I went there with another friend too, but now that never happened."

"What do you mean?" I asked, now totally confused.

"It's hard to explain. Tell me, Todd, in all your travels, have you ever come across someone named Peter Thorpe?"

I thought long and hard, but in the end drew a blank. I knew quite a few Peters, and Thorpe was a common enough surname, but I couldn't recall ever meeting a Peter Thorpe.

"Was he the friend you mentioned?"

"Yes he was, but the world's different now and we really never met. I don't even know if he exists."

He sat down and told me the whole story. It was incredible, and if it had been anyone other than Billy telling it I'd have described it as unbelievable. But in spite of the strangeness, I had no doubt at all every word was true.

By the time he'd finished the sun was getting low, so we started walking back to the road. At night in winter it gets very cold in Narrabri, although this never bothered Billy. I was wearing only shorts and a tank top and by the time we reached the car I was feeling decidedly chilly, but I didn't let on in case I received another dose of his furnace.

The final semester passed quickly by and much of the time was spent preparing for the end of year examinations. Billy and I were both earmarked as prospective honours students and the honours adviser suggested we have a think about possible topics for our thesis. I asked him if it was possible for students to work in pairs and he said it was okay but that the work submitted had to be of a higher quality than that of an individual student. So it was settled then and there that Billy and I would work together next year on our honours project.

Our work was to be based on a critique of the literature on faster-than-light travel, and Billy suggested a couple of lines of pure research we could do to add some small original contribution. He had an idea that combined the dynamics of surfboard riding with quantum physics which I found very endearing. His reasoning was a board rider could move faster than the wave he was riding, so if we could do the same thing with light waves, well, '*ahead warp factor 3*' and all that. But every time we tried to figure out a way of doing this Special Relativity would jump up unexpectedly and block us.

In the end we discovered lots of ingenious ways for travelling slower than the speed of light. Fortunately for us the examiners were more interested in methodology than actual results and ranked us very highly. Billy graduated with the University Medal and was awarded the Sumner-Miller scholarship, while I was ranked third in the year and received a commendation.

Throughout the year he had become a frequent weekend visitor at my parents' house as we spent our time delving into partial differential equations and riding the waves. Billy and Julia started spending time alone together, and before long they were an 'item'. I was very happy for both of them.

After the academic year had ended they went on a driving holiday through northern Queensland while I went back to my lifeguard duties. I received an offer of employment as a research assistant at Brisbane

University which I accepted. When Billy returned he enrolled at the university as a PhD student.

While I was working in the same department as him, I spent most of my time involved in other research projects, but we still saw each other quite often. I remember clearly the panic he was in when he discovered part of being a post grad student was doing some undergraduate teaching. Julia helped a lot in calming him down. She bought him a shirt, the lightest and thinnest she could find, so transparent he might just as well not have been wearing it. Once he stepped in front of the class, though, everything changed. He was a natural teacher, and the students loved him.

He had a knack for explaining things in a way that really got through to them. Before long he had a small group following him around, and each morning they would gather in the cafeteria and talk excitedly about the frontiers of physics while consuming vast quantities of cappuccinos. By the end of the first semester he'd been firmly established as a physics school icon.

It was in early October that Billy came running into the laboratory where I was working, almost bowling over the head of school. He was waving a paper by a New Zealand researcher describing a type of crystal with quantum linkages through space-time that suggested a way around the relativistic speed limit. Billy was babbling away at almost the speed of light himself, but when I finally made him slow down enough for me to understand what he was saying, I could see why he was so excited. These 'fractal' crystals, as the author called them, looked like just the ticket for getting into the galactic fast lane and I was almost as excited as he was.

Not five minutes later my boss came in and told me I was being sent down to Sydney University for four months to work on a joint venture with their physics school. I was stunned, but I had no choice. Talk about bad timing.

I departed for Sydney two days later, and Billy and Julia were at the airport to see me off. That was the last time I saw them before I died.

Dead for a While

When I arrived in Sydney I discovered my role was to assist a group of honours students who were working on a special project over the summer holidays. They were trying to develop a more efficient solar energy collector for hot water systems, and while it was interesting stuff it had very little to do with astronomy.

At the beginning of the project all the students were wearing shoes. As the summer wore on and became hotter and more humid, one by one they started coming in barefoot, and by the end we were all barefoot. They were a fun group to work with and I frequently went surfing with a couple of them at the weekends.

At the time there were about half a dozen postgraduate research students in the Physics school. One of them, a tall, thin, very pale man named Andrew Schilling, always seemed to be just hanging around staring at people and I found him to be quite unnerving and, well, scary. There was also a skinny little guy who, like me, was always barefoot. His name was Peter and when we passed in the corridor we'd smile or wave to each other, but I never really got to meet him. I had no idea at the time he might have been Billy's long lost friend.

I kept in touch with Billy and he sent me more updates and ideas on fractal crystals and the 'subspace' they were supposed to unlock. He even thought this subspace might be the source of his autothermia. I wished I could be back in Brisbane working through it all with him.

Just before the project wound up I was working through some of the equations and discovered that for subspace to be stable it would have to be folded over on itself along the plane of symmetry of the galaxy. It suddenly struck me that the place Billy had told me about, where he'd gone with his father and his lost friend, might actually be a twin planet to Earth on the

other side of this fold. It made sense, since you could get there through subspace without having to move. I scribbled out several pages of notes and posted them off to him.

When I concluded my work in Sydney I took a couple of weeks' holiday and decided to go up north to Cairns. It was still in the rainy season but the weather was kind to me and I spent lots of time exploring the little beaches just north of the city.

On my last day I was walking along one such beach. There was a north-easterly wind blowing that was making the water surface choppy. I was about halfway along when someone came running out of the dunes and calling out to me. It was Andrew Schilling.

"I came across your notes on subspace folding," he said. It was the first time I'd heard him speak and his voice was even more menacing than his appearance.

"Unfortunately you're really getting a bit too close to the truth, and we can't have that now, can we?" I looked puzzled, and it took me a few moments, fatal moments as it turned out, to realise he was threatening me.

"I'm sorry I have to do this. You seem like a pretty decent sort of a guy." He pulled back his jacket, revealing a large knife. Before I could react, the knife plunged into my chest and the world faded to black.

But then it didn't happen that way at all.

* * *

On my last day I was walking along the beach. There was a north-easterly wind blowing that was making the water surface choppy. I was about halfway along when I saw someone run out from behind a dune. Then two more people appeared and there was something of a scuffle. I was distracted momentarily as a gull screeched right next to me and when I turned back all three of them had gone. I gave the matter no further thought and continued my walk.

When I arrived back in Coolum Beach I saw Billy and Julia sitting in an outdoor café so I walked over to them. They seemed to be having a somewhat heated discussion.

"Why won't you come to America with me?" Julia was saying. "It will cost you nothing, my parents are buying the tickets, and you can put off your studies for three months. You said yourself you're way ahead of schedule."

Billy looked flustered. I walked up to them and sat down, and we exchanged greetings.

"Look, Billy, go with Julia," I said. "You'll have a great time and I'll fill in for your teaching duties while you're gone."

He shook his head and raised his arms in defeat. “Okay, you’ve talked me into it, but now I’ll have to go and buy a shirt and some shoes because I’m sure they won’t let me on the plane like this.” Julia and I both laughed.

Billy was good to his word and within a few weeks they were flying off to Los Angeles. When they returned they announced their engagement.

The wedding was fabulous. The ceremony took place in the park in Brisbane where the World Expo had been in 1988. Billy’s parents came up from Narrabri along with one of his old school friends from there, another barefooter named Matthew. We found Billy the world’s most lightweight tuxedo and kept it in the refrigerator until just before the ceremony. He survived without going into meltdown, but the jacket disappeared as soon as he’d said ‘I do’. He kept his shirt on, though. In fact, ever since returning from America he’d been wearing a shirt and shoes almost all the time. He said his autothermia was getting easier for him to control now that he was getting older, and he wanted to appear more normal to avoid embarrassing Julia.

Soon after the wedding I found out that Julia was pregnant. They bought a house in Brisbane and spent most of their free time getting everything ready for the baby. Billy’s research started slipping behind, but he kept saying he’d soon catch up.

Christmas came and they insisted on having the family get-together at their place. Tom and Sarah also came over from Narrabri and we had a wonderful couple of days. Julia’s pregnancy was going along really well and the doctors were confident there’d be no problems.

Baby Peter was born on the 11th of February, and from the very first day he was all smiles and giggles and very rarely cried. As he grew through the toddler stage his inquisitive nature became quickly apparent and he seemed destined to become a great astronomer. So we reckoned, anyway.

Work at the university continued along reasonably well. The stuff I was doing as a research assistant counted towards my Masters degree and this was duly conferred. Then, on Peter’s third birthday, I received a letter from Tom Collins offering me a position on his research team at Narrabri. I rang him and said the offer looked very attractive but I’d like a couple of weeks to consider my options, and he was agreeable to that.

I spoke at length with my supervisor about Tom’s offer, and his advice was I should accept the position with open arms. I knew deep inside it was the right career move for me, but at the same time I was reluctant to leave my friends and beaches.

Finally one night I rang Tom and spoke to him for what must have been three or four hours, and it ended with me accepting his offer. Not realising how late it was, I drove round to Billy and Julia's place to break the news to them. I couldn't believe my eyes when I pulled up across the street from their house.

There'd been a fire. The roof of the building had totally collapsed and the remaining brick walls were charred black. The fire brigade were still pouring water onto the ruins. An ambulance was parked in the driveway and as I stepped from the car I saw the paramedics carrying three black bags on stretchers out of the remains. I screamed as I ran across the road towards them.

I saw the taxi out the corner of my eye, but I knew it was too late to avoid being hit. I don't remember the impact or my short flight across the road, but I do recall briefly seeing the paramedics running towards me before once again the world faded to darkness.

* * *

On my last day I was walking along the beach. There was a north-easterly wind blowing that was making the water surface choppy. I was about halfway along when someone came running out from behind a dune just ahead of me, then when I blinked he was gone. A moment later he was back again, and as I watched he kept flickering in and out of existence like in some old movie. Two other, smaller, people emerged from the dunes and they were also flickering. One of them yelled something that sounded like '*Emu!*' and charged at the first man, but he was swatted away like a pesky insect. The other one charged in, yelling '*Dodo!*', and grabbed hold of the tall guy's shirt. The tall guy started shouting and then pulled a knife.

There was a bit of a scuffle, then the tall guy was tripped by the first little guy who was still lying on the sand. All the while they were flickering faster and faster. Suddenly there was a bright flash of light and everything went black.

Through the darkness I began to see cracks of light. I could hear voices, but they were soft and indistinct. Someone yelled, '*This has to stop, NOW!*' and then I heard another voice, a familiar voice, saying, '*Quick, Peter, it's another cusp!*' It was Billy. '*Take my hands and look into my eyes*'. The darkness exploded into a swirling black mist and then it gradually fluttered away, leaving me standing in a room in front of a whole lot of people, some of them taking photographs. I looked down and there was still sand on my feet. I had no idea how I'd gone from the beach near Cairns to here.

Beside me were two people lying on the floor. One of them was Billy, only he looked a bit older than when I'd last seen him a couple of weeks ago. The other person also looked familiar, but it took me a moment to recognise him as Peter, the postgraduate student from Sydney. He also looked a bit older than when I'd last seen him just before finishing up with the group of students down there. Then someone else walked up to me, and it was Tom Collins.

"Todd, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I have no idea. A minute ago I was walking along a beach, and then wham!"

Just then Peter started to stir and Tom bent down to help him up. Billy was still out cold. I backed away while Peter started going on about how they'd saved me from Andrew Schilling. I had no idea what any of this was about and just stood there in total confusion.

In due course the paramedics arrived and took Billy to the hospital. Tom took me back to his place and offered me his guest room, which I gladly accepted. A bit later Peter came in to see me.

"I don't know if you remember me, Todd, but I used to see you occasionally when you were working at Sydney University a few years ago."

"Sure I remember you, Peter, but what do you mean a few years ago? It's only been two weeks since I left Sydney."

He started telling me about the time cusps and split time lines. He spoke of my involvement after the incident on the beach, but I had no recollection of any of it.

"How's Billy?" I finally asked.

His expression became very sad.

"The doctors say physically he's fine but there's no trace of any higher brain activity. It's like his spirit's gone and only his body's left here now."

Over the coming days we went to see him but there was no change in his condition. Then Peter had a sudden idea that maybe he was still in that other time line where events leading up to the house fire were still unfolding. He was right, and at the instant in the other time line where Billy died in the fire he regained consciousness here.

About half an hour later I was hit by what felt like a bolt of lightning. I was listening keenly to them talking about all that had happened when my whole body was racked with incredible pain. Then just as suddenly the pain stopped and I was lying on a road. Across from me was a burnt-out house and two paramedics were running towards me. I had no feeling in any of my body, it was as if I was just a disembodied head. It was then I realised I

wasn't breathing, and couldn't breathe. For a moment I panicked, but soon a feeling of peace and serenity came over me. Black specks started appearing in my vision and then all was darkness.

I must have passed out for a few moments, because the next thing I knew Billy and Peter were standing over me looking very concerned. I was back in Billy's hospital room, lying on the floor. For a moment I was totally confused, but then began to realise I now had a full set of memories from the time line that existed from that moment on the beach until the house fire and my death on the road. My other self from that time line must have just merged with me. I did my best to explain my experience to Billy and Peter, and much to my relief they understood completely.

The next morning I was woken by a knocking on my door, and when I opened it there was Julia. It transpired that in this time line, while I'd been dead, she'd gone off to America alone and married someone she met over there, divorced him three years later, and had then come to Narrabri when she'd heard about Billy. She said her marriage had been a dreadful mistake and wondered if Billy could ever forgive her. I suggested maybe we could plan a surprise dinner for him that night when he came back from the hospital.

Peter has described the dinner and the wedding that followed, so I won't bore you by repeating it all. Instead I'll take up the story a few weeks later, when the Eridanians came.

I was still living in Tom and Sarah's guest room. Tom offered me a job at the telescope but I was unsure of what I wanted to do with my life now. I was still suffering the after-effects of being uprooted and transported four years into the future and needed to come to terms with my new existence before making any decisions like that. I was extremely grateful to them, both for their hospitality and their understanding of how I felt.

The ringing of the phone woke me a little after seven o'clock. Neither of them seemed to be within earshot so I sleepily answered it. Peter was on the other end and he was so stoked up it took me several minutes to get any sense out of him. It seemed the little ship he and Billy had built had come home again, and he'd found it sitting on his deck when he'd gone out there this morning.

This time the Eridanians were much more forthright. An envelope was taped to the outside of the ship, and inside was a letter.

Dear Billy and Peter,

Congratulations on your successful subspace flight! We'd be pleased to meet with you in order to extend our hospitality and discuss how best to proceed. Come to the waterhole in the Pilliga on Sunday at about noon, and please bring Todd with you as well if he wishes to come.

*Yours truly,
Andwin*

The three of us met at Peter's place about half an hour later and I was very keen to have a look at their little ship. It was certainly an engineering marvel and I could easily imagine it sitting in a museum case with crowds of school children looking at it in awe.

We all agreed to go out to the waterhole on Sunday to meet with Andwin. None of us sensed any malice in the Eridanians and, while we were no doubt very nervous, we had no fear of what we might encounter, or at least none that we were prepared to outwardly express.

We arrived at the waterhole at about eleven o'clock, but there was no sign of the Eridanians. The next hour passed excruciatingly slowly, but, just as I was starting to think either they weren't coming or it was all a hoax, Peter pointed up into the sky.

A strange shimmering was visible about fifty metres above the waterhole. Moments later a flash of blue light, accompanied by a loud bang much like a close thunderbolt, heralded the appearance of a metal craft about the size of a delivery van. It slowly descended, eventually coming to rest at the edge of the waterhole about twenty metres from where we were standing.

Once the craft had settled a hatch opened in the side and a tall, thin man stepped out. At least that was my first impression, but as I studied him more closely there were some subtle anomalies. His head seemed just slightly too large for his body and his arms a trifle too long, but in a crowded street he could easily have passed unnoticed. He was barefoot and I couldn't help noticing the middle toe on each foot was the longest.

"G'day, I'm Andwin," he said in perfect Australian and with no hint of an accent.

Instinctively I started to reach out and shake his hand, but then I remembered something from Star Trek about never touching a Vulcan so I pulled back.

He extended his hand, though, and said, "It's okay to shake my hand, Todd. We're not Vulcans."

I was dumbfounded, but managed to extend my arm once more and shook hands with him. His hand felt slightly warmer than it should have, but not so much as to cause alarm. Again it was one of those subtle differences my subconscious interpreted as odd.

Billy and Peter then came forward and also shook hands with him.

“You seem to know a great deal about us,” Billy said.

“Yes, we’ve been watching your work here with great interest. We try to learn as much as we can about our first contacts before we meet them face to face.”

He escorted us into his shuttlecraft and we jumped through subspace to where the mother ship was waiting in geosynchronous orbit. He took us into a lounge area and offered us some refreshment, then dimmed the lights as we watched what could best be described as a travelogue for Eridani.

We were shown where in the galaxy the Eridanian system was relative to Earth, the other planets in the system, and the geography and history of their world. Their history, unlike our own, was one of quiet achievement without wars or any apparent disharmony. Of course what we were seeing may well have been the work of media relations personnel with little basis in fact, but I felt this wasn’t the case. One thing I did notice throughout was that not a single Eridanian ever wore shoes. I liked the look of the place very much.

At the end of it he asked if we had any questions. Billy raised his arm.

“Has the southern hemisphere always been desert?”

For a moment he looked startled, but then he said, “Yes, it’s a quirk of the planet’s formation. There’s negligible tilt on our axis and the winds of the northern and southern hemispheres don’t mix. As there was never any ocean south of the equator, that whole hemisphere has remained totally dry.”

“Do you know who Andrew Schilling was?” Billy then asked.

“All I can say is he’s a known outlaw. He shouldn’t trouble you again.”

“I thought he was dead,” Peter said.

“He may well be,” Andwin said, and that was all he’d say on the subject.

After an awkward silence Billy changed the subject.

“Where do we go from here?”

“We’d like to open up formal contact with your people, but we need to tread carefully. The reason we invited you here is we’d like you, Billy, to be our representative, for a short while.”

“Why me?”

“You may not realise it, Billy, but I think everyone else does,” he said cryptically.

Suddenly I saw where he was heading.

“You have a gift, Billy,” I said. “People listen to you and they trust you. Remember the students you had around you when you were teaching?”

He sat back and nodded.

“Peter, we’d like you to assist Billy. You both must work together in this if we’re to succeed,” Andwin said.

“Emu and Dodo,” Peter said softly. I had no idea what he meant, but both Andwin and Billy nodded.

“What about me?” I asked.

“For you, Todd, we have something totally different in mind. We’d like you to come back to Eridani and work with our scientists there, teaching them about your science and technology.”

It struck me then that this was my new purpose in life, the thing that would fill the void in me that had opened up when I’d been catapulted through time. I immediately agreed.

I returned to the surface with Billy and Peter and said farewell to them, asking them to pass on my thanks to Billy’s parents. All going well, we’d meet again in about a month’s time when we hoped there’d be a formal envoy from Eridani to Earth. Billy’s goal was to ensure the Eridanians would be well met.

He took me by the shoulders and stared into my eyes. I could feel his mysterious heat flowing into me and could sense him gently probing my mind. Then he released me.

“We’ll work together again, Todd, and achieve great things.”

Billy and Peter were successful in getting the Eridanians’ message of friendship across to the world, and the envoy achieved its aims. As it turned out, though, I was unable to return to Earth with them, and it was to be another ten years before I saw my friends again.

Shadows of the Past

There was a knock on my door. I opened it and before me stood Elissi along with two Eridanian men whom I'd never met. Elissi was one of the scientists I'd been working with over the past ten years in the Earth-Eridani Scientific Exchange Foundation, of which I was now head of the Earth delegation. Over the course of the last decade we'd achieved a lot, including the deployment of low cost subspace energy transducers on Earth that all but eliminated the need for fossil fuels, and the medical breakthroughs that saw cures developed for cancer, AIDS and the common cold on Earth and the eradication of several serious Eridanian diseases here.

Elissi and I had become very close friends. While, strictly speaking, love-making between us was impossible because of our biological differences, we nonetheless had a satisfying and rewarding relationship.

I invited her in and she introduced me to her companions.

"Has it ever struck you as odd that this planet is green and lush north of the equator but all desert to the south?" she asked me.

"I could hardly not have noticed."

"But after you're used to it you just accept it and get on with life, is that right?"

"I guess so," I said, not understanding yet what she was driving at.

"We'd like to show you something in the southern hemisphere. Can you come with us for a few days?"

I said I could, and we quickly packed a few things and departed. They escorted me down the road towards the river and there we boarded a boat. Once everyone was on board we slipped out into the flow and headed upstream.

"This planet has always had an equatorial bulge," she said once we were clear of the land, "but up until about ten thousand years ago the southern hemisphere was very similar to the north, with a polar ocean and lush green forests extending almost to the equator."

“The southern lands were inhabited by a different race of people. They were shorter than us and had darker skins.” I didn’t like the sound of what she was telling me as I could see the direction this was taking, but I said nothing.

“Have you ever wondered how it is we’re one of the leading planets in space exploration and yet have so little technology on our home world?”

“Um, well I’ve always been told your people discovered subspace very early in their development and as a result had little need to develop other high tech industries.”

“Sheeze, Todd, I know you’re a male but even so you do have a higher than average intelligence,” she said, now mocking anger. “Do you really believe that line?”

“Well, now that you mention it, it does sound a little strange,” I said sheepishly. After all, I was only a male.

“Would it sound more plausible, even to your male mind, if I told you the southern people were heavily into technology, with industries pouring out communications, transport and data processing products much like your own planet?”

“Come to think of it, yes, I guess that would sound more plausible. I suppose, then, they were the ones who really discovered subspace.”

“That’s right, and we northerners were happy to take advantage of them. But subspace wasn’t all they discovered.”

The sun had now set and the air over the river cooled rapidly. In my ten years on Eridani I’d lived in a coastal town with a consistently mild climate. This was the first time I’d experienced real cold since leaving Earth and I shivered momentarily. Elissi continued her story.

“Across the fold of subspace there was another planet, linked to this one by the minute subspace tidal forces. The first explorers of that world found it was largely barren. There were no land animals and the only vegetation was close to the seas. But they did find the southern ocean, and only the southern ocean, was teeming with fish. It was later discovered there was a subspace tunnel between the two worlds lying somewhere beneath their respective southern seas. Whether this was a natural formation or a legacy of a previous civilisation we still don’t know.

“The early explorers discovered our twin planet was rich in minerals and quickly set up industries there. But they found the greatest wealth lay deep beneath the surface and so teams of scientists were sent to develop bigger and better mining devices.

“All was well until they started using a matter imploder to do their mining. The imploder was fast and left a clean hole with no apparent

residue, so its use became widespread. What they didn't realise was the imploder left behind microscopic particles of incredible density. In essence they were solid chunks of neutrons.

"These chunks, being so small and yet so massive, quickly found their way to the centre of the planet. Nothing untoward was noticed on the surface, because the external gravitational field of a planet is the same whether the mass is uniformly distributed or concentrated at the centre. At least nothing was noticed until it was too late." I was starting to guess what was coming next.

"Eventually the neutron chunks coalesced at the core, creating a huge superchunk. The gravitational field became so intense the surrounding core material imploded and a chain reaction began. Within a matter of hours the planet's entire core collapsed into a black hole, and the energy released by the implosion blasted the remaining shell into nothing more than dust.

"But the subspace tunnel from our world remained in existence, and our southern ocean began pouring through into the void. The southern technologists worked frantically to find a way of blocking the tunnel, and eventually they succeeded. This was extremely fortunate for us, because if the ocean had drained completely our atmosphere would have been sucked through next. But, by the time the tunnel was blocked, less than one percent of the southern ocean remained.

"That water evaporated over the coming years, and because of the equatorial bulge there was no intermingling of winds to bring moisture down from the north. So within the span of a few decades the entire southern hemisphere became desert."

Ahead of us I could see lights and soon the boat pulled in at the centre of a small town.

"We'll stay here tonight and then proceed south by air tomorrow," she said as we were leaving the vessel.

"What became of the southern people?" I asked.

"I'll tell you that tomorrow."

We spent the night at an inn, but I didn't get much sleep. I lay awake thinking of what it must have been like to have had an entire ocean go down the gurgler. It was frightening.

Early the next morning we headed out of town in a small land transport vehicle. After travelling for about an hour we came to an old airstrip with an old aeroplane sitting forlornly in one corner. My worst fears were realised when we boarded the aircraft.

"Don't worry," Elissi said, "it's only just had a complete overhaul."

In spite of my reservations, the plane became airborne without any drama and I sat back and watched the landscape unfurl below us. We were heading due south and the land gradually became more mountainous and dry.

“So what became of the southern people?” I finally asked.

“They mostly died out,” she said with no emotion in her voice. “Now you’d think us northerners, being such good and decent people, would have reached out to our cousins and resettled them in the north, but no, we didn’t. Instead the prevailing attitude was it was their own damn fault for tampering with nature, and it served them right.”

I sat there in silence, trying to keep an impassive expression on my face.

“But it gets worse,” she continued. “Our leaders of the day, and remember this was nearly ten thousand years ago, were a tad embarrassed when they realised the southerners had died out, so a massive cover-up was launched. Within a generation there was no official record of the southern race and within two or three generations no-one knew they had even existed. The northerners claimed the subspace ships as their own invention, and we continued on with our semi-rural existence as if nothing had happened.”

She took a deep breath.

“Now here’s where it gets really interesting, at least as far as you’re concerned, Todd. In all our space exploration we found no other planets with twins across the subspace fold, so there was no reason for anyone to suspect Eridani to have ever had such a twin. That is, until we discovered Earth, because, as you no doubt know, Todd, Earth does have a twin planet.”

My head was spinning. Suddenly a whole lot of seemingly unconnected events fell into place.

After all these years, I finally knew why Andrew Schilling wanted me dead.

“Are you okay, Todd?” she asked, looking at me with a worried expression on her face.

“Yes, I’m okay,” I managed to say. “Just a goose walking over my grave.”

“A goose doing what?”

“Just an old Earth saying. Does the name Andrew Schilling mean anything to you?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“He was an Eridanian living on Earth some fifteen years ago, and he tried very hard to stop us from discovering subspace.” At this stage I didn’t want to say just how hard he’d tried.

“I see,” she said, although I felt she knew more than she was letting on.

“When we made first contact, my friend Billy Collins asked Andwin about him. Andwin went very tight-lipped and would say only that he was a known outlaw, presumed to be dead. I don’t think Billy believed him.”

“And since then you haven’t been allowed to go back to Earth and speak with this Billy person privately.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that,” I said, but then the male brain cells started ticking over. “Or perhaps I would.”

The plane was now crossing the equator. The mountain peaks below us were completely arid. To the north a few cloud banks were visible, but to the south the sky was a clear deep blue. Humidity zero. I shuddered when I thought again of that great southern ocean disappearing down the plughole.

We landed about ten degrees south of the equator. Stepping out of the aircraft was like walking into an oven. The temperature would have been in the mid forties at least and the air was totally dry. We were hustled into an ancient land vehicle with a barely functioning air conditioner. Twenty minutes later we drove into a large cavern and parked amid several dozen other such vehicles.

“Welcome to one of the few remaining enclaves of our southern cousins,” Elissi said.

We walked to the back of the cavern where a long staircase went down into the hill. As we descended the air became cooler and, if I wasn’t imagining it, damper. At last we reached the bottom and then walked about two kilometres along a narrow tunnel. Finally we emerged into a huge underground cavern, in the centre of which was a brightly lit lake.

Two short, dark-skinned Eridanians met us at the entrance and Elissi spoke to them in Eridanian. We were escorted down a path, and on either side of us, stretching away as far as we could see, were fields of grain growing under what I presumed were subspace-powered lights. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of a southern Eridanian tending to his crops.

Soon we arrived in the village and were met by another southern Eridanian. He, like all the others I’d seen, was wearing only shorts that looked like they’d been washed too many times.

“This is Abulla, Todd,” Elissi said. “He doesn’t speak your language, but you probably know enough Eridanian by now to communicate with him.”

She’d been trying to teach me the Eridanian language for as long as I’d known her, but with limited success. At school I’d studied German for a couple of years and had only just succeeded in avoiding outright failure, so

clearly languages were not my strong suit. Nonetheless I'd picked up enough Eridanian words and grammar to make myself almost understood.

Abulla was obviously aware of my linguistic limitations for he spoke slowly and precisely. He essentially confirmed what I'd been told by Elissi, and went on to say this was one of only six known remaining southern enclaves. They grew all their own crops and recycled as much water as they could, but still needed to travel north occasionally to bring additional water back from the springs on the other side of the equator. In earlier times there'd been talk of building a pipeline but the days of their high technology society were long gone and they just didn't have the resources or manpower for such an undertaking. He also said if they tried anything like that the northerners would discover them. He didn't elaborate on what he thought might happen then.

I felt sick to the core. The entire Eridanian philosophy of peaceful coexistence and co-operation between worlds had just been proven to be the greatest lie of all time, right here on their own home world.

Before leaving the enclave we joined the village children in a game of the Eridanian version of soccer. They appeared happy and healthy in spite of the difficult conditions under which they lived, but it only served to heighten my anger at what was happening here.

We took off in the plane again and headed further south. Elissi said we were heading almost to the south pole, to the place where the ocean had drained away. We flew on in silence.

As we neared the polar region the mountains and plateaus gave way to lower, flatter land. Gazing from the window, I tried to imagine what the landscape would have been like before the ocean disappeared. I found that I couldn't.

After almost twelve hours of flight we landed in a broad flat depression. About a kilometre away I could see some buildings and structures, but no other sign of life. It was very cold outside the aircraft and I had no other clothing apart from the shorts and tee shirt I was wearing, but I decided a little coldness was nothing compared to the hardship the southern Eridanians had to endure, so I suffered in silence.

We walked towards the buildings and the physical exertion warmed me up a little. They were a lot further away than I'd thought and a lot bigger than they looked.

Finally we reached the perimeter of the establishment and were met by another southern Eridanian. In spite of the coldness he, like those in the enclave, wore only a ragged pair of shorts and I wondered if perhaps all the southern Eridanians were autothermic. He escorted us into the nearest

building where we were introduced to Nagari, who was in charge of operations here.

He explained to me about the subspace shield that was blocking the tunnel into the black hole. Because of its vital role, the original engineers had built six shields, one on top of the next. But that was nearly ten thousand years ago and one by one the shields had weakened and failed. Now only one shield was fully functional and a second was operating in a reduced capacity.

The problem they faced was the technology and knowledge that had been used to construct the shields had ultimately been lost, and while those who still lived here had the ability to carry out routine maintenance, they'd been unable to repair the failed or failing shields. Ultimately the two remaining shields would fail too and then the planet would die.

My immediate reaction was that the northern Eridanians deserved what they would ultimately get, but that was just a male thought aberration. Virtually none of the northerners knew anything of the plight of their southern cousins, nor could they be held to blame for the actions of their forefathers. And of course the remaining southern Eridanians would be just as dead too when the final shield failed and the atmosphere disappeared. I had to do something to help.

Nagari took us on a tour of the facility. In spite of its age the equipment was all bright and shiny and looked well maintained. There were teams of southern Eridanians regularly checking everything and making minute adjustments while another group, Nagari explained, were trying desperately to repair one of the failed shields using parts scavenged from other failed shields. So far they had been unsuccessful.

For the final part of the tour we walked beyond the compound to the edge of an enormous pit. Around the perimeter was a walkway about ten metres wide, and beyond that a perfectly round hole that, according to Elissi, was about two kilometres in diameter. We walked over to the railing and looked down. Below us was a ring of blue light around the circumference of the hole, and then below that another, paler, ring. These, Nagari said, were the two remaining shields.

I looked straight down and when my eyes had adjusted to the dark I could clearly see stars. I was looking through the subspace tunnel and the starlight was coming straight from the other side of the galaxy. Amazing stuff! Nagari explained that because of the reversal of direction that occurred in such a subspace tunnel, the other end was always pointing away from the black hole that used to be Eridani's twin.

"How long do you think you have left?" I asked Nagari in my stuttering Eridanian.

“We don’t know. It could last another ten thousand years or it could fail tomorrow.”

“Then how long would you have to escape?”

“The planet would completely depressurise in a matter of a few decades, but the shockwave when it blows will be so intense it will probably kill just about everyone on Eridani within a matter of hours. Except for the lucky few, none will escape.”

“Can’t you warn everyone?” I asked, now very distraught. “Or even get help to repair the shields?”

“For ten thousand years we’ve been asking for help from the northerners but they won’t listen. With the exception of a handful of people like Elissi and her friends, no-one even believes we exist, let alone that their planet is in grave danger.”

I shook my head in disgust. I simply couldn’t believe how pig-headed and ignorant the northerners were. But then again, after all I’d seen and heard in the last two days, maybe I could. Then I had an idea.

“I’m an off-worlder and I believe. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Find your world’s best subspace scientists and bring them here. Maybe they can solve the riddle of fixing the shields, or better yet close the tunnel itself. That would be the ultimate solution.”

“Consider it done,” I said to him, now full of hope. Right then I had no doubt our best scientists would have no trouble fixing this, once they turned their minds to it. If only Billy were here, he’d know what to do.

Of course! If anyone could fix this Billy and Peter could. They were the best.

“I have to return to Earth,” I said to Elissi. “Can you arrange it?”

“It will be difficult. For ten years the authorities have conspired to keep you here, to make sure you couldn’t spill the beans on what’s been going on. If they have even the slightest inkling you’ve seen the southern enclaves or this facility they’ll clamp down tight, and probably even have you meet with an unfortunate accident.”

“Shit, we have to hurry then.”

* * *

I’d finally reached the front of the line at the customs barrier and my paperwork was being checked by the official in the booth next to me. In just a few minutes I’d be on my way to either Earth or prison. Why was he taking so long?

“Everything appears to be in order, sir,” the official finally said. He almost seemed disappointed I wasn’t a notorious criminal. “I notice you

haven't been to Earth for ten years. Things are a lot different there now, so I suggest you study the tourist guides during the flight. Enjoy your journey."

I walked briskly towards the departure gate, my boarding pass at the ready. As I entered I turned around and my heart sank. Standing on the other side of the lounge and watching me intently was someone I'd hoped never to see again. It was Andrew Schilling.

I turned away quickly and hurried on board the ship. From where I was seated I could see the doorway and I watched and waited for Andrew to board and arrest me. But he didn't. Eventually the hatch closed and the ship was readied for the jump to subspace. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The journey to Earth took about an hour. I studied the guides as per my instructions and was surprised to see how much my home world had changed. It had changed very much for the better, as far as I could tell. But then, up until three days ago I'd thought Eridani was the closest thing to paradise. A fool's paradise, yes.

Upon arrival at the geosynchronous space dock orbiting Earth I hired a private shuttle to take me directly to Narrabri. I couldn't risk going through the public spaceports in the capital cities.

From the airport I took a taxi directly to Billy's house. I marvelled at the silent subspace-powered motor of the vehicle. Things really had changed since I was last here. Twenty minutes later I arrived at my destination.

When Julia saw me standing on her front doorstep she almost fainted.

"Who is it, Mum?" said the voice of a young boy, and then a moment later I was looking at the nephew I'd never before seen except in photographs. He had his father's dark skin and was wearing only a pair of scruffy shorts. He reminded me all too much of the children in the southern Eridanian enclave.

"Jason, this is your Uncle Todd. He's come home all the way from Eridani."

"Hello Uncle Todd," he said, and then ran back to whatever it was he'd been doing. We both laughed.

"Billy's next door with Peter," she said. "You're lucky you didn't come any earlier as we've only just returned from a bushwalk."

I left my bags with her and wandered over to the house next door. I could tell from the voices that Billy and Peter were on the back decking so rather than go to the front door I walked around the side of the house.

To say they were overjoyed to see me would be an understatement. They were shaking my hand, patting me on the shoulders and asking a million questions at once. Finally I managed to get a word in edgeways.

“Something really big is going down and we need to talk. I think we should bring Tom in on this too.”

Half an hour later we were all gathered around the table in Billy’s house. I told them everything.

The Bubble Bursts

“Are you sure it was Andrew Schilling?” Peter asked when I’d finished the final part of my tale.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I thought he was dead.”

“You said yourself he turned to dust and disappeared. The same thing happened to you the first time in Narrabri and you’re not dead. All that happened was he moved to another time line.” I’d been thinking about this ever since I left Eridani and was confident I had it all figured out.

“So what do we do?” he asked.

“Firstly we have to go and take a look at what’s left of their twin planet,” Billy said.

“If what they say is true, I’d expect they’ll have that region of space pretty well guarded,” I said. “Particularly if Schilling knows we’re onto them.”

“You’re right. We should send a small unmanned probe, drop it in for as short a length of time as we can, then pull it out again. Let me see what the star charts have to say about that place.”

He went to his computer and began searching through the charts.

“Hey, take a look at this. They certainly wanted to make sure no-one went looking.”

The region around where Eridani’s twin had been was marked as high density interstellar dust and an extreme hazard to navigation. No starship pilot would ever dream of taking a vessel into such a place. They were clever all right.

“Since we know very precisely the location of Eridani, we can pinpoint its former twin just as accurately,” Billy said. “We’ll drop the probe in as close as we can safely get, do as many gravimetric and radiation scans as we can, and then skedaddle.”

We quickly filled in the details of our plan, and Billy and Tom then set about gathering everything needed to assemble the probe.

Two weeks later we launched it. The original subspace jump was to a point five light years beyond Eridani so as to make backtracking difficult if it were to be observed. The second jump took it to an orbit a hundred thousand kilometres above the remains of Eridani's twin. Then we waited.

Billy had allowed half an hour for the sensor readings to be accumulated. Tom was pacing up and down while Peter went and made some coffee. The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Then the phone rang and everybody jumped. We all thought the Eridanians were onto us already, but it turned out to be telescope security wanting to know how long we'd be in the building for. The seconds dragged on.

We didn't have the navigational accuracy to bring the probe back directly into the laboratory, so instead we dropped it into a low altitude unstable Earth orbit. The telescope was pointed ready to download the data before it burned up in the atmosphere, and we all breathed a sigh of relief when the receiver locked onto its transmission.

The data revealed a tiny black object of roughly half the original planetary mass right where Eridani's twin should have been, with lots of submicron dust and debris surrounding it in an extended ring system. Closer examination revealed a subspace anomaly about five hundred kilometres from the black hole, and this most certainly was the other end of the subspace tunnel.

"Could you double check that distance please, Billy?" Peter asked.

"Okay, as near as I can read it, it's about 450 kilometres," he said a few moments later.

"This could be even more serious than we think," Peter said. "Before the twin planet imploded, the end of the tunnel would have been on the sea floor, which would place it about five thousand kilometres from the centre of the planet. Now it's less than one tenth that distance. Did it move in the initial implosion or has it been getting pulled closer and closer over the last ten thousand years?"

Billy scratched his chin for a while. "My guess is it's been gradually getting closer, which would explain why the shields have been progressively failing. I think it likely the closer it gets the quicker it will move, so there's probably not a lot of time left before it crosses the event horizon."

"What would happen then?" I asked.

"I don't know, but the black hole may well start devouring Eridani itself, sucking it across subspace as if the tunnel were a drinking straw."

"So if that's correct, the only thing we can do to save them is destroy the tunnel."

“I think in the long term that’s the only real answer anyway.”

Tom was monitoring the subspace communications coming out of Eridani and there were no signs of any alarms having been raised. It looked as if our probe had gone in and out without being spotted. I was still very worried, though, as to what Schilling’s next move would be.

“Okay,” Tom said, now standing and taking his familiar ‘I’m-in-charge’ posture. “Billy, I’d like you to do your wizardry with the simulation software and see if you can figure out how long the Eridanians have and what needs to be done to destroy the tunnel. Peter, you can have the task of smuggling us into southern Eridani without anybody noticing. Todd, you can come with me when we go to see the Eridanian ambassador tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Before we go charging in uninvited, we should at least show the courtesy of putting our case to the ambassador. When he says no, we can then charge in uninvited with a clear conscience.” I shrugged.

Tom had connections with the Eridanian embassy in Sydney and managed to book an audience with the ambassador at half past three. We flew to Sydney first thing in the morning and spent a few hours wandering around the city and the harbour foreshore prior to the appointed hour.

The ambassador’s residence was in a new development that had replaced the old Garden Island naval dockyard, and his office had a commanding view across the Botanical Gardens, the Opera House and the harbour. Right on three-thirty we were ushered in.

The ambassador was tall and slim, but older than most Eridanians I’d encountered. Their lifespan was similar to ours and I judged him to be in his late fifties or early sixties. He welcomed us and invited us to sit. Tom then proceeded to describe, in a much more concise manner than I could ever have managed, the situation I’d observed in southern Eridani.

When he’d finished the ambassador leaned back with his hands behind his head and stared into space for about half a minute. Finally he spoke.

“Tom, we’ve known each other for many years and I respect your integrity enormously. Likewise I’m sure Mr Myers truly believes everything he was shown in the deserts. I can assure you, though, that you have been deceived. Yes, there are small groups who dwell on the fringes of the southern deserts, but they do so of their own accord and with our full knowledge and blessing. As for the rest of your story, well all I can say is there are some who, for their own ends, would seek to discredit the Eridanians. You’ve been taken in by an elaborate hoax, Mr Myers, I can assure you of that. Eridani never had a twin planet, and the southern

hemisphere has never been anything but desert. There's a star system close to the subspace folding of our system, but it's not connected through any linkage to our planet. That system contains high levels of dust and debris and is believed to be unstable. I'd advise you for your own safety to stay well clear.

"Trust me, Tom, it's nothing but a scam. Don't let yourself be fooled into doing something stupid."

With that he stood, which we took as a cue it was time to take our leave.

On the way down in the lift I looked at Tom but he motioned me to be quiet. We walked quickly from the estate and towards the Botanical Gardens.

"He was lying, of course," he finally said. "He knows exactly what's going on in the southern hemisphere and he's up to his neck in the cover-up."

"Are you sure?" I'd heard great things about the ambassador and found it hard to believe he could be in on it.

"Positive. I've known him personally since he was posted here nine years ago, and I can read him like a book."

"So what now?"

"As soon as Billy figures out what we have to do, we'll go right ahead and do it."

I smiled.

* * *

We would emerge from subspace in just a few minutes. Thankfully the orbital parameters of Eridani were one of the most well-documented in the galaxy, and Peter was confident he could bring us out about five thousand metres above the planet's surface, from where we'd do a powered descent to the shield installation.

Billy had made an alarming find. The other end of the tunnel was gaining speed rapidly as it moved towards the black hole, and would cross the event horizon within a couple of months. But even if that wasn't bad enough, the gravitational stresses transmitted back through the tunnel would probably break the remaining shields within a week or maybe two. Time was running out fast and I simply couldn't believe those northern Eridanians who knew the truth could just sit back and watch the death of their planet.

Billy suspected the tunnel was most likely a natural formation and its location probably corresponded with the planet's magnetic south pole. According to his theories, it could be destroyed by setting off a magnetic pulse around it of sufficient strength to cancel out the planet's own field. We

had with us sufficient superconducting cable and a subspace power source capable of doing the job, although there were still some details to be sorted out once we arrived and Billy could talk to Nagari and the other shield engineers.

We'd left Earth in the early hours of the morning, and on our way to Eridani we'd dropped back into realspace on three occasions, one of which was on the other side of the fold. We were hopeful we'd escaped detection, but as a precaution Peter had calculated an emergency escape route we could use right up to the moment when we touched down on the planet's surface.

Peter told us to get ready. There was a blue flash from the windows as we crossed back into realspace and then below us was the desert of southern Eridani. We'd considered arriving under the cover of darkness but Tom suggested the craft would probably be less visible during the day, so we made high noon our scheduled arrival time. Peter quickly checked our altitude and position and confirmed we were right on target. We quickly descended.

We parked the spacecraft about a hundred metres from the main building. The land was flat and totally devoid of cover so there was no point in trying to conceal it. Nagari and about half a dozen other southern Eridanians came out to meet us.

"We received your messages and we're so very glad to see you here safely," he said in Eridanian. He escorted us back into the building where detailed plans of the shield system had been laid out for our perusal. We devoured the refreshments his people served us while Billy studied the plans intently. He said he could think better on an empty stomach and so ate nothing as usual.

After the rest of us had eaten everything on offer, Billy asked to be shown the entrance to the tunnel and Nagari took us out to the edge of the pit. As I looked over I noticed the glow from the weakened shield ring was a lot dimmer than it had been when I was last here. There was little time left.

"Our superconducting coil has to be laid below the level of the shield rings," Billy finally said. He kicked firmly at the ground and scooped away a substantial amount of sand with his toes. His feet were a lot tougher than mine.

"The best way to do that would be to dig a trench around the perimeter of the hole. Todd, could you ask Nagari if he has anything we could use?"

I passed on Billy's question and he nodded, then spoke quickly to one of the other Eridanians who ran off towards one of the buildings. A few minutes later I heard a large door being opened and then an odd-looking backhoe came rumbling towards us.

“Perfect,” Billy said and pointed to where he wanted them to start digging.

It took most of the afternoon to dig the trench, and while this was happening the rest of us carefully unloaded our cargo of superconducting cable. The superconductor itself was quite brittle so we were very careful not to allow it to kink or twist. Billy did a double check on the depth of the trench and then gave the okay to start laying the cable.

We worked throughout the night. Being so close to the pole, and with the air being totally dry, the temperature plummeted as soon as the sun set. I’d come prepared this time with a heavy jacket, fleecy trousers and gloves, and for the first time I saw Peter put something more than a tee shirt on. Billy and the Eridanians, though, were unfazed by the cold and still wore only shorts.

Just before dawn there was a loud explosion and the ground shook beneath our feet. Several of the Eridanians came running out of the building towards us, speaking so rapidly I had no chance of understanding them. Finally Nagari turned to me.

“The weakened shield has just failed. The one remaining shield is still holding, but only just. It may be only a matter of hours now before it too fails.”

I passed the message on to Billy who nodded gravely.

“We’re almost ready, but I’ll need to recheck everything to make sure nothing was damaged by the shield failure.”

I left him to his tasks and looked eastward to where the sky was just beginning to lighten. The temperature was well below zero, I thought. My nose was frozen and the rest of me wasn’t far behind. Out of curiosity I walked back to the ship to check the thermometer and found it was actually minus ten degrees.

I shook my head, then walked back to where Billy was working.

“Do you know it’s minus ten out here?”

“Yeah,” he said while continuing to run his diagnostics. “I noticed about half an hour ago it wasn’t quite as hot as before.”

I shook my head and went to find Peter.

The sunrise over the desert was beautiful and we all stopped to watch. If we failed it would probably be the last sunrise this world would ever see.

We were about to begin the initial phase of activating the pulse when I heard a faint humming sound coming from above and behind us. I looked around and saw four small craft emerging from subspace about ten metres above the ground. They quickly landed and from each a dozen northern

Eridanians emerged. They were each carrying a lethal-looking weapon that they pointed in our direction.

The last to emerge was someone well-known to me. Andrew Schilling. My heart sank.

“Shut down your equipment please and stand away from it.” Billy did as he asked.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr Emu and Mr Dodo. I think it’s payback time, don’t you?”

“Why are you doing this?” I yelled. “When that shield fails this whole planet will die. Is that what you want?”

“Well, since you asked, yes, that’s exactly what I want. For far too long this world has been a thorn in my master’s side. But don’t worry, we’ll have plenty of time to make good our escape before the shield gives way completely.”

As if on cue, there was another rumbling underfoot and a loud high-pitched rushing noise started up. The final shield had started leaking air into the tunnel. Schilling walked forward and stood in front of Billy’s pulse generator.

“You know, this thing of yours probably would have worked. I’ll give you credit, you’re probably the top subspace physicist in the galaxy. It really does seem a shame to waste such a talent. You wouldn’t care to join me, would you?”

Billy said nothing. He lowered his head and scuffed his feet in the sand. Schilling then turned his attention to Peter.

“What about you, Dodo? Now you’re not in the same league as your friend here, but we could still find plenty of use for you. I’ll tell you what, I’ll put you in charge of our whole subspace research establishment. Would you like that, Peter?”

Peter emulated Billy and skilfully moved a pile of sand from one bare foot to the other. There was another deep rumble and the rushing sound became louder.

“Fools,” he said and pointed his weapon at the magnetic field generator.

Billy looked up at Peter and nodded ever so slightly. At the same instant they both leapt at Schilling and as soon as they touched him the three of them vanished with a loud pop. I didn’t know what they’d done, but I knew straight away what I had to do. I dived across the sand towards the generator, sliding the last metre on my belly. As soon as I reached it I activated the pulse.

A deep humming sound began building up. The other armed Eridanians, taken totally by surprise by Billy and Peter’s action, lowered their weapons

and looked towards the pit from where a cloud of dust was rising. The ground began to rumble and shake, and I covered my head.

There was a loud explosion and the air filled with flying sand. Then everything was quiet, the humming, the rumbling and the rushing noise all gone. As soon as the air had cleared sufficiently I looked over to where the opening to the subspace tunnel had been. Where a few moments ago there'd been a two kilometre wide hole, there was now solid ground. As I watched the last of the raised sand settled back down, and then I heard a shout.

In all the confusion Tom had snuck around behind the Eridanians and managed to reach our ship. One of them fired his weapon, but it was a moment too late as Tom jumped to subspace. The Eridanians looked at each other for a moment and then, apparently deciding pursuit was the best option, ran back to their craft and disappeared into subspace too.

Nagari walked up to me, bent down, and kissed my feet, and then the other southern Eridanians formed a line behind him and repeated the ritual. I was overwhelmed.

It was noon. Nagari had invited me to join him and his people for their midday meal. I ate, but I wasn't hungry. There'd been no word from anyone, and I could only assume Billy and Peter were dead and the northern Eridanians had caught up with Tom and captured or killed him. I had a pretty good idea as to what Billy and Peter had done. I knew both had inherited special powers, the Emu and Dodo spirits as they called them, and were able to flip across to the other side of the subspace fold by willpower alone. They'd done this, taking Schilling with them. On the other side they would have emerged into hard vacuum and all three would have died within moments.

There was a commotion outside and I stood up, but Nagari motioned me to sit back down. He walked over to the door and spoke to one of his people. Then he turned back to me.

"Todd, I think you'd better come outside. Tom has returned."

I leapt from my seat and ran to the door. Sure enough, the ship was back just where we'd left it and Tom was walking towards us. I ran to meet him.

He grabbed me and hugged me tightly. There were tears rolling down his face.

"You're a hero if ever there was one, Todd. This whole planet owes their lives to you and I'll personally make sure they honour you, and learn the truth of their past."

"It was a team effort," I said, and then grimaced when I thought of the sacrifice Billy and Peter had made.

“I found them,” he said, so softly I barely heard him. I looked up at him, unsure of what he meant.

“They were unconscious when I reached them. Billy had his arms and legs wrapped tightly around Peter, while Andrew was floating by himself about a metre away. They were caught in an eddy current that had formed in the air rushing out of the tunnel. If they’d been a few metres either side they would have been blown clear away and there’d have been no hope at all.”

Slowly it dawned on me what he was saying. *Billy and Peter were alive!*

“Are they all right?”

“No, not really. The air pocket they were in was pretty thin, barely enough to stop their blood from boiling. Their lungs have haemorrhaged, their eardrums are perforated and there may well be brain damage. Andrew didn’t make it.”

“Where are they?” I asked. I was shaking.

“I took them to the medical centre at the Earth embassy on the northern side of the planet. They’re in good hands, Todd, but I don’t know if it will be enough to save them.”

I leant over on his shoulder and started weeping openly. He held me tightly as the sun sank slowly towards the western horizon.

Aftermath

The funeral service was thankfully short. I managed to maintain my impassive expression throughout the ordeal in spite of the turmoil of emotions inside me, and I held tightly to Elissi's hand. With me also were Julia, Jason, Tom and Sarah, as well as Peter's parents who had come to Eridani as soon as they'd heard what had happened.

There'd been several thousand Eridanians in the syndicate who had known the truth about the southern desert but had conspired, for ten thousand years, to keep it secret. Maintaining the honour of Eridani, past and present, had been their overwhelming motivation. Their greatest fear had been that, if the truth ever came out, all of Eridani would have been held to ridicule by the rest of the galaxy and their race would forever live in shame.

The rest of the northern population, with the exception of a few like Elissi who had actually travelled south of the equator, had absolutely no idea of the cover-up. They believed the southern hemisphere had always been desert and was entirely uninhabited.

The reaction of the galactic community when the news finally broke took the Eridanians totally by surprise. Instead of ridicule and rejection, they were flooded with sympathy and support. It was wonderful in a way to be here to see this society finally coming to terms with its past.

The southern Eridanians were offered abundant fertile land north of the equator. Many accepted the offers and were quickly relocated. Some, however, chose to remain in the desert and already there were teams of engineers beginning construction of pipelines to bring water to their underground communities.

Andushin, known to us as Andrew Schilling, had served what he'd believed to be a just and noble cause. The secret of Eridani had to be kept, no matter what the cost. Yet I'd been told by one of the members of the syndicate he'd been badly torn by the lengths to which he'd been forced to

go, and had been relieved when the time line in which I'd been killed had collapsed. Nonetheless it would be difficult for me to forgive him. Attending his funeral was the first step along that road.

After the service we returned to the hospital. Billy and Peter had been placed in a drug-induced coma while the worst of their injuries healed. Billy had made rapid progress in the past month and the drugs had been stopped a few days ago. The doctors expected him to regain consciousness at any time. For Peter, though, the prognosis wasn't as good. His initial progress had been fair, and the lung and ear damage had healed well, but in the last two weeks his condition had deteriorated somewhat. The doctors were still expressing optimism but their body language told a different story.

When we arrived in the ward the nurses quickly ushered us into Billy's room. To everyone's surprise he was sitting up in bed reading a book. Julia rushed at him and nearly hugged him to death.

Later that day he told me that prior to our departure from Earth, he and Peter had discussed at length what they might do if the northern Eridanians tried to stop us.

"We knew Andrew Schilling, or should I call him Andushin, would do something. If at all possible, one of us was to create a diversion while the other tried to activate the magnetic pulse. In the end it was Peter who suggested that as a last resort we might have to grab him and flip him across the fold. We knew doing so meant certain death, but were prepared for that if it meant saving Eridani. We were indeed fortunate the shield began leaking when it did, but I feel very sad about Andushin."

When he was told about Peter's condition, he asked the doctors to stop the coma-inducing drugs.

"I may be able to help him, but to do so I need to reach into his mind. He doesn't need to be fully aroused, just conscious enough to dream."

The doctors looked bemused, but as they couldn't offer any other alternative they agreed to his request.

The next day Peter was ready, and Billy sat down on the side of his bed and took hold of his hands. Peter's blank expression changed into a thin smile and my heart leapt with joy. Then his eyes slowly opened and Billy stared down into them. Suddenly I had a recollection from the distant past, from when I'd been uprooted and thrown forward in time. *'Quick Peter, it's another cusp'*, I'd heard Billy say. *'Maybe we can stop it though. Take my hands and look into my eyes'*. "Take my hands and look into my eyes," he'd said, it was his way of connecting his mind to Peter's. Emu and Dodo.

They remained locked together for over two hours, then Peter's eyes slowly closed and the smile left his face. Billy released his hands and slid backwards. He looked awful. Julia helped him up and back to his own bed.

"I've done all I can," he whispered, "but I don't know if it's enough."
"He'll be fine. You need to rest now." But he was already asleep.

The next morning when we arrived at the hospital I was expecting Peter's condition to be much improved, and was dumbfounded when the nurse said he was worse. Billy, however, was up and about and was expected to be discharged later today.

He sat with Peter for most of the day, holding his hand and talking to him. We sat with them for about half an hour but Jason started getting restless, so I suggested to Julia we go out and explore some of the city. She seemed relieved to be away from the depressing atmosphere of the hospital.

Word had spread like wildfire of the heroic deeds the southern Eridanians had performed in maintaining the shields over the millennia. It seemed now that anyone with dark skin was revered and Jason was enjoying all the attention, even though we had to explain time and again that we were actually off-worlders. We spent a few hours walking through the parkland beside the lake and then I took them to one of my favourite cafe's that specialised in Earth-style food.

We returned to the hospital around mid afternoon. Billy was all packed up and ready to leave, but there'd been no change in Peter's condition and we were all fairly subdued. As we were about to depart there was a bit of a commotion in the direction of his room. Several doctors went running by, but when we asked the nurses what was happening they told us to wait. A few minutes later Peter's parents arrived in the ward and joined us.

About half an hour later a doctor came out and spoke briefly to Peter's father. His parents, along with Billy, were ushered into his room while the rest of us were told to wait. It didn't look good.

About ten minutes later a nurse came out and asked me to come through. I looked back at Elissi and she nodded, so I followed her into the room.

Peter was lying motionless and for a moment I feared the worst, but then he turned his head towards me, opened his eyes and smiled weakly. I rushed forward and grabbed hold of his hand, tears of joy running down my face.

Finally I looked up at the doctor.

"He's out of danger now," he said, smiling. "As far as we can tell he'll make a complete recovery. All he needs now is rest."

He gave us a few more minutes with him and then ushered us back outside. Billy broke the good news to the others, and then we all left the hospital and went to the best restaurant in town.

Two weeks later Peter was discharged. He was still very weak and his voice was a little hoarse, but he was otherwise okay. Once he was well enough to travel we returned to Earth. Elissi came with me as well and was keen to see our world first hand.

There had been a flurry of scientific expeditions to the former twin of Eridani. They'd discovered much of the southern ocean still remained as ice particles orbiting the black hole in its spectacular ring system, and plans were underway to build huge scoop ships to try to recover as much of it as they could. Whether they could ever retrieve enough to make a viable ocean was still being hotly debated, but they were keen to try.

The evening before Elissi and I were due to return to Eridani I told Peter he'd now have to write a sequel to *The Course of History*. He shook his head and said maybe I should write it instead. At first I thought he was joking, but he kept hounding me, and, well, this is the result.

Billy said he'd write the third instalment the next time something interesting happens, so as to make it a trilogy.

Keep watching this space.

Todd Myers

Part Three

Emu and Dodo

The Desert

The old man walked out of the desert, his bare feet caressed by the ancient ground.

The world was very different now. In the past there'd been changes, yes, but never like this. Other peoples had come, and the old ways were mostly gone. It saddened him, but in the end it made no difference.

The Spirit was strong this time, shining to him like a beacon. Not only that, he could also sense the presence of the Other, the Hidden One, and that could mean only one thing. He must hurry.

Destiny

The years march quickly by. At the beginning of this saga I was fourteen years old, the same age as my son, Jason, is now. I'm now in my early forties, middle-aged they call it, yet in many ways I don't feel any older than I did when this story began. I am, as Peter put it, still just a grown up skinny little kid.

I can still remember, as clearly as if it were yesterday, the morning Peter Thorpe came into my English class with two other new students. The moment I saw him something inside of me moved, changed. Some great destiny, yet unplayed, revealed itself for a fleeting moment. "*Now Peter,*" our teacher had said while looking round the room for another vacant seat, "*I'll put you up the back there with Billy.*"

Perhaps if Mr Fitzwilliam had chosen any of the other four or five vacant seats for Peter, Eridani would now be an airless wasteland and fifty million Eridanians would be dead. It's a scary thought.

The time line in which Peter first came into my life ultimately ended, to be replaced by years of loneliness, but the seeds of our destiny were sown then and there. It was a destiny not to be denied.

The events on Eridani were traumatic for all of us. After we returned, Peter went to live with his parents in Sydney for a couple of months while he recuperated from his injuries. I spoke to him frequently by telephone and went to visit him every two or three weeks. His recovery had been excruciatingly slow for him. He found himself short of breath if he undertook even mild exercise, and had frequent headaches and bouts of dizziness. But in the early days the nightmares were the worst. Almost every night in his dreams he'd find himself unable to draw breath and would wake up gasping for air and drenched in sweat.

The first time Julia and I went to visit him I offered to mind meld with him and he accepted gladly. As my mind joined with his I was overcome with darkness and despair, but I countered by recalling the happy times we'd

had together in the past, particularly the times we'd gone bushwalking, and managed to dispel some of the gloom. By the time the meld had ended I was totally exhausted, but he seemed a bit better. We repeated this each time I visited and little by little his spirits lifted.

After two months his physical condition had improved considerably. He said he was ready to return to Narrabri and start working again, but Julia insisted we all go to Coolum Beach for a two week holiday. Peter took a lot of convincing but Jason was so enthusiastic about the idea he finally relented.

The weather was perfect the whole time and we spent our days swimming, walking on the beach, or just lying in the shade of the palm trees soaking up the salty warm north-easterly breeze. Jason had a passion for beach cricket and beach football and did a much better job than any of us adults at getting Peter out of the last stages of his depression. The beach cricket in particular appealed to him, and I suspect Peter would have made quite a handy middle-order batsman if astronomy hadn't come in the way.

On our last day we hired a catamaran and sailed out around some of the small islands off the coast. We were followed most of the way by a pod of dolphins, and when we anchored at an island for a swim they came right into the shore and swam with us. Jason was thrilled but it was Peter who was their star attraction. They swam around him and under him, rubbing him on the chest and back with their noses, and then two of them convinced him to put a hand around each one's dorsal fin and they pulled him round and round the bay. When we returned to the yacht there was a look of happiness and contentment on his face I'd never seen before. Julia saw it too and smiled at me, then she kissed me and we sat back hand in hand, soaking up the last of the afternoon sun while Jason and Peter steered the boat.

That night the four of us sat outside looking at the stars and listening to the crickets and frogs. The air was warm and still with just the occasional puff of a cooling breeze. Jason challenged Peter to a 'name that star' competition. Both were very good and eventually declared it a draw. Then the sky lightened as a half-moon rose over the ocean, and that meant it was close to midnight and way past Jason's bedtime. He knew it too and tried to make himself invisible, but he was really too tired to put up much of an argument when Julia pointed him in the direction of his bed. We stayed out for about another hour, sitting quietly while we finished off the remaining wine.

"Coming here was the best thing I could've done," Peter said softly. "I can't thank you enough, I feel so good now, even better than before."

On the drive back to Narrabri we stopped at every little town and village along the way, and Peter took Jason exploring in the shops, parks and museums. We stayed overnight in Goondiwindi and had a delightful meal in an old restaurant overlooking the river. By the time we left to walk back to the motel the air had turned chilly, at least according to Julia it had, so Peter and I removed our shirts and gave them to her to put on. Jason, who was wearing a lightweight open mesh tank top he could tolerate for short periods without overheating, offered it as well, but it was too small for her so she wrapped it round her neck like a scarf.

An old man came out of a hotel, stared at us, then shook his head in disbelief. We must have looked quite a sight, and I wish I'd had a camera with me.

Shortly after we arrived home Dad rang and asked the four of us to join him and Mum for dinner. After the meal he rose and straightened his shirt, a sure sign he was about to make a speech.

"Your mother and I have been thinking about this for a long time, and now you're back we've decided to act. As from today I'm officially retired from AusScience, and we've bought a small farm about twenty kilometres out of town. We'll be moving out there next week."

Julia hugged them both while I just sat there with my mouth open. I had no idea Dad was planning to retire any time soon, but I did the arithmetic and figured out he'd turn sixty-four at his next birthday. I just couldn't believe the years could slip by so quickly and easily, and yet they had. I was stunned, but then Julia glared at me and brought me back to Earth, and I stood up and congratulated them both.

"You're now in charge of the telescope," he said to me, dropping another bombshell.

"What do you mean?" I asked stupidly.

"I mean you're now in charge of the telescope. You'll be given the official notification tomorrow and then you'll be moving into my office and inheriting my paperwork, son." He had a mischievous grin on his face as he said that.

"Peter, you'll be moving into Billy's position as head researcher, if you're feeling well enough."

"Yeah, thanks Tom, I'm honoured." I looked at him and he grinned and winked at me. He obviously had something in mind, and knowing Peter I'd probably end up becoming the victim.

* * *

Over the ensuing years I slowly got the hang of my new administrative duties. Peter hounded me constantly for funding for his research projects, most of which I managed to push through. Dad came in from time to time to see how I was getting along and to give me a few pointers. Eventually I actually started to enjoy my new job, which surprised me no end.

Todd, who had returned to Eridani with Elissi to help out in the restoration of the planet's southern hemisphere, announced his forthcoming marriage and invited Peter, Julia, Jason and myself to be present for the ceremony. While under ordinary circumstances I'd have been delighted to attend, the thought of returning to Eridani troubled me in a deep and unexpected way. Up until then, I'd thought I'd put the events there behind me, but apparently my subconscious had other ideas. Julia and Jason wanted to go, though, so I pushed my concerns aside and made the necessary arrangements.

On the afternoon before we were due to depart I was just finishing up for the day when there was a knock on my office door. It was Peter, and in his customary way he sat down on the corner of my desk, his legs swinging and his feet ploughing the air with his toes spread wide apart. This was a habit he'd unconsciously picked up from me, and I smiled.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Um, I don't know," he said hesitantly. His legs stopped swinging, which meant he was getting serious. "Maybe I'm just being stupid, but I have a really bad case of the jitters about going to Eridani."

As I was about to reply the lights dimmed momentarily. We both looked up and I felt a cold chill run down my spine. Power fluctuations were fairly common out here in the countryside, though, so I paid it no further heed.

"I must say I'm feeling a bit the same," I said.

"This sounds silly, but I don't think my jitters have anything to do with what happened to us before. It's just a feeling I have that if we go something really bad will happen."

I stood up, took his hands in mine and looked into his eyes. Straight away I felt a stab of fear and broke off the meld. There was perspiration running down my face and I stumbled backwards.

"Are you okay, Billy?"

"Yeah, but whatever's spooking you just bit me."

"Do you mind if I call Todd?"

"No, go right ahead. I was about to do the same thing myself."

It took about five minutes for the subspace call to be set up, but eventually he got through.

“Hi Todd, it’s Peter. I’m fine, only Billy and I both have a bad feeling about coming to Eridani, and I’m wondering if you’d mind terribly much if we didn’t come.”

Todd spoke for a bit, and gradually Peter started to smile.

“That sounds great. We’ll look forward to seeing you. Good luck with the ceremony, and make sure you send us some cake.”

He hung up and then turned to me.

“Todd said we should trust our feelings and not come if we have any reservations about it. He and Elissi will be coming to Earth for their honeymoon and he suggested we have a party here with you, Julia and your parents.”

“I guess that’s settled then. In a way I’m relieved, only now I’ll have to try to explain all this to Julia and Jason. They were both looking forward so much to going.”

On the way home I struggled to come up with a rational explanation to give them, but failed. Julia would understand willingly enough, but by the same token I didn’t want to disappoint them without at least trying to explain my reasons.

As I approached the door she came running out to me.

“Billy, Jason has an attack of the terrors and is refusing to go to Eridani. I’ve been trying all afternoon to calm him but he seems to be getting worse.”

“He’s not the only one.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, now totally perplexed.

“Peter and I also have the terrors. I don’t think we should go.”

This was the last thing she was expecting me to say and was stunned into silence for a few moments.

“Let’s go inside,” I said. “I need to talk to Jason.”

“Dad, we can’t go to Eridani, please, we can’t go,” he cried with tears streaming down his face. I held him close to me.

“It’s okay son, we’re not going.”

It took a few moments for my words to sink in, but when they did he looked up at me with an expression of pure relief on his face.

“Peter and I have also felt whatever it is that’s upsetting you. We’ve decided to take the hint and stay here.”

He smiled, wiped the tears from his eyes and hugged me. I held him tightly again and ruffled his hair.

“Thanks Dad, thanks. I think if we’d gone some of us would have died.” He snuffled again and then ran off to find his mother.

“What do you think is happening?” Julia asked me after we’d finished dinner.

“I don’t know, but I’ve been feeling uneasy for the last couple of days. Then Peter came to me this afternoon with similar concerns and when I tried melding with him I was struck with the most intense feeling of fear I’ve ever had.”

“Well, I’ve cancelled the bookings now. Do you have any idea what was going to happen? Will Todd and Elissi be safe?”

“I really don’t know, but now that you mention it, my feeling is the danger was directed only at us.” I’m not sure why I said that, but the words just came out before I could stop them. I hoped I was right.

It was a week later. The wedding had proceeded uneventfully and Todd sent us the video recording. There was a good turnout, with Todd’s parents and numerous friends from Earth as well as lots of Eridanians. There’d been no starship crashes or other catastrophes and I was starting to feel a bit silly, but every time I thought that maybe we should have gone a shiver would go down my spine.

That night I was sipping a cup of coffee after dinner and telling Julia about the mountains of paperwork that had arrived on my desk during the day. It seemed every bureaucrat in AusScience had decided to make my life a misery. I was in mid sentence when suddenly everything went dark.

At first I was totally disoriented, but eventually realised I was sitting on a stone floor with my back against a wall, and I was cold and hungry. I’d never been cold or hungry before and it took me a few moments to put names to these unpleasant sensations.

I started to stand up but was almost knocked out by a tremendous stab of pain across my back. I moaned. It was the result of the flogging, I remembered now, but before I could figure out the source of that memory I was back in my living room.

“Billy, what’s wrong?” Julia was saying as she shook me gently by the shoulders.

“I don’t know,” I said, a nauseous feeling rising through me. “For a moment I was somewhere else, in a cold stone room, and my back was still sore from the flogging.”

“From the what?” she asked, now looking at me as if I’d gone totally insane.

“I don’t know, it’s just a memory I had of being whipped across the back by someone after being thrown into that cell,” I said, surprising myself as a little bit more of that ‘memory’ surfaced.

Just then there came a familiar knocking on the door, and I yelled for Peter to come in.

“Something really weird just happened to me,” he said. “I was pouring some wine into a glass when suddenly it was full and the entire contents of the bottle had spilt out across the bench top. It was as if my brain had just switched off for a minute.”

I told him what had just happened to me, and then another ‘memory’ flashed back.

The ones who had imprisoned me had killed Peter!

Time Out

We decided almost without discussion that we'd all sleep together tonight, so camping stretchers were brought out and arranged on the floor of the living room. From a rational point of view, being together in the same room would offer no defence against a repeat of the earlier incident, but it made us feel better.

I tossed and turned for ages before sleep finally came, and then in a marathon dream I discovered what it was that made us so frightened about going to Todd's wedding.

The wedding and the reception that followed were great, and we'd enjoyed ourselves immensely. We were all glad we hadn't given in to our irrational fears and stayed behind on Earth, and I said as much to Julia as we were being driven back to our accommodation in the Eridanian town of Angust.

We rounded a bend and ahead of us was another vehicle that appeared to have broken down. Three Eridanians were standing around it looking forlorn, and our driver stopped to assist them. As he walked towards them, one of them suddenly produced a club and hit him on the back of the head, knocking him to the ground, and then all three ran towards our vehicle. The one with the club jumped in the back with us and before we could react he grabbed Jason around the neck.

"Try anything foolish and I'll break its neck," he said in a guttural form of English.

Our captors drove at high speed into the countryside, darting down numerous narrow dirt roads. Eventually we turned in through a gate and drove about a hundred metres further to a low wooden building.

"Get out of the vehicle," the club-wielder yelled, still with his arm wrapped tightly around Jason's neck. We did as we were told. He then threw Jason to the ground in front of where we were standing. Julia went to

help him but the club-wielder shook his head. She stood back. Jason moaned, then gingerly got to his feet and stood between Julia and me.

The three kidnapers were joined by four others from the building, and they huddled together talking rapidly in the local Eridanian tongue. Occasionally they'd point at either Peter or me, then finally the one with the club walked back over to us.

"You Billy Collins?" he yelled into my face.

I nodded and said yes.

He raised the club high and started the downswing of what might have been a fatal blow.

"No!" cried Peter. He leapt at him, knocking him off balance, and the blow went wide.

Quickly our attacker regained his footing, then grabbed Peter around the shoulders and threw him back against the wall. Before any of us could react he raised the club again and brought it crashing down onto Peter's head. There was a sickening crunch and he collapsed limply to the ground.

I woke up, barely able to stop myself from screaming. I looked across at Peter and saw he was sleeping peacefully, and slowly my heart rate returned to something close to normal. I quietly rose, went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. It was half past three according to the clock on the microwave. I refilled the glass and returned to my stretcher. The others were still asleep.

I knew now that another time line had formed. The dimming of the lights in my office had not been a power fluctuation after all. It seemed to me we were balanced on a knife-edge between this reality and the other one, and I was scared this one might end before we had a chance to set things right. But before I knew it I'd drifted back to sleep, and my dream continued.

"Get rid of the woman and child," another of the Eridanians yelled, and several of them grabbed Julia and Jason and bundled them back into the car. They drove off at high speed.

I looked down at Peter and then turned away. I was violently sick. There could be no doubt he was dead. Then one of our captors grabbed me and pulled me into the building, leading me along a narrow corridor and down two flights of stairs. At the bottom was a barred door which he opened and then threw me into the cell behind it.

One of my captors flicked a switch on the wall and a great weakness came over me. I fell to the floor, gasping, and then another sensation came over me. It took me a little while to put a name to the feeling, but eventually I did. I was cold. Very cold. I started shivering. The door was slammed shut.

I looked round my cell. In one corner was a pit and in the other a bucket of what I presumed to be water. There was a single dim light fixture in the centre of the ceiling, but other than that it was bare.

Some time passed, but I don't know how much. I heard footsteps on the stairs and then two large Eridanians appeared and entered the cell. One of them grabbed me and held me back against the wall. I heard a cracking noise and felt the extreme pain as the whip slashed across my bare back.

I woke again and this time it was daylight. My hand went to my back, but it was fine. The others were still asleep so I walked quietly out to the kitchen and put the kettle on. While I was waiting for it to boil I heard some movement from the living room and then Jason came walking sleepily in.

“An old man came to me in my dreams and said we have to go to the Emu cave,” he said. “He told me it was very important.”

“What sort of old man?”

“He was Aboriginal like us, only very old. He was a good man, though. I think we should go.”

“Okay then,” I said and smiled. He was still only a boy but his intuition was strong. We'd go to the cave.

“Just where exactly is this place?” Julia asked. She was driving as I didn't want to risk being behind the wheel if I should suddenly flip back to that other time line again. Peter and Jason were in the back seat. It was now about nine-thirty, and it would probably take us another hour or so to reach the cave.

“You go about 25 kilometres into the Pilliga, then you'll see a dirt road off to the right. Follow it as far as it goes, then it's a bit of a hike into the scrub from there,” I said.

“How much of a hike?” I hadn't said anything about walking, so perhaps she was expecting a neon sign saying *Emu Cave* with a paved car park out the front.

“About two or three kilometres I think, but the ground's pretty level and the track's not too overgrown, or at least it wasn't the last time I was there.”

“When was that?”

“Um, about twenty years ago, I think, when I took Todd there.” Suddenly everything went black again.

The light in my cell had been turned off, or else it had failed. I was sitting on the floor in the corner with my knees pulled up to my chest and my arms wrapped tightly around them, trying to keep warm. Whenever I started shivering my back would hurt, and my stomach felt like it had been

hollowed out. I'd drunk some of the water, which tasted foul but didn't seem to be poisoned or drugged, but what I really needed was food. My body seemed to be cut off from its source of subspace energy, and I guess I was experiencing for the first time what it's like to be an ordinary person, albeit one who's been whipped and starved for a week.

I heard footsteps coming down the stairs and looked up as the door opened. There was some weak light coming down the stairwell, revealing two of my captors. They turned the cell light on and even its dim glow hurt my eyes.

"Are you sure this is the one?"

"Yes, there's no doubt. This one and the other that died, they were the ones." I suddenly realised they were speaking English, which meant this conversation was a put-up for my benefit. I remained motionless.

"Yes, that was unfortunate. We really wanted both of them alive. Say, is it always this cold down here?"

"It will be even colder in a few days. The subspace bubble tends to drop the temperature by about ten degrees after it's been on for a while."

"Keep an eye on him. I want him weakened, not dead."

Suddenly I was back in the car.

I shook my head and tried to regain my bearings. Julia said Peter and I had been out cold for about five minutes. Peter had experienced nothing during the time he was out, for him it was just a discontinuity in this time line. *'That's because he's dead in the other one,'* I thought as a shiver went through me.

"Do you have any idea what they want?" Peter asked.

"None whatsoever, only that they want me weakened. The cell I'm in has some sort of subspace bubble around it, so they must know about my autothermia and its origins."

"Well that's pretty common knowledge since Todd wrote his story," Peter said. "Do you think it might be revenge for the death of Andushin?"

"I'd thought that initially, but now I'm not so sure. They said they needed me alive for something."

We reached the turnoff to the cave. The road was in better condition than last time I was here, which surprised me a little. It wound its way steadily downhill before crossing a dry creek bed at a wooden bridge that looked as if it had been recently rebuilt. I suppose fire access tracks, which is what this road really was, do get maintained from time to time, but it just seemed too much of a coincidence that the maintenance had happened so recently. I don't like coincidences.

Soon we reached the end of the road. It used to just peter out alongside the base of a small escarpment, but now more of the undergrowth had been cleared and a proper turning circle constructed. The work looked very recent indeed, with bulldozer tracks still clearly visible in the dirt. Julia parked the car.

“Which way?” she asked.

“We just climb up through that gap in the rocks there, and then there should be a track at the top,” I said.

The track was still there, but it looked like it hadn’t been used at all in the twenty years since I last saw it. The low undergrowth had grown across in places, making it difficult to pass. The mosquitoes were also out in force, and as Julia was the only one wearing a top there was plenty of exposed skin for them to dine on. We pressed on in silence.

The track slowly descended and as it did the breeze dropped to nothing and the hot sun became more oppressive. The ground was well covered in fallen leaves and was quite pleasant to walk on barefoot, but that was the only pleasure I was feeling. In the past I’d always found the cave to be an uplifting and wholesome place, but now I was feeling something slightly menacing.

When I heard the sound of falling water my spirits lifted a little. In a couple of minutes we came out of the oppressive scrub and onto a rocky ledge, where a small stream splashed down a bit of a waterfall before forming a pool at the base. Beyond the pool was the cave, but with the angle of the sun it looked dark and foreboding.

We worked our way around the edge of the pool. In happier times I’d have swum across, but not today. Then a noise came from the bushes near the mouth of the cave and I motioned for everyone to stop.

An ancient Aboriginal man, naked but for a ragged loin cloth around his waist, came out of the scrub.

“Come here, my children, and don’t be afraid.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” Jason said, and I started moving forward. The others followed. We emerged from the scrub at the edge of the pool and stood before him. He was tall and straight in spite of his age, and his hair was pure white while his jet-black skin was decorated with ochre paint in the traditional markings of my tribe.

On the ground he’d made a circle of painted rocks near the mouth of the cave, and motioned us to sit down within it. As we did I felt all the oppressiveness leave me. The sunlight seemed dimmer now, as if it were passing through mist or water, and everything was still and quiet. I looked up at him and he smiled.

"I'm glad you've come," he said, "as I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"This reality you're in, well, it isn't real, but I thought you'd have realised that."

I suddenly felt very sick. *If this reality isn't real, then the other one must be. I must really be imprisoned somewhere on Eridani, and Peter must really be dead.*

"We're like ghosts haunted by reality," Jason said.

"That's very close to the truth," the old man said, "but we're more than just ghosts, at least for the moment. I suspect you now have some idea of the events that have taken place in the real world."

"We know what's happened," I said. "Peter's been killed, Julia and Jason have been taken away and probably killed also, and I'm wasting away in some cold, dark cell in a basement somewhere. But why is all this happening?"

"Why indeed," he said, and then paused for a moment while he gathered his thoughts.

"You and Peter carry within you the spirits of twin brothers who were once, how should I say, great leaders of our people. Your coming together marks a pivotal point in history, but there are opposing forces who, well, let me just say have a preference for a particular outcome, one way or the other. I represent one of those forces, and it's our hope you'll fulfil your destiny."

"You sound like a politician," Peter said.

"Yes, I probably do," he chuckled. "I suppose in a way that's exactly what I am. But even to us the future is dim, and to say more could place your destiny in greater jeopardy."

"But what is it we have to do?" I asked, now feeling very small and very frightened.

"The four of you have to return to the real world. There you must escape from those who are holding you on Eridani. When you do, go to Elissi, for she's with us and will give you further aid."

"What do you mean the four of us?" Peter asked. "From what I can gather, I'm supposed to be already dead."

"Oh yes, well so it seems, but time cusps can be tricky things. Your life-force continues in this time line I've created, so when it merges with reality you'll continue to exist."

"As a ghost or a vampire or some other undead creature, no doubt," he said, now close to losing his composure.

“Perhaps, or perhaps not. The laws of the universe require continuity of existence at all levels, but how that will work in this particular instance is unclear.”

Peter placed his hands over his face and pulled his knees up to his chest. I reached out and put my arm around his shoulders.

“We’ll get through this, Peter, just like we always have.”

“Yes you will, but we can’t delay any longer. The four of you must join hands, and then, Billy and Peter, let the spirits within you take you with them.”

We joined hands, and as we did the light began to fade and the world outside the circle of stones turned to grey.

“Be careful, and trust in each other. We may meet again later in your journey.”

I looked up into Peter’s eyes and he returned my gaze. As our minds touched, the outside world turned to dust and disappeared, and I could feel once more the great strength of the *Emu* and *Dodo* spirits within us.

Then just as suddenly I was alone in the dark, cold cell. I tried to stand but a wave of dizziness came over me, then my empty stomach cramped and I doubled over in pain. For a moment I thought I was going to faint, but slowly my surroundings became solid again. I wondered now what had become of the others, and Peter in particular, and I half expected to hear a chain rattling or to see some ghostly apparition take form. But nothing happened, and gradually I sank back down onto the cold stone floor and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

‘Billy, wake up’.

I opened my eyes but it was completely dark.

“Billy, it’s me,” someone whispered from the other side of the cell door. I was still half asleep and said nothing.

“It’s me, Peter,” the voice whispered again, now sounding impatient, and my heart almost burst with joy. There was a brief rattle that sounded disconcertingly like chains, and then a squeal as the cell door opened.

“Come, quickly,” he whispered again.

I stumbled to my feet and walked towards the open door. There was a faint glimmer of light coming down the stairwell and I could just make out a silhouetted form standing on the other side of the doorway, but as I approached I felt a force pushing me backwards and I couldn’t get through.

“Peter, they have some sort of subspace barrier down here that’s holding me in. There’s a switch on the wall to your left, though. See if you can find it.”

I could just make out his hands as he felt along the wall. He seemed to be substantial enough, but who could tell in this dim light. Then I heard a click as he flicked the switch and a blinding flash of red light flared inside my head. I was dimly aware that I'd sat back down on the floor.

As the shock subsided I realised I was no longer cold, and could feel my strength rapidly returning. I stood up and tentatively stepped towards the door. The force that had been pushing me back was gone and I walked straight through. Peter put his arm around my shoulder and guided me to the stairs, but then he paused and turned back to the cell.

"Let's give them something to think about." He gently closed and latched the door again, trying to make a minimum of noise, then turned the subspace barrier back on.

"Come quickly now," he whispered, "and be as quiet as you can. The guards are all asleep, or at least they were."

We gingerly climbed the stairs, walking only on the balls of our feet and hoping there were no creaky boards. We made it to the corridor but then my heart sank. There was a light on in one of the rooms and voices were coming from inside. Peter pushed me back against the wall.

"Maybe we can find another way out," he whispered, and very gently tried the door next to where we were standing. It opened and we tiptoed inside.

In the dim light I could see it was a storeroom of sorts. There were a few cupboards, a desk, and on the other side another door. Peter closed the door behind us and we crossed the room. He tried the far door and it opened, so we passed through and closed it quietly behind us.

We were in another corridor and there was a dim light glowing at the far end above yet another door. There were several more rooms on either side but they were dark and, hopefully, empty. We crept down towards the far door and when Peter opened it I breathed a sigh of relief. We'd reached the outside.

It was then I finally noticed he was covered in dirt, but I waited until we were well away from the building before I said anything.

"It was really weird," he said. "As soon as we crossed over into this reality I went completely numb, but gradually I felt a tingling sensation spreading through me. A great rushing noise came into my ears, and then I could see the sky. There was loose dirt flying away from me in all directions, and I realised I was lying in what was left of a shallow grave. I can only imagine my remains that had been buried here had reconstituted themselves as my life force returned, and in so doing blew open the grave. I can remember everything that happened up to the moment the Eridanian

swung his club at me, but there's no trace left of the head injury that killed me."

We had now reached the dirt road they'd brought us in along, and we walked briskly back in the direction from which we'd come a week earlier. There was enough light from Eridani's enormous moon to be able to avoid stubbing our toes on any large rocks, and it felt wonderful to have soft ground under my feet again.

About half an hour later I saw a light through the trees and as we got closer I could make out a small cabin off from the side of the road. Peter wanted to keep going but I had a feeling we needed to check it out, so we crept along in the shadows until we came alongside the wall. There was light coming from a window about half way along and, hoping my dark skin would make me difficult to see from the inside, I chanced a quick glance.

Directly in front of me, but with his back to the window, was an Eridanian guard and on the other side of the room, in two small bunks, were Julia and Jason. I quickly ducked back down out of sight and told Peter what I'd seen.

"What do we do now?" he whispered.

"I don't know."

The sky was beginning to lighten. Before I could think of anything I heard the guard stand up and walk out of the room, and moments later I heard a door open on the other side of the building. I stood up and looked in the window again. At the same moment Jason opened his eyes and saw me. A broad grin spread across his face.

"Wake your mother and climb out the window before the guard comes back," I whispered.

Peter and I helped them out and then we crawled along the ground back into the cover of the trees. We decided to head further into the woods rather than going back to the road, as that would be the first place they'd look when the guard discovered his charges had escaped.

We worked our way downhill to where the vegetation was thicker. Eventually we came to a small stream and followed it deeper into the valley. Behind us we could hear vehicles roaring up and down the road, but so far no-one had come in our direction. The sun was just beginning to rise as we came to where the creek joined a broader river.

"I think we should go downstream," Jason said.

"What makes you say that?" Julia asked.

"I don't know, only I can feel goodness down that way."

Julia looked at me and I nodded. Jason's sixth sense was getting stronger now he was in his teens and I had no doubt he was right. We pressed on.

The bank of the river was mostly sandy and the walking was easy. There was good cover close to the water that we could use should we hear any approaching searchers, but so far there'd been no sign of anyone. By mid morning we'd covered, I suppose, about ten kilometres, and I was feeling good under the warm sunshine. The welts on my back were healing rapidly now that my body had access to its subspace energy source, and my strength had been fully restored. After my week of captivity and deprivation I suppose I was on a high, but I wasn't really aware of it at the time.

Gradually the forest became thinner and eventually gave way to farmland. We had less cover now, but as there'd been no sign of pursuit we pressed onwards. The river wound its way through a steadily widening valley until we rounded the final bend and emerged in the midst of farmland. In the distance we could see a small town.

As we drew closer it started to look familiar, then suddenly I realised this was the very town we'd come to for the wedding. *Angust*. Elissi's parents lived there, but just where their house was I couldn't remember, and neither could the others. Jason thought there was a large tree out the front, but that probably wasn't going to help us much.

Ahead of us a group of Eridanian children were playing on the water's edge. As we came closer one of them looked up and started running towards us. He stopped about thirty or forty metres away, studied us closely and then started running again. He ran straight past me, Peter and Julia, and grabbed hold of Jason.

"Jason, it is you, it is!" he cried as he hugged him.

I finally recognised him. We'd been introduced briefly before the wedding, and he was Elissi's nephew. He and Jason had taken an instant liking to each other and had spent most of the morning playing together out the back of the house.

"Norrie, am I glad to see you," Jason cried, hugging his friend back.

"We all thought you were lost. But now you must come back to the house. Everyone is worried about you."

He led us away from the river and down a maze of streets and laneways. Finally we came to a familiar-looking house with a large tree out the front, and he ran ahead and called out something in Eridanian. Elissi's parents came out to see what all the commotion was about and when they saw us they came running down the street to meet us.

It was four hours before Todd and Elissi arrived back at the house, and in that time we'd been served copious quantities of food and drink and given clean clothes. We told them about our capture and ultimate escape, but said

nothing about the split time lines. They had no idea of who might have been responsible for our kidnapping, only that it must have been connected with what had happened in the south. They were extremely apologetic that something like this could happen to guests on their world, and that then led to more offerings of food and drink. By the time Todd and Elissi arrived we were almost ready to explode.

“Thank God you’re all safe,” Todd said. “We’ve been out searching ever since the inn reported you hadn’t returned. Then your driver was found walking dazed along the road, but he could shed no light on what had happened or who was involved. We all feared the worst.”

We recounted our tale once more. Todd asked lots of questions but Elissi remained silent, listening intently. After her parents had gone to bed she asked us all to step out the back with her. We sat around in a rough circle on the verandah.

“How much did the old man tell you?” she asked. For a moment I thought she meant her father, but then I realised who she meant. It seemed an age since we’d been sitting in a similar circle outside the Emu cave on Earth, and I wondered if anything remained of that time line.

“Not a lot,” I finally said. “He said there was something really important we had to do, but he couldn’t say what that was. He said you’d help us.”

“Is there something I’m missing here?” Todd asked.

“It has truly begun then,” Elissi said, ignoring him.

“Do all of you people talk in riddles?” Julia asked, sounding frustrated. “*What* has truly begun?”

Elissi cleared her throat and sat up straight.

“For thousands of years we’ve been exploring the galaxy. We’ve found hundreds of inhabited worlds and on all those worlds the people are humanoid like us and live in societies similar to ours. While every world has its own languages and culture, the use of speech and the basic grammatical structures are much the same everywhere. There’s infinitely more variety amongst the animal species on even a single world than there is amongst the sentient beings of the whole galaxy, and for this there can be only one plausible explanation.”

“A common ancestor,” Todd said.

“Exactly, but perhaps ancestor is the wrong term. I belong to an order dedicated to piecing together the truth that lies behind the folklore and creation legends of all the peoples of the galaxy. We’ve discovered there is indeed an underlying truth, and the events unfolding here and now have their roots in that ancient past, in what we believe to be a long-forgotten common beginning for all of us.”

“Come out here,” she said as she rose and walked to a clear area in the backyard. We all followed. “That small group of stars up there, can you see them from Earth?”

I recognised the constellation immediately, even though it was slightly distorted by the parallax effect of being sixteen light years from home.

“We call it the Seven Sisters,” Peter said.

“Its proper name is the Pleiades cluster,” Jason said. “It’s about four hundred light years away and is a close-knit group of relatively young stars.” My son the astronomer, indeed.

“That’s right,” she said, smiling at him. He smiled back.

A shiver ran up my spine. When I was very young I’d had a scary dream. I can’t remember now what was scary about it, but I do know the Pleiades was a part of it. Sometimes, even now, I dream I’m looking up into the night sky and see a vast cluster of bright stars, hundreds of them, and I know it’s the Pleiades, coming for me. The scared little boy inside me was rapidly rising to the surface.

I looked up and saw Elissi’s eyes were focused on me.

“Tell me what just went through your mind,” she said softly, almost in a whisper. I did my best to describe my dreams and the unease I felt whenever I happened to glance up at that cluster. When I’d finished she nodded.

“I’ve had the same dream,” said Peter. “Someone or something from the Pleiades is after me, coming for me.”

The call of an alien night bird rang out across the valley and I shivered again. If someone had said ‘*boo!*’ just then I’d have probably died of fright. I looked back up at the constellation. They called it the Seven Sisters, but most people could only see six of them with the naked eye. I could see eight, and for some unfathomable reason that scared the hell out of me. I stared at those eight stars like a kangaroo dazzled by the headlights of an oncoming car, trapped a split second away from death.

‘Emu has to go home.’

I don’t know where that thought came from, but it was suddenly imprinted across my mind as if written in a brightly flashing neon sign.

“Emu phone home,” I thought aloud, creating a parody from a movie I’d loved as a kid. Everyone looked at me. I wiped my brow, surprised to find it was dripping with perspiration.

“*Dodo has to go home,*” Peter whispered. I looked across and now he was staring at the Pleiades. “*They have awakened.*”

“The old man was right,” Elissi said as she led us back onto the verandah. “We must leave here as soon as we can. There’s a ship we can use

not far from here, but I suggest we sleep now and go at first light tomorrow.”

The Eighth Sister

It was the first time in over a week that I'd slept in a real bed. By the time my head hit the pillow I realised just how totally exhausted I was, and it was only a matter of moments before I was sound asleep. My childhood dream came back to me.

I was standing alone in the backyard of my parents' house in Narrabri. I was very small, probably about three years old. It was a clear summer's night with no moon, and I was enjoying the coolness of the air on my naked body while staring in wonder at all the brilliant stars spread across the sky. My father had been teaching me to recognise the different constellations, and I could see the Milky Way, the two Magellanic Clouds, the Southern Cross, the Coal Sack and Orion. But then my eyes drifted beyond Orion and were caught by the funny shape of the Pleiades. I sat down on the damp grass, staring at it for ages. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight funny little stars.

Then it started getting bigger. Just a little at first, but soon it had spread out across Orion. I blinked, and then instead of just the eight stars there were hundreds of them in a bunch like a ball, getting bigger and brighter all the time. I suddenly realised they were hurtling down towards me. The first star streaked across the sky to my right and a few seconds later there was a dull thud as it hit the ground. Then more came, crashing to Earth all around me. I screamed and ran, but our house and the neighbours' houses were all gone and I was out in the middle of the desert. All around me more stars fell, causing loud explosions and leaving behind huge craters. I ran and I ran and I...

...woke up. I was sweating and shivering all at once and could feel my heart pounding away inside my chest as if it were trying to escape. I breathed slowly and deeply, gradually calming myself. Here I was, a forty-year-old astronomer of some renown, totally spooked out of his mind by the

sight of one of the most famous constellations in the night sky. I chuckled, then rolled over and slipped back to sleep.

“Come on Dad, wake up,” a voice was saying as I reluctantly returned to consciousness. It was daylight, and Jason was standing over me and shaking me by the shoulder. I moaned.

The Eridanians don’t drink coffee or anything like it, but Todd had brought a stash of it with him from Earth and I was much relieved when he handed me a steaming cup. Elissi, who had finished packing and had been ready to go for hours, was pacing up and down across the kitchen floor.

By the time I’d finished my coffee Julia was up and dressed, so we made our way towards the front door of the house. Elissi’s parents were standing there waiting to give us a send-off, and it took the best part of half an hour to get through all the parting rituals. Finally we made it outside.

Elissi had a six-seater vehicle, which was just as well since there were six of us now. ‘*With three more we could have our very own Fellowship of the Ring,*’ I thought and chuckled to myself, but then I realised our quest, whatever it turned out to be, would probably be just as important and challenging as Frodo’s. We boarded the car and she drove us quickly out of town.

After about forty minutes we turned onto a dirt track and drove about another ten kilometres through farmland before turning in through a gate and pulling up outside what looked like a large barn. She got out, had a good look round, and then opened the double doors on the front of the barn. Inside was a shiny spacecraft of the kind used by diplomatic staff to visit nearby star systems.

Elissi and Todd asked us to stay in the car while they manoeuvred the ship out into the open, then we boarded while they parked the car in the barn and secured the doors. After the pre-flight checks had been done we lifted off and headed up out of the atmosphere in readiness for the jump to subspace.

“Where are we going?” asked Todd who was seated at the navigational console.

“Um, point us towards the Pleiades, but drop us back into realspace before we reach the cluster,” Elissi said. “I want to have a closer look at the region before we go right in.”

“We have company,” Peter said from where he was sitting on the right hand side of the craft. We all looked round to see four small ships headed rapidly towards us.

“Damn,” she said. “Take us into subspace as soon as you can, Todd.”

The chasers were still gaining on us even though we were running our realspace propulsion at maximum. Jumping to subspace in a craft this size while still inside the atmosphere was considered too dangerous because of the severe turbulence caused as the air rushed in to replace the disappearing ship.

“Another twenty seconds and we should be okay,” Todd said. Our pursuers continued to gain on us.

“There’s two more coming at us from this side,” Jason said.

“Ten seconds,” Todd said. We all held our breath.

I saw a flash from one of the craft, then another.

“They’re shooting!”

“Damn,” Todd said, and activated the subspace jump six seconds early. The ship lurched to one side, bounced a little and finally settled down.

“We’re clear and on our way,” he said. “It will be about ten hours to the Pleiades, so sit back, relax and enjoy the ride.”

We were sitting in the lounge area when Elissi brought out an enlarged photograph of the Pleiades cluster and put it down in front of me. As soon as I saw it a shiver went up my spine.

“Do you think you could identify that eighth star you can see?” she asked me.

It was easy, as the constellation was imprinted on my brain. I pointed to a star just to the lower left of the diamond-shaped part of the constellation.

“That one there,” I said.

“Uh huh.”

“What do we know about it?”

“Not a lot, really. It’s actually not part of the cluster, but just happens to sit about eighteen light years this side of it. It’s of similar age and size to your sun or ours. It’s reported to have a planetary system, but there’s no record of any explorations having been done.

“On the other hand, we’ve found references to it in the mythology of a number of civilisations that are close enough for it to be visible to the naked eye.”

I looked closely again at the image of the star. ‘*Home*,’ said a voice inside my head. I shivered.

She gave Todd the co-ordinates.

“This is spooky,” he said. “Firstly, it’s a magnitude 10.2 star when viewed from Earth. Now I know your eyesight is pretty good, Billy, but there’s no way you could see that with the naked eye.”

“Perhaps its location relative to the Pleiades has been programmed into my brain, so when I look at the cluster I see that star as well,” I said.

“Could be. The other spooky thing is, I had no idea where we were going when I programmed the jump, but that star is only a quarter of a light year from where we’ll emerge from subspace.”

Our journey through subspace ended right on cue. Directly ahead of us was the spectacular Pleiades cluster. At this distance there were hundreds of stars visible across a broad region of space. Off to one side and shining brightly was the star that had brought us here, and our attention turned in that direction.

We immediately scanned the system for radio or subspace transmissions, but that proved to be fruitless. At this distance we’d expect to detect something from any large-scale technological society that might reside there, but a smaller community could be too faint to pick up. Still, as far as we could tell from this distance, the whole region was uninhabited.

“Take us in closer, Todd,” Elissi finally said. “Bring us to, say, about one light hour from the star.”

He initiated the jump and a few minutes later we were there. The star was now a bright sun, and we set about searching for any planets.

We identified two that were at about the right distance to support liquid water. One, upon closer inspection, was too small to retain an atmosphere, but the other looked much more promising. It had air, oceans, clouds and lots of green colouring that suggested plant life. Our radio and subspace scans still revealed no trace of technology, however. We moved into a close orbit around the planet.

“Are either of you seeing anything here that you recognise?” Elissi asked Peter and me. We both shook our heads. The voices inside had gone quiet.

I watched the planet rotate below us. There looked to be three main continents and many smaller islands, with regions of lush green and other areas that appeared to be desert, but nothing that suggested any habitation, present or past.

I was about to turn away when Peter grabbed my arm.

“Look Billy,” he whispered. “That island, just south of the equator, that looks like the letter C. I think that’s where we have to go.”

I saw what he was pointing at and felt a stab of recognition too.

“Yes, that’s the one,” I whispered back.

“What are you two whispering about?” Elissi asked, and we showed her.

We swept over the island at a height of about five hundred metres, but there was no sign of any civilisation at all, and nothing struck either Peter or myself as being particularly familiar, other than the island itself. On the

inside of the C was a wide sandy beach so we decided in the end to land there.

The atmosphere checked out okay so we left the ship and walked down the beach to the water's edge. The air was hot and humid with a gentle breeze blowing in from the ocean. But there was something missing.

On an island like this anywhere on Earth, or on Eridani for that matter, you'd expect to see lots of seabirds. Here there were none. Nor were there any insects, or any other trace of animal life. If this planet was supposed to be the cradle of galactic civilisation then something had gone terribly wrong.

"You'd think," Todd said, "that even if there'd been some calamity long ago that wiped everyone out, there'd still be some traces left, like old buildings or whatever." I nodded grimly.

We walked past an outcrop of rock, but there were no shellfish or anything else on it apart from a bit of moss. An uneasy feeling was building inside me.

We came to an inlet where a stream flowed down from the interior of the island, and decided to follow it inland for a while. There was a shady canopy of trees and very little undergrowth, so the walking was easy. The land steadily rose, and then we came to a series of rock ledges where the stream descended through a cascade of small waterfalls. The sound of the water was very loud in this otherwise silent world.

The climb was pretty easy, and when we reached the top we found ourselves on a bare rock shelf about a hundred metres across. This was just the sort of place where on Earth I'd expect to see ancient Aboriginal carvings, but a thorough examination revealed nothing.

At the other end of the shelf the ground continued to rise and the course of the stream took us back under the canopy again. Ahead I could hear the sound of more falling water, and in about five minutes we emerged from the trees to find a large rock pool with a ten metre high waterfall at the far end.

"What's that over there?" Julia asked, pointing to the rock wall behind the falls. It looked like an opening but it was difficult to tell from where we were standing. The undergrowth was thick around the edge of the pool but we managed to force our way through and then very carefully walked behind the curtain of falling water. The rock felt very slippery underfoot and twice I came close to slipping and falling in.

There was a crack in the rock about three metres high and one metre wide. Todd, who was in front at this time, peered in.

"It looks like it opens out into a cave. Did anyone bring a torch?"

The answer was a resounding no.

"I'll go in a little way and let my eyes adjust to the darkness."

"Be careful, Todd," Elissi said.

“It looks like there’s a passageway going down inside the hill,” he said from inside the cave. “I’ll keep walking in until I run out of light.”

“Hey, I think I’ve found something,” he said about two minutes later. His voice was faint and sounded like he was a long way in. “There are steps going down here, and they’re much too regular to be a natural formation. It’s too dark to go any further, though. I’m coming back out.”

“It’s really weird,” he said after emerging from the cave. “There’s no trace of anything artificial in there, until suddenly you reach those steps. They’re very smooth and regular, and just disappear down inside the hill. We need some light.”

“There’s some torches back in the ship,” Elissi said. “I suggest we go back there now, and then come and explore this place tomorrow.”

We started edging our way back along behind the waterfall, but suddenly Jason slipped and went sliding down the rock and into the pool. I tried to grab him but also slipped and ended up tumbling into the water as well.

Jason surfaced and I swam out to him. I’d almost reached him when his head suddenly disappeared. I took a deep breath and swam down to the bottom. Fortunately the water was crystal clear and I could immediately see that some sort of vine had wrapped itself around his legs. I reached him and started pulling it away, but every time I pulled one loop off another would form. He struggled frantically but that only seemed to make it worse. I untwisted the vines as fast as I could, knowing I’d soon have to surface for air and that when I did it would be the end for him. Then Todd was in the water next to me and he had a knife. He quickly hacked through the vines and we pulled Jason back to the surface.

He was still coughing and spluttering when we got him back on dry land, but seemed otherwise okay. He started shivering and Julia held him close to her. On his legs were red marks where the vine had taken hold of him.

“We should get him back to the ship as quickly as we can,” Elissi said. “I want to check those welts for any sign of infection.”

We made our way back in silence, with Jason riding on my shoulders most of the way. He said he felt okay, and by the time we reached the ship the red marks had almost disappeared. Elissi took tissue samples from around the welts and also did a blood analysis, but everything was clear.

The sun was setting and we decided this would be a good time for a meal. Julia and Peter got stuck into the cooking while Todd served the wine. These ambassadorial ships came with a well-stocked cellar, it seemed. We enjoyed our meal, but the conversation was subdued.

After dinner I stepped out of the ship and was immediately paralysed with fear. Rising above the sea was the enormous vista of the Pleiades, a huge ball of hundreds of stars glowing brightly in the sky. It was just as I'd seen it in my nightmare back when I was three. I stood there and stared, waiting for the stars to come hurtling out of the sky at me, but gradually, when nothing happened, my fear subsided and I was finally able to look away. I turned around and almost bumped into Peter, who was also staring at the cluster.

"It's evil," he whispered.

I shook him gently and he seemed to snap out of his trance.

"Let's go back inside," he said shakily, "and lock the door."

"I think everyone should stay inside the ship whenever the cluster is above the horizon," Todd said shortly after Peter and I had rejoined them.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"I'm detecting a significant x-ray emission from within it."

"Good reason."

"That may explain the lack of animal life on this planet," Julia said, "and why if there was once a civilisation here they've all gone."

"Hmm, could be," I said. This was something more for me to think about. Peter had said the cluster was evil, and I wondered if that's what he meant. Perhaps we'd find some answers when we explored the cave tomorrow.

The Third Brother

I slept in. By the time I woke everyone else was ready and waiting to go. The first thing I checked was Jason's legs, but the welts from the vine had healed completely. Elissi had run more blood tests this morning and there was no trace of any infection. I was relieved.

I quickly showered, shaved, pulled on my well-worn board shorts and declared myself ready. The Pleiades had set about an hour earlier and the radiation levels were now back to normal, so we did a last-minute double-check and then left the ship. The day was sunny, warm and humid again, and we were glad of the shade under the trees.

Before long we'd arrived back at the pool. This time we roped ourselves together before tackling the treacherous path behind the waterfall. We made it without incident and entered the fissure.

It was just as Todd had described, a passageway of sorts heading gently downwards. I examined the walls closely for any engravings or paintings but there were none, and it wasn't until we reached the steps that we found the first evidence of anything artificial.

The stairway descended beyond the range of our lights. After finally checking that everyone was ready, we began to go down. Jason had taken it upon himself to count the steps and, in what was probably a sign of my middle age, I made a mental note that for every step we went down that was one more we'd have to come back up again afterwards.

We made our way down in silence, except for Jason whispering his count. The stairs followed a straight line without any landings or other variations, and Jason's count had reached 854 when we finally reached the bottom. We rested for a bit before going any further and drank some of our water.

The passageway continued on for several hundred metres, now smooth, level and clearly artificial. Just when I thought it must go on forever, it opened up into a large cavern, and as we entered lights around the walls

began to come on. The cavern was semicircular in shape with an elaborate fountain on our right. On the curved wall immediately in front of us were a series of pictures.

The first was an aerial view of the island, only sprinkled with buildings and roads. Next was an image of a village, which must have been close to where our ship was parked, showing many people busy around the market stalls. The third showed the harbour filled with sailing craft of all varieties. The fourth and last showed the Pleiades cluster, but with a bright blue star at its centre.

We rounded the central fountain and there before us was a platform upon which stood what appeared at first glance to be statues of two men. I knew at once these were the twin brothers Emu and Dodo.

I stepped up in front of the Emu statue and took hold of its hands, while Peter did the same with the Dodo statue. For a moment nothing happened, but then I felt a slight tingling sensation moving along my arms and into my body. In response the Emu spirit began rising from deep within me and I felt it flowing out and into the statue. The hands, which at first had been hard and cold, began to warm and soften, and then the tingling stopped and it was done. I took a step back and looked up into the face of the man standing before me. His eyes opened, as if waking from a long sleep, and he smiled. I glanced across and saw Dodo was also awakening.

The brothers looked slowly around the room, taking in their surroundings, still with somewhat dazed expressions on their faces. Then they stretched like cats waking from a nap and stepped down from the platform. Emu scratched his head and turned to me.

“Thank you for bringing us back here,” he said rather hesitantly, as if his tongue and mouth were just getting the hang of speaking. “My name is Dromaius and my twin brother here is Raphus, although you may continue to call us Emu and Dodo if you wish.”

He made his way to the wall next to the fountain and pressed a button in a recessed panel. A door in front of us slid open and we were almost overwhelmed by a strong musty odour. He quickly pressed another button and the humming noise of some vast ventilation system started up.

“It will take a while for the air in our living quarters to clear,” he said, “so if you don’t mind we might return to the ship with you for now.”

“No, that will be fine,” I said, my head still spinning a little.

The twin brothers were tall and slender with olive-coloured skin and black wavy hair. At first glance I’d have described them as Mediterranean in appearance. If they’d been wearing any clothing when they went into suspended animation or whatever it was, it had long since rotted away and

both were naked. Elissi just happened to have two pairs of shorts in her backpack, for which they were most grateful. I couldn't help wondering if she knew beforehand what we were going to find here.

"We're of a race called the Firstborn," Raphus said as we made our way back up the stairs. "It is said our ancestors came originally in spirit form when the galaxy was newly made, but when this world was ready we took physical shape. Over the millennia we built our homes here and then, eventually, began spreading life throughout the galaxy, for that was our role."

"We were long-lived, but not immortal," Dromaius said. "As children we visited your planet many times and observed the early migration of human tribes into what you now call Europe and Australia, although the shape of the continents was somewhat different then. We formed a spiritual link with your people and helped guide the early stages of your civilisations. But we were back here on our home world when the end came.

"The star cluster you call the Pleiades was our jewel in the sky. According to legend, our forefathers made it by gathering vast amounts of hydrogen gas together and forming a star nursery. At the centre of the cluster, where the cloud was most dense, a giant blue star formed. It was a sight to behold, but ultimately our downfall."

"We had an older brother named Barrad," Raphus said. "When the first civilisations we had seeded began to rise, he and his followers were adamant we should become their divine rulers, effectively enslaving them, but Dromaius and I would have none of that. A great debate raged for years, but ultimately we prevailed. In his anger, Barrad threatened to destroy those worlds, and then he disappeared."

"It would seem he started with this one," Dromaius said, "or it was a very well-timed coincidence. A little over twenty years after his disappearance, the blue star suddenly flared up until it was as bright as the sun. We watched in amazement as a brilliant red cloud began to grow outwards from it. Each night when the cluster rose the cloud was a little bigger and a little less bright, until after the passage of several months it had faded away. The blue star itself also faded and we gave it little further thought."

"Then our people started becoming sick." Raphus said. "It affected the older ones first. They became weak and developed sores that wouldn't heal, and eventually they died. Our scientists said the remnant of the blue star was giving off dangerous radiation that would eventually kill us all, but before it did the cloud of debris that had been thrown off during its eruption reached us.

“Dromaius and I were walking in the desert when we saw the first shooting stars. In the beginning there were only a few, but before long an almost a constant stream was coming at us from the cluster. Occasionally a larger meteor would crash to the ground, and every few hours we could hear muffled explosions in the distance. The bombardment intensified, until there were meteorites pounding into the ground all around us. We ran back to the shore as fast as we could and set sail for the island.”

I had seen this, I realised, in the dream that had terrified me as a child, and which I'd experienced again the night before last in Angust. I shivered as I thought of what it must have been like for them.

“I don't know how we managed to reach the island unscathed,” Dromaius said. “Many people had been killed and most of the buildings were in ruin. Our parents had taken refuge down here and we joined them.

“The rain of meteorites continued unabated for decades. Our parents, who had been touched by the radiation sickness, eventually died, leaving Raphus, me and just a few other villagers left. We eventually realised we were trapped on a doomed world, so our spirits fled to where we'd forged our links on Earth and our bodies reverted to stone.”

“Over the millennia our spirits have passed from generation to generation,” Raphus said. “We watched with great interest as your societies developed, and despaired at the dark times. But our dream was always to eventually return here, to reclaim our world.”

“What became of Barrad?” Julia asked.

“We saw nothing at all of him or his followers after the great debate,” Dromaius said. “It wasn't until Earth established contact with the Eridanians that we realised his followers, the Barradhim, were active on that world. They were without doubt behind the activities of Andushin and his syndicate, and again in your recent kidnapping. That's why it was so important for you to come here and restore us to physical form.”

“There's an even greater imperative, I think,” Todd said, and we all looked around at him. “If my observations last night are anything to go by, your blue star is about to go supernova. If that were to happen it would fulfil Barrad's threat by wiping out all the civilised worlds within a few thousand light years of here.”

“Are you sure about this?” Dromaius asked.

“No, I'm not sure. I need to make a lot more observations and we'll probably have to study the star at closer range, which is why I hadn't said anything up until now. But I'd say there's a better than even chance it will blow sometime in the next hundred years or so.”

“Is there anything you can do to stop it?” Julia asked.

“Alas no,” Dromaius said. “Our powers lie in the creation of life, and we can’t move stars or planets. But even if it were to explode today, it would be four hundred years before the radiation reached Earth or Eridani, so your people, once warned, would have time to evacuate.”

“We need to recall the Council,” Elissi said.

“You’re right, we’ve been idle for far too long.”

Once we returned to the ship Todd prepared for an immediate lift-off and a jump through subspace to take us closer to the rogue star. With the shielding provided by the ship, we were able to get within about a quarter of a light year in safety, at least for short periods of observation. We made exhaustive measurements of its mass, energy emission, spectrum, magnetic field and just about anything else that might be relevant.

Todd, Peter and I poured over the data, looking for anything that might suggest an outcome other than supernova explosion. Jason watched over our shoulders with keen interest but remained silent, obviously aware of the seriousness of the matter. In the end we concluded that, had the star had just a little bit less mass, say ten percent less, it would have ended its life passively as a cooling red giant. But our observations showed, beyond doubt, that the final contraction leading to a supernova explosion had already begun and there was very little time left, less than a couple of years in all probability.

As soon as we landed back on the beach we were met by Dromaius and Raphus who guided us across the island to a huge underground cavern which was the ancient Council room. There were already about forty representatives present from many of the civilised worlds. Some were descendants of the original Firstborn while others, like Elissi, were members of groups supporting them. As I surveyed the crowd I spotted a tall man with black skin and pure white hair, and even though his back was towards me I recognised him immediately as the old man we’d met at the Emu cave. As I approached him he turned, saw me and smiled.

“I’m glad to see you and Peter reached here safely and fulfilled your quest.”

“It would seem our quest may have been in vain,” I said, and told him of our findings.

“That’s grim news indeed, but perhaps someone from amongst the Council may have a solution to suggest.”

At that moment Dromaius and Raphus stepped onto the dais and asked everyone to take their seats. Dromaius thanked those assembled for coming at such short notice.

“Before we begin proceedings I’d like to introduce you to two very special people,” he said. “They are from Earth and were the latest to carry our spirits, but confronted great peril bringing us back here. Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe, could you please come forward and join us.”

Peter and I walked up and sat alongside the brothers while all the others were applauding loudly.

“I say *great peril*,” Dromaius continued, “and I refer not only to the most recent attempt to capture and kill them, but of events going back almost thirty years. For we have discovered the lair of the Barradhim, and it’s on the planet Eridani.

“We believe they may have been active on that world for at least ten thousand years, when an incident took place that resulted in the destruction of Eridani’s twin world and saw the southern hemisphere of their planet reduced to desert. This chain of events almost ended in the destruction of Eridani as well, but in the end was averted by an extreme act of heroism by Billy and Peter.”

Elissi stood and Dromaius invited her to speak.

“I was informed only a few hours ago that the authorities on Eridani have arrested the Barradhim responsible for the kidnapping. They are being questioned even as we speak.”

“What news of Barrad himself?” one of the delegates asked.

“Of Barrad we’ve seen nothing,” Dromaius said. “He may be hiding on Eridani, but I feel it’s more likely he’s directing events from elsewhere.”

There was an outburst of murmuring and everyone looked around the room, possibly expecting to see Barrad lurking amongst themselves.

“We have an even *greater* peril at hand,” Dromaius said. “The remnant of the blue star at the centre of the cluster continues to emit dangerous levels of radiation, and we must warn all of you to remain sheltered while ever it is above the horizon. But our friends from Earth have discovered the star is on the verge of a supernova explosion which would eventually wipe out all life on at least a dozen of the civilised worlds.”

A three dimensional image of this part of the galaxy appeared above us. As we watched, the star at the centre exploded and a red sphere moved outwards. As it passed each of the civilised worlds, that world flashed briefly and then went dark.

“There are another forty or fifty worlds that may be affected by the radiation burst, but they should be able to survive. It will depend a lot on the final intensity of the explosion.”

“What can we do to prevent this?” another of the delegates asked.

“We’re open to suggestions, but we don’t know any way to stop the explosion of the star,” Dromaius said. “It will take fifty years for the radiation to reach the closest of the inhabited worlds so there’ll be time to organise evacuations, but the disruption will be enormous and the annihilation of animal and plant species immeasurable.”

A lively discussion as to what distant planets might be suitable as refugee shelters for the affected worlds took place, and suggestions were made to set up vast zoos and botanical gardens to preserve as many species as possible. Planets were nominated, discussed, and then discarded for various reasons. All the talk seemed to be heading nowhere.

“But surely there must be some way to stop the star from exploding,” one of the delegates finally said.

Everyone looked around at each other, hoping someone might have the answer, but there was silence. Dromaius was about to resume the discussion when there was movement at the back of the hall. I was dumbstruck when Jason stepped forward.

“Forgive my impertinence, for I’m only a boy from Earth and not a member of this Council,” he said softly.

“Please feel free to speak, Jason, if you think you might be able to help us,” Raphus said.

“Well it seems to me there might be a way to stop the supernova. On Eridani there was a subspace tunnel that linked the southern ocean of the planet with that of its twin, and when the twin imploded all the water rushed out into space and was lost. Well, what I was thinking was, um, couldn’t we do the same thing with the star, like open up a subspace tunnel to its core and vent the excess matter and pressure to the other side of the fold?”

As soon as he’d finished speaking he looked down at his feet, expecting no doubt to be shouted down, but there was total silence. The idea was so radical and absurdly simple I was sure there must be some fundamental reason why it couldn’t possibly work, but I could think of nothing off the top of my head. I looked around the room and everyone was deep in thought. Then Todd stood.

“Forgive me also, for I’m not a member of this Council, but what Jason has suggested might just work. We’d only have to vent a little over ten percent of the star’s mass to prevent the supernova, and if we could open up a portal right at its core and keep it open long enough, the pressure would be sufficient to eject the mass far into space on the other side of the fold. Assuming, of course, there’s not a twin star over there on the other side.”

Dromaius activated the display again and moved to the region opposite us in the galaxy.

“There’s no star there, nor any other systems that might be adversely affected by this. Perhaps this would be a good time to adjourn the meeting, and those of you with the necessary technical and scientific skills might be able to determine if Jason’s proposal is feasible. We’ll reconvene tomorrow morning.”

Jason ran up to us as soon as the room had cleared a little. Julia and I hugged him tightly.

“What made you think of that?” I asked.

“Last night you and Uncle Todd kept saying if it had a bit less mass it wouldn’t explode, so I started thinking how you might go about reducing the mass of a star. Then, like I said, I remembered about what had happened to the ocean on Eridani and thought, well, if it worked there then why not here?”

I hugged him tightly again. I was just so proud of my son I could burst.

Julia, Elissi and Jason returned to the ship while Todd, Peter and I joined a group of other scientists to analyse the proposal and see if it really was feasible. We worked right through the night, figuring out the amount of matter that needed to be vented, how it would disperse on the other side of the fold, and how the portal could be initiated and then sustained long enough to be effective. In the end we agreed it could be done, given sufficient time and resources. We needed a more precise estimate of when the star would explode.

When the Council reconvened the next morning we presented our findings. There was a general murmuring of assent.

“Very well then,” Dromaius said, “it’s agreed we should attempt this, but we must maintain absolute secrecy for if the Barradhim, or even Barrad himself, were to learn of our plans, we’d surely be defeated. I think it best you return to your own worlds now and carry on just as before, as if you had no knowledge of the supernova threat.”

“Won’t that hamper the construction of the portal?” one of the delegates asked.

“Of course,” Raphus said, “but we’ll have to live with that. Given enough care, we should be able to obtain the materials needed without arousing suspicion, particularly if we obtain the various components from different worlds. Our only hope is to maintain total secrecy.”

“And to hope the star doesn’t blow before we’re ready,” the delegate added.

“We’ll continue to monitor it as closely as we can,” Dromaius said, “and will keep all of you advised of its progress towards supernova.”

* * *

We returned to Earth. Jason went back to school while Peter and I returned to work at the telescope. We’d been charged with supplying the fractal crystals needed to build the portal. It would require two rings, similar to the two frames I’d used fourteen years earlier in my first demonstration in the laboratory, only on a much larger scale. Peter devised a range of uninteresting research projects each requiring small quantities of crystals, and little by little we built up our stockpile.

The reports from the Pleiades were brief and said little more than that the star was quiet. Elissi reported there’d been no further trouble from the Barradhim on Eridani. The work continued.

* * *

Six months after the Council meeting we received the call. The star was starting to collapse, and it was now essential we put everything together and make our attempt at defusing it. Opening the portal across the subspace fold was the easy part, as it was simply a repeat of my first experiment with the two fractal crystal frames, only on a much larger scale. The difficulty was in maintaining the portal long enough to vent sufficient matter. The interior of the star was incredibly dense and incredibly hot, and the crystals would be vaporised almost instantly. To get around this, we’d use a magnetic field to force the ejected matter into a vortex. With a sufficiently large field, and in conjunction with the star’s own magnetic field, this vortex would be self-sustaining and, we hoped, keep the portal open.

We arrived at the construction site on the opposite side of the galaxy to the star. Everything was just about ready. Peter and I carried out a final inspection of the fractal crystal rings, and a test was done opening the portal a light year or so from the star. Everything seemed to be working fine.

The reports from the star monitoring station indicated we had little time left. The radiation had intensified greatly in the last few days and its core was continuing to shrink under the weight of its own mass. The rings and the magnetic field generator were being manoeuvred into their precise positions and everything was ready to go.

We were just about to activate the portal when, to our dismay, six Eridanian ships dropped out of subspace right into the path of where the

star's material would be ejected. Frantically our communications personnel hailed the ships.

"We know what you're attempting and it can't be allowed to proceed," said a voice from one of the ships. "We'll remain right where we are, and we have hostages on board."

"What can we do?" Todd asked. "We can't just kill innocent hostages."

"We have no choice," Elissi said. "If we don't proceed the star will explode and whole worlds will be destroyed."

"The star's about to blow!" said the voice from the monitoring site on the other side of the fold. "You must activate now!"

"Do it!" shouted Elissi.

"I, I can't," said Todd. "I'm sorry, I just can't kill them in cold blood."

"Don't be a fool, Todd!" Elissi cried as she ran to confront him. "Countless billions of people will die if you don't. Here, move aside and let me do it."

"No, I can't let you. We can't just wantonly kill even one person to save however many billions you say might otherwise die. Can't you see, that would make us no better than they are. The people on those ships, the hostages and crew, they have families, children, friends. What would you say to them? What if I were one of the hostages? Would you do it then? Look, we'll have decades, even hundreds of years, to relocate those civilisations that will be affected by the supernova, or who knows, maybe even develop some form of shielding that would protect whole planets from the radiation burst. But regardless of any of that, we can't kill them, Elissi, we simply can't. It would just be, I don't know, wrong."

"Then we've failed," she sighed.

"Wait," Peter said. "I have an idea."

He ran to the communications console and started keying madly away at the computer. A few seconds later he looked up at us, grinning.

"Watch this," he said, and pressed the ENTER key.

To our amazement, the six ships disappeared in a flash of blue light.

"They're safely in subspace. Hit it, Todd!"

Todd hit it. A brilliant white plume of matter began streaming out of the point where the rings had been.

"The rings have vaporised, but the portal's staying open," he said. "It's holding steady."

We watched as the plume expanded and spread out across space.

"The star's holding steady," the voice of the monitoring station said from across the fold. "The mass is decreasing, it's down by 0.5 percent already. Another hour and we should be safe."

“What did you do with those ships, Peter?” Elissi finally asked.

“Well,” he said with a sheepish grin on his face, “they were Eridanian standard subspace shuttles, right? So I guessed they’d have the standard Eridanian control system fitted, and I simply sent them the command to initiate an emergency jump to subspace. It will take them hours to figure out how to disable it, and by then they’ll be many light years away.”

“You cunning devil. How did you know about our remote command systems?”

“Oh, I read it in a book someone gave me when I was recuperating from my injuries a few years ago.”

When the vortex finally collapsed the star was down to eighty four percent of its original mass and out of supernova danger, while at the same time its radiation emissions had dropped to almost nothing. It would take another eighteen years for the effect of this to reach the Firstborn’s planet, but after that they’d be able to start recolonising the surface.

Later reports from Eridani indicated there were no hostages on board the ships, and the Barradhim had been bluffing. Todd argued it really made no difference, that either way to have destroyed those ships would have been plain and simply wrong. Elissi just shrugged her shoulders and turned away, and I couldn’t help wondering if their marriage would be strong enough to survive such a fundamental difference of opinion. Todd looked up at me as if reading my mind, and nodded grimly.

Endgame

It was mid April and we were gathered at my parents' farm to celebrate Jason's fifteenth birthday. Eight of his school friends also came along, and as soon as we arrived they took off in the direction of the creek.

Peter and I were assigned the task of gathering firewood for the barbecue while Julia helped Mum with the food preparation. When Dad was finally satisfied we'd collected enough wood he lit the fire and brought out the steaks, sausages, and potatoes. The smell of wood smoke and cooking meat soon filled the air.

Just as lunch was about to be served the boys instinctively returned, wet, muddy and thoroughly happy. The pile of food was quickly demolished and then Julia brought out the birthday cake topped with fifteen burning candles. Jason blew them all out with one enormous huff and stood, not knowing whether to smile or grimace, as his friends sang '*Happy Birthday*'.

After lunch we organised a game of cricket. Two teams were formed, called the Dodos and the Emus and captained by Peter and myself. The teams were randomly chosen, and Jason became an honorary Dodo for the course of the afternoon. Peter again shone as a batsman, scoring an unbeaten 57 as the Dodos cruised to victory. Jason's leg-spin bowling had improved out of sight, as I discovered when he clean-bowled me for a first-ball duck. Such is cricket. I was never much good at sports, really.

After the game the boys went back down to the creek to acquire some more mud, while us old folk sat around under a shady tree and sipped coffee. It was one of those beautiful autumn afternoons with warm sunshine, no wind, and just a touch of coolness in the air.

* * *

The Pleiades adventure was now well and truly behind us. We'd returned to the Council room for a debriefing several days after the defusing of the star, and all reports were that it had been a complete success, although no

trace had been found of the six Barradhim ships. At the end of the proceedings Jason had been called up onto the dais and was presented with a gold medallion. He was unfazed by all the attention, though, and said in response he was probably more surprised than anyone that his idea had actually worked.

After that life returned to normal. The paperwork from the AusScience bureaucrats had built up enormously during my absence and I had to bring Dad in to help me for a few weeks. Eventually, though, everything settled down again. In January we went to Coolum Beach for two weeks, and while we had no close encounters with the dolphins this time, we all enjoyed ourselves. Julia's parents had bought a yacht so we spent a lot of time sailing and exploring the coastal islands.

Jason was dux of the school again in spite of the disruptions during the year, and remained committed to following in his father's footsteps toward a career in astronomy. For his birthday I bought him a new telescope with motor drive and a CCD camera, and he brought it along with him to the farm to try out away from the town lights.

The boys returned from the river at about half past three as their parents were due to collect them at four. We hosed them down and they ran around playing touch football to dry themselves off. Peter and I joined in, but the youngsters were faster and more nimble and we were convincingly outplayed.

After dinner we gave Jason's telescope a good workout for a couple of hours. He'd happily have stayed out all night, but Julia started complaining about the cold so we came back inside for some supper. It was a little after nine o'clock and we were sitting around sipping coffee and eating Mum's homemade biscuits when we heard a noise outside the house.

Moments later four armed Barradhim stormed into the living room and ordered us down on the floor. We complied and they then took up positions, two on each side of the door, and waited. A couple of times Dad started asking them what was going on, but they pointed their weapons at him and told him to be quiet.

It was an hour and a half before anything else happened, and then a tall, heavily built man wearing fine robes and black boots polished to a mirror finish came striding into the room. He looked a little like Dromaius and Raphus, with olive-coloured skin and steel-grey hair, but whereas they had appeared kind and gentle, this man looked aggressive and ruthless.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he said in a loud and forceful voice. "I'm Barrad, and I've been looking forward so much to meeting you all."

He walked over to me and beckoned me to stand.

“The famous Billy Collins,” he said. “Physicists of your calibre are very rare indeed and I really could put your talents to good use.”

I looked down and shuffled my feet on the carpet.

“Yes, I know Andushin made you a similar offer on my behalf, and I know what the outcome of that was. But you’ll find I’m a very forgiving employer.”

One of the guards snickered and Barrad gave him an icy glare.

“My answer is still the same,” I said, trying very hard not to show how frightened I was.

“Well, I expected as much, but I had to ask.”

The pain in my stomach exploded as his fist hit me and I collapsed back to the floor. Julia started moving towards me but he glared at her and she froze.

“Stay where you are,” he said softly but forcibly.

He took a step closer and looked down on me, then reached out and placed his boot firmly on my chest, pinning me against the floor.

“I’m sure you don’t want your family to see you slowly crushed to death like some annoying pest. Now Billy, WILL YOU JOIN ME?”

The pressure he applied to my chest forced the air out of my lungs and I grimaced with pain. Then he eased off a bit and I sucked in a little air.

“No,” I whispered.

“Fool,” he said softly, and then slowly, relentlessly, reapplied the pressure. The pain was immense and I couldn’t breathe. Black spots began appearing in my vision and I closed my eyes.

“Don’t hurt him any more, please,” Jason pleaded from across the room, though it sounded like he was speaking from the other side of the galaxy.

“What do we have here?” Barrad said, turning towards him. The tread on his boot dug into my skin as he swivelled but the pressure came off and I managed to heave in some air while trying not to make too much noise.

“You must be Jason the boy wonder,” he said, finally taking his boot off my chest. “I’ve been hearing a lot about you too. Come and stand before me.”

Jason looked across at Julia and then reluctantly stood, but with his head bowed and his eyes pointed at his feet. He’d never been a very big boy, and even at the age of fifteen he was only 150cm tall and weighed just 40kg, but now he looked much smaller and fragile. Barrad laughed, loudly and horribly.

“Oh my,” he said, still chuckling. “I’d planned on taking this stick insect as my new apprentice, but I can see now it would be a futile exercise.”

He lashed out with his hand and pushed Jason in the chest. He fell over backwards and Barrad laughed again.

“Stand up, you miserable twig,” he yelled, and Jason quickly got back on his feet, still keeping his head down. Barrad paced up and down, stroking his chin.

“Maybe if I put some clothes and boots on him he might look the part, but no, I don’t think it would work. I mean look at it, the droopy shoulders, the sunken chest, the hollow stomach and the skinny little arms and legs. Do your parents ever feed you, boy?”

Jason said nothing, but continued to stare at his feet and wiggle his toes.

“Answer me, boy!” Barrad yelled and slapped him across the face. Jason flinched slightly, but otherwise showed no reaction.

“Yes,” Jason said softly, “they feed me but I really can’t eat very much. I’m autothermic like my father.”

“Yes, well, maybe I can find some use for you after all. Autothermics make very good low maintenance slaves.”

“Bind him!” he yelled to the four guards who were still standing on either side of the door, and they jumped forward and placed manacles on Jason’s hands and feet. He continued to stand where he was with his head bowed.

“Leave him alone!” Julia cried, and for her trouble had a weapon pointed in her face.

“Would you please just *sit down* and *shut up*,” Barrad said slowly but firmly. “I’ll kill you all if I have to, but your suffering will be so much more entertaining if I don’t.”

My mind was racing, but I could think of nothing I could do to help my son. I was literally petrified. Meanwhile Barrad continued to stare at him, scratching his chin.

“I have a fractal crystal mine on a distant planet,” he eventually said. “It’s mostly mechanised but I do need a few human operators to keep it running smoothly. Autothermics are ideal since they never get sick and only need a few crumbs occasionally to keep them alive. Yes, you could prove quite useful. Do you think you’d like that, boy?”

“To be honest, no,” Jason said softly, still with his head bowed.

“Hah, a joker to the very end. Now look at me, boy, when I speak to you. Didn’t your parents teach you any manners?”

He pulled Jason’s head up with his left hand and prepared to strike him across the face with the right, but it was then he really saw Jason’s face for the first time, and he faltered.

His hand wavered, moving to strike him and then pulling back. His face grimaced.

“Elko?” he said in a soft, feeble voice.

“HE’S LONG DEAD AND BURIED. FORGET HIM!” he roared and then raised his hand again to strike him. But once more he faltered.

“No, Elko was my friend, and I hurt him.”

“HE WAS WEAK AND DESERVED TO DIE!”

A black halo formed around him, and he trembled.

“No, Elko was right.”

The cloud around him grew and there were now flashes of lightning in it.

“NO!” he bellowed, and the halo suddenly shattered and blew away like fine dust. His shoulders drooped and his head flopped down onto his chest. He looked exhausted.

Slowly he pulled himself upright again, but all the menace had left him. He turned to the four guards.

“Go,” he said softly. “Take your ship, return to the palace and wait for me there.”

The guards, shocked by the transformation that had come over their leader, stood their ground.

“GO!” he yelled at them, and they looked at each other and ran out of the house.

He pulled a set of keys from his belt and threw them to Jason.

“You may remove the shackles now,” he said, and sat down on the floor.

“When I was very young I had a friend named Elko,” he finally said. “We were the best of friends and would go everywhere together. My younger brothers, the twins, also liked him because he always brought them gifts and was kind to them.

“Then one day Elko and I were out exploring in the desert. We would have been about the same age as Jason, at least by our reckoning, and Elko looked just like him. We came to a deep canyon and climbed down to the bottom. It was narrow and quite dark but we walked further and further in, enjoying the cold, damp stone under our feet after the hot sands of the desert, for none of us wore shoes then. After a time we came upon a cavern in the side of the gorge. We could both feel a powerful presence in there and Elko was afraid. But I was taller, stronger and indestructible, so I went in.”

He paused for the best part of a minute, a tear rolling down his cheek.

“I went in and it was very dark, but there were things, metal things, glistening in the dim light. There was a sword and a shield, and a coat of silver mail. I put on the coat and it was icy cold against my skin, but it felt good. I picked up the sword and the shield. I felt a great strength flow into me, as if I’d become a grand warrior from the ancient times. I could now see deeper into the cave and there was more treasure further back, so I went

outside and ordered Elko to come and help gather it, but he trembled and ran off. I picked up a rock and threw it at him, hitting him on the back of the head. I didn't know my own strength. He fell to the ground, and when I ran over to him he was barely conscious.

"What's happened to you, Barbar?" he whispered. When I heard him use my nickname, Barbar, I flew into a rage and started kicking him. By the time my anger subsided I realised I'd killed him, so I left him there and ran back to the cavern. There I found an old sack and put everything I could find into it. I ran back out of the canyon with my bounty, which I hid close to home, and told everyone Elko had slipped and fallen to his death. There was a big search but his body was never found.

"Some ancient demon captured me in the cavern that day, and I developed an insatiable lust for power and dominance. My brothers saw this in me and shunned me, but that only made me worse. In the end, and after I was defeated in a great debate, I left home and travelled far and wide, plotting my revenge."

There was the sound of someone else entering the house, and then a deep voice spoke.

"You didn't kill me that day, although you came very close," the owner of that voice said, and the old Aboriginal man whom we'd first met at the Emu cave walked into the room.

Barrad turned around and looked at him.

"Elko?"

"The very same, Barbar. I despaired you'd never be free of that demon, but at last that day has arrived."

"Elko, I'm so sorry, so terribly, terribly sorry."

Jason cried uncontrollably for almost an hour after they'd left, such was the ordeal he'd been through. Julia and I slept with him on the floor of the living room that night, with him wedged tightly between us, but he slept soundly and was his normal self by morning. Julia and I, it seemed, were more shaken by the incident than he was, mostly because we felt so helpless to do anything to stop Barrad taking our son away.

I thought long and hard during the early part of the morning and then called a family conference. As well as Julia, Jason and myself, I included my parents (since it was their house) and Peter who was virtually family anyway.

"What happened last night was intolerable by anyone's standards," I said, kicking the discussion off. No-one disagreed.

“I think it might be a good idea for us to move away from here, to somewhere more obscure.”

“More obscure than Narrabri?” Dad asked.

“You know what I mean. The whole galaxy knows we live here.”

“Did you have anywhere in mind?” Julia asked.

“No, not really, except maybe somewhere on the coast where we could go surfing and sailing.”

“What about your job?”

“Well, maybe it’s time to escape AusScience anyway. There’s bound to be plenty of work available as an independent researcher.”

“Is there room for two researchers in your plans?” Peter asked.

“I don’t see why not, if that’s what you want, Peter.” He nodded.

“Looks like you’ve all pretty much decided then,” Mum said. “This is the shortest family conference I’ve ever attended.”

“Um, I think we’re forgetting someone very important here,” I said, and turned towards Jason. “How do you feel about this, son?”

“I really don’t want to move,” he said softly after a few moments thought. His head was bowed low and he was talking to the table top. “There’s my school, my friends and my cricket and stuff, and well, I like the beach when we go on holidays but I wonder if I’d like it as much if I lived there all the time.”

I moved my chair closer to him and put my arm around his shoulders. He turned and looked up at me and we made eye contact. Slowly a smile grew on his face.

“It’s really out of concern for you that we’re having this discussion at all,” I said. “I think the decision should ultimately be yours, and if you’d rather stay then we’ll stay. Okay?”

“That’s an awful weight you’re putting on the boy’s shoulders, kiddo,” Dad said.

“I just want us to stay a happy family. Your mother and I are scared there might be more attacks on us, or on you.”

“But I don’t think running away and hiding is the answer,” Jason said. “The evil that had possessed Barrad has gone now, and I really don’t think there’ll be any more trouble.”

“You really want to stay here, don’t you?” Julia asked.

“I do, Mum. This is my home, I was born here and have lived here all my life. I know that when I finish school in a couple of years I’ll have to leave to go to university, but until then I really do want to stay here.”

“So be it,” I said and smiled at him. He smiled back and then hugged me. Julia joined in as well, and then Mum, Dad and Peter piled on top.

A few weeks later we received a visit from Elko.

“Barrad has returned to his stronghold in the Anteres system,” he said. “Even without the influence of the demon he’s still a very powerful and charismatic leader. He’s met with his supporters and they’ve agreed to turn their talents towards, well, more constructive ends. They’ve become, in effect, a team of elite trouble-shooters, now dedicated to a peaceful and free galaxy.

“I was aware of the resemblance between Jason and myself at his age when we first met at the Emu cave. I warned him when I saw him again at the Council meeting that he could expect an extreme reaction from Barrad should they ever come face to face, but never did I imagine the mere sight of him would cause Barrad to confront and ultimately expel the demon.”

“How is it you were right on the spot when it happened?” I asked.

“It was really just pure chance. I became aware Barrad was on Earth and went to your house to warn you, but when you weren’t there I thought I might find you at your parents’ farm. I arrived just moments before the demon was expelled.”

“So what became it?” Julia asked. “Is there a chance it could possess someone else, even one of us?”

“No, that spirit has passed beyond the bounds of the universe and won’t trouble anyone again.”

Life did return to normal for us. During the winter months we went bushwalking almost every weekend and reconnected with the land of our ancestors. We discovered the National Parks’ authority were planning to conduct special tours of the Emu cave and its surroundings (they were the ones responsible for the upgrading of the access road) and Dad was engaged as an Aboriginal consultant and guide.

At AusScience the warfare with the bureaucrats continued unabated, but Peter had a paper published in *Nature* which earned him great praise and a pay rise. Julia and I still talk wistfully of early retirement and a cottage by the sea, but we’re content to wait at least until Jason has finished his schooling.

As summer approached, the Pleiades cluster was once again visible in the night sky. One clear night Jason and I sat outside watching as it slowly climbed above the horizon.

“I can’t see the eighth star any more,” I said.

“That’s because you’re no longer carrying the Emu spirit.”

“Yeah,” I said, but my thoughts had drifted to Dromaius, Raphus and the other Firstborn, and the enormous task that lies ahead of them as they

prepare to rebuild their world. At that moment a shooting star flashed across the sky and I wished them well.

Billy Collins

The Desert (2)

Elko and Barrad walked into the desert as the sun was setting on the western horizon. Although the air was now chilly, the sand still retained some heat from the day and warmed their bare soles.

“You sensed it in the boy as well?” Barrad asked.

“Yes, from the moment I first met him. He has within him a very powerful spirit.”

“It was that spirit that forced the demon from me. Is it one of us, do you think?”

“No, something much older, perhaps, and much deeper. I feel it’s really an essential part of the boy himself, rather than some other entity he’s carrying.”

“Sooner or later he’ll come to realise that he has this power. The question is, will he be strong enough to deal with it?”

“I hope he will be, for I really do love him,” Elko said. “But I also fear for him.”

The sun set and the two ancient ones disappeared into the twilight.

Part Four

For the Love of Jason

Awakening

Remember me? We last met two years ago when I'd just turned fifteen. Well now I've finished school and have been accepted into the science faculty at Brisbane University where I'll be studying astronomy in accordance with the family tradition. Grandpa has made it no secret he'd love to have another Dr Collins in the family!

It's Christmas time and high summer here in Narrabri, so for me and my best friend Aaron, that mostly means mucking about in the river. Aaron, whom I've known since kindergarten, is a Star Wars guru of the highest order and knows absolutely every bit of trivia about all six movies. He even looks a bit like Luke Skywalker, which is how he earned the nickname 'Luke', and he reckons he wants to be a Jedi Master when he grows up. I'm sure he'll make an excellent one.

Dad is still the boss at the radio telescope here, and Peter still his principal tormenter. Peter's been doing some good theoretical work on the possible existence of an extragalactic subspace. His work was published in *Nature*, as you may already know, and that's brought a lot more funding to the team. Whether we'll be flying off to Andromeda in an intergalactic ship anytime soon is another matter, though. According to him, there are some pretty big practical obstacles to overcome before that can happen.

It's ten o'clock on Christmas Eve and the Pleiades is riding high in the sky. Genesis, the name now given to the planet of the Firstborn, is still uninhabitable because of the radiation from the rogue star. Even though it was defused almost three years ago and is no longer emitting any significant x-rays, it will be another fifteen years before the last of those rays, ambling along at the speed of light, finally reach the planet.

As I look at the cluster a chill goes up my spine. Perhaps some old memory of that turbulent year has resurfaced into my subconscious.

Whatever the reason, my eyes are drawn to that little group of stars and for a moment I seem to be floating towards them.

“Jason?”

The voice is at first far away, but then I feel a hand on my shoulder and the spell is broken.

“It’s okay, Dad,” I say as I turn around. “I was miles away, I guess.”

“You sure were. You’ve been standing out here staring into space for the last hour and a half.”

I begin to wonder if there’s some power, some force, something perhaps connected with the planet Genesis, awakening inside of me, and I’m afraid.

Sixth Sense

Six months earlier.

I woke and peered out my bedroom window. The sky was dark. I glanced across at my clock radio and saw it was 6:20, still an hour before my normal rise time. I rolled over and then it started, the headache that began behind my eyes and slowly moved to the top of my head. My throat was suddenly dry.

I got out of bed and stumbled towards the kitchen, bumping my shoulder on the doorframe on the way out. With every step I felt worse, and when I finally reached the sink I had to steady myself against it for a few seconds before picking up a glass and filling it with water. I took a mouthful and waited. Nothing happened, so I took another. An ominous gurgling sound came from my stomach and I braced myself, but eventually the nausea passed. I poured out the rest of the water and cautiously padded my way back to bed.

I stretched out on my back and remained perfectly still. The headache subsided a little, and I tried to think some pleasant thoughts. I recalled the bushwalk I'd gone on with Aaron the weekend before last, when we'd come across a beautiful little waterhole out in the middle of the forest...

... and I'm cautiously making my way along the ledge, Aaron in front and my father behind, then suddenly my foot is slipping out from under me and I'm sliding down. I hit the water and go under. The pool is quite deep and refreshingly cold. I rise to the surface, laughing, and see Dad is swimming out towards me. I take a breath, but suddenly something has grabbed hold of my foot and is pulling me down. I struggle against it, but it wraps itself tighter round my ankle. Now Dad's reached me and is trying to pull the vine away, but each time he removes one loop another wraps itself around. I start to panic and pull wildly against the vine but it's of no use. I

can hear my heart pounding through my head. Pounding, pounding, pounding....

“IT’S GOING TO BE A COLD ONE TODAY, SO YOU’D ALL BETTER RUG UP,” my clock radio bellowed into my ear. I sucked in a huge breath, and could still feel my head pounding. I took a few more deep breaths as the horror of the nightmare gradually receded. I’d almost forgotten about my near-drowning in the pool on Genesis that had happened just after we’d discovered the entrance to the underground home of Dromaius and Raphus, and I shuddered as I thought back to that moment and the terrors that followed. My headache returned.

I gingerly crawled out of bed and made my way to the bathroom, hoping my morning shower might wash the anxiety away. It seemed to work as I let the cold water splash down over my forehead, and when I emerged I felt a lot more like my usual self. I towelled myself down and then looked in the mirror.

I’d been letting my hair grow longer this year, for reasons I can no longer recall. It was now ten months since I last had it cut, and I was determined to get past the magical year. I hadn’t yet decided if I’d cut it then or just let it keep growing until it started to annoy me. Looking in the mirror, I saw it was now hanging limply down to my shoulders so I messed it up a bit with the towel and then swept it forward so it was covering one eye as the current fashion dictated. I peered at the result with my other eye for a few moments, then slowly shook my head and swept it back behind my ears. Fashion or not, I’d prefer to be able to use both eyes. I messed it up a bit more until I was at least fashionably dishevelled, then wandered back to my bedroom and rummaged around for some clean underwear and my school shorts.

When I walked into the kitchen Mum was eating breakfast. She asked me if I wanted anything but I shook my head. For the last couple of years, up until about three months ago, I’d undergone a growth spurt, had gained ten centimetres and fifteen kilograms and had an appetite almost like that of a normal person. But that had ended as abruptly as it had started and my appetite now was almost non-existent. Dad said when he was my age he went through a similar thing, and that was when his autothermia had reached its peak. Now in his mid forties, he could wear a shirt all day long without going into meltdown, which was a good thing given the exalted position he held in AusScience. But right now even my board shorts were making me feel a little uncomfortably warm. With that thought my headache returned.

“Are you okay Jason?” Mum asked.

“I have a bit of a headache, that’s all.” As I spoke my throat felt dry and constricted. I poured myself a glass of water and slowly sipped it.

“Probably the weight of all that hair,” she said. “Do you want to take an aspirin?”

“No, I’ll be right.”

I grabbed my backpack and wandered outside to the garage where my bicycle lived. I glanced up at the sky. It was a uniform dull grey and looked like it might start raining at any moment. As if in answer to my thought, a drop of rain hit me on the nose. I strapped my helmet on, mounted the bike and pedalled off towards school.

Aaron was sitting in his usual spot under the trees when I arrived. He looked up and brushed his hair away from his eyes as I approached, but it immediately flopped back down over them again as it always did, making him look like a sheepdog.

Having been hanging around me forever, he’d come to emulate my dress style, but he wasn’t autothermic so each year at around this time he’d be forced to put some warm clothing on. A few years ago he’d acquired a thick woollen sweater with a picture of Yoda on the front. At the time it was several sizes too big and pretty much swallowed him whole, but he loved wearing it in winter with nothing underneath, enjoying the feeling of the wool tickling his ribs. Today he was wearing it again even though it was now a couple of sizes too small and sporting a fair number of holes.

“I see winter’s got the better of you,” I said, but my voice was all croaky.

“Yeah, but it sounds like you should be wearing this rather than me.”

He started pulling it off, but I shook my head.

“I thought autothermics never got sick.”

“I’m not sick,” I croaked.

My headache continued throughout the day, but didn’t get any worse. Aaron was right - according to conventional wisdom, autothermics were never supposed to be sick, but as Dad, Peter and I were the only officially documented autothermics on the planet, that theory wasn’t based on a whole lot of empirical evidence. *‘Maybe it’s just some bug that’s snuck past my first line of defence,’* I thought, and I’d probably be fine by tomorrow.

When I arrived home I picked up the book I’d been reading, but found I couldn’t concentrate so in the end put it back down again. I was just getting up to go outside when the phone rang and I heard Mum answer it. My stomach suddenly constricted and I fell back down onto the sofa. Luckily I hadn’t eaten anything for two days and my stomach was empty, otherwise I think I’d have disgraced myself all over the living room floor.

“Oh no, that’s awful,” I heard Mum saying, although it sounded like she was talking from a great distance.

“Is it bad?”

“Oh no.”

“Look, I’ll come straight down, and I’ll bring Jason with me.”

She hung up and started walking towards me.

“I have some bad news, honey,” she said as she sat down next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. “Aaron was riding his bike home from school and was hit by a car. The driver didn’t stop, but Aaron was found on the side of the road by another person a few minutes later and they called the ambulance.”

“Is he badly hurt?” I heard myself whisper.

“I’m afraid he is,” she said as gently as she could. “The doctors are working on him right now. I told Mary we’d come straight over to the hospital. Do you think you’ll be okay?”

I nodded, but felt like I was detached from my body and was watching it performing in a play. She helped me out to the car, still with her arm around my shoulders. My legs felt like rubber.

We drove to the hospital in silence. The tears were becoming heavy in my eyes, but I tried very hard not to cry. I was a big boy now and had to learn to cope with life’s cruelties. I sniffled a little.

Mum walked up to the reception desk and I stood behind her, trying to be invisible. The smell of the hospital made me feel nauseous again and I hiccuped. The woman behind the desk peered round at me and then pointed towards the lifts. We moved off in that direction with me still hiccuping.

The doctors had finished with him by the time we reached the intensive care ward. His parents were with him, and as we approached I was shocked by how pale and grey he looked. His right arm was strapped up and tied off at some ridiculous angle, and he had bandages on his head and knees. The cluster of electronic instruments around him bathed him in a sickly green light.

“How is he?” Mum asked his mother as we approached.

“He’s still unconscious, and he has severe concussion and multiple fractures of his arm,” she said, and then put her hands over her face. Mum immediately put her arm around her shoulders and comforted her. They both sat down and I cautiously walked over alongside the bed. I could hear his shallow breathing.

I stood there just looking down at him for what must have been several minutes. I was too numb to think about anything at all, and I was terrified he was going to die. Very slowly and carefully I reached up and took hold of his left hand. I closed my eyes.

Some time later I felt a cold hand on my shoulder and looked up. There was a doctor standing behind me.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he said quietly and gently ushered me away from the bedside. He pulled a curtain around Aaron and I sat down next to Mum. The minutes passed ever so slowly.

"I have some good news for you," he said as he pulled the curtain back. "He has regained consciousness and shouldn't suffer any after-effects from the bump on the head. I must say though, that his helmet almost certainly saved his life." He looked at me sternly and I nodded back to him, but his message was wasted on me. I always wore a bike helmet anyway.

"I'll give you ten minutes with him but then we'll have to let him rest. You can come and see him again tomorrow morning, and by then we should have him down in a normal ward."

"How long will he be in here for?" his mother asked.

"We'd like to keep him under observation for at least another twenty-four hours, and then his arm will need to be reset when the swelling's gone down a bit."

His parents went up to him while Mum and I kept back. The relief I felt that he was going to be okay was indescribable. It was then I noticed my headache and sore throat were gone.

His mother waved me over to the bedside and she and her husband stepped back. Aaron looked up at me. I took hold of his hand again and he smiled.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I am now," he whispered, "thanks to you."

"What do you mean?" I asked, but when I looked down his eyes were closed and he was asleep.

My parents have always said I have some sort of sixth sense, and I guess this was just another example of it. But knowing that didn't make it any less spooky for me. I never questioned Aaron about what he meant by 'thanks to you', and he never raised the subject himself. Being able to sense calamities before they happen is one thing, but I really didn't want to find out I had 'healing hands' as well. I mean, it's hard enough just being that freaky autothermic kid who can never wear a shirt, without having something like this as well.

I did learn later, though, that when Aaron was admitted to the hospital the doctors were very concerned about his head injury and only gave him a fifty percent chance of survival, but later on, after he'd regained

consciousness, it was downgraded to being nothing more than a minor bump on the head. That really scared me.

His arm was a different story. It was broken in several places, including right at the elbow, and even though the doctors did the best they could in piecing it back together again, he was unlikely to ever regain full movement. Fortunately the injured arm was his right one and he'd always been a left-hander, so his schoolwork leading up to the final examinations was largely unaffected. His days as the star batsman on our cricket team, though, were over.

* * *

Christmas Day.

Santa Claus never comes down the chimney at the Collins' household because, well, we don't have a chimney. Instead in years gone by a pillowcase would be pinned to the end of my bed on Christmas Eve, and then magically the next morning it would be filled with toys and astronomy books, and the can of beer left for Santa would be empty. The fact that Dad's breath always smelt of beer on Christmas morning never tipped me off, though.

Now at the ripe old age of seventeen I'm deemed to be too old for such things, and the exchange of gifts takes place at a more reasonable hour after everyone is up and about. While I've never considered myself to be in the least bit greedy or selfish, I must admit to feeling disappointed when I realised there was only one small parcel under the Christmas tree with my name on it. Mum wouldn't let me open it, though, until Grandma and Grandpa Collins arrived.

I moped around the house feeling sorry for myself but trying not to show it, wondering what horrible thing I'd done during the year to warrant being restricted to only one tiny Christmas present. I could think of nothing - my exam results had been good, I hadn't been in any trouble or fights, I'd even volunteered to mow the lawn without having to be asked. In the end I went outside and climbed the tree in the backyard where I sat until my grandparents arrived.

My spirits lifted a little when Peter came out onto his deck, saw me in the tree, waved and wished me a 'Happy Christmas'. I returned the greetings and then we chatted for a little while about my plans for university and what to expect living in the colleges.

Grandma and Grandpa finally arrived and morning tea was served out in the backyard. Usually the first thing Grandpa does on Christmas morning is

ask me what presents I'd received, but this year he didn't even broach the subject. I began to suspect there was a conspiracy going on here.

Finally, after I'd begun to think morning tea was going to drag on for the rest of the day and into the night, we all moved back into the living room and gathered around the tree. I noticed Grandma and Grandpa had added to the pile of presents, but I also noticed none of the additions had my name on them either.

Peter wandered in, as if on cue, and then Dad started handing out the gifts. He made sure my tiny one was the last to be presented, and when he finally handed it to me I saw everyone was watching me intently. A conspiracy indeed!

I unwrapped the paper, and inside was an unmarked cardboard box. I opened that only to find more wrapping paper inside. Inside that was an unmarked envelope (this was getting ridiculous!) and when I finally tore that open a key fell out on the floor. I stared at it, dumbfounded, and then looked up and saw everyone was grinning expectantly. Finally the penny dropped. It was a car key!

I picked it up and gave Mum and Dad a big hug, and then Grandpa and Grandma as well.

"It's hiding in my garage if you want to go take a look," Peter said.

We all walked quickly around to his garage and waiting inside was a brand new *Photon*. I'd been reading about this model with its enhanced subspace-powered drive system, but I'd never in my wildest dreams expected to actually own one!

"You'd better check in the boot and make sure the dealer replaced the damaged spare wheel," Dad said. It seemed an odd thing to say but, gullible as ever, I assumed there must have been a manufacturing defect in the original spare.

I opened the boot and of course it was filled with brightly wrapped presents. I was totally overcome and went around hugging and kissing everyone with tears streaming down my face. When I planted a kiss on Peter there was a bright flash of light from behind me, and as I turned around I saw Aaron was standing behind the camera.

"Nice car, Jase. Can I take it for a spin?"

"Were you in on this conspiracy too?" I asked, still with tears running down my face.

"Of course. Oh, and Merry Christmas too, by the way."

That night the nightmare returned.

I'm edging my way along the ledge behind the pool on Genesis, but this time I'm alone. I lose my footing and slip into the water. It's quite deep and refreshingly cold, and I rise to the surface, laughing. I take a breath, but suddenly something has hold of my foot and is pulling me down. I start to panic and pull wildly against the vine but it's of no use. I can hear my heart pounding through my head. But then the dream shifts, and instead of having a vine around my ankle I'm strapped in the driver's seat of a submerged car. I'm no longer panicking, but instead feel quietly at peace. A bright light begins to form around me.

"Jason?"

It's a woman's voice clearly and loudly calling my name.

I woke with a start, with the morning sun shining on my face. I hauled in a deep breath of air, and then another for good measure. I looked around the room trying to find the source of that voice, but I was alone.

I had no doubt I'd been given a premonition of my own death. As I didn't seem to be old and decrepit in the dream, and as the car was in no way futuristic, I could only assume I wouldn't have long to wait before my demise.

I told no-one about the dream, though, and in the coming weeks I continued to drive my car but made sure I went nowhere near any water deep enough to submerge a vehicle in.

Interlude

On the 14th of August 2002, Jennifer Simpson came into the world, much to the delight of her parents William and Melissa of Eatons Hill, a leafy suburb on the northern side of Brisbane. The birth had been a lot easier than Melissa had expected and the baby looked perfect. Both mother and daughter were given the all clear and released from hospital the next day.

She was a very contented baby and didn't cause her parents too much sleeplessness during her infancy. When awake she was very inquisitive and went crawling all over the house exploring. She was particularly fascinated by the old grandfather clock Melissa had bought from the local antique store, and would sit in front of it watching the pendulum swing back and forth for hours at a time.

She had none of the usual childhood illnesses and on the few occasions Melissa took her to the doctor for a routine check everything was perfect. She herself was also in fine health and had suffered none of the postnatal depression she'd been fearing so much.

Having had such an easy run with the first one, they decided to try again and in March 2004, Timothy was born. This time the birth wasn't so easy and Melissa suffered complications which, although not life-threatening, nonetheless meant she'd be unable to have any more children. But Timothy was a fine and healthy baby boy.

It wasn't until the start of Jennifer's third winter that her parents suspected there might be something different and abnormal about her. It was a cool day, noticeably colder than it had been until then, and Melissa went to put a fleecy top on her. But as soon as the cloth touched her skin she started to cry and tried to pull it off.

"No Jennifer, you have to wear it. It's cold outside today."

But she didn't care and her crying intensified. Eventually Melissa picked her up and it was then she noticed how hot she was. She lifted the top and the skin beneath it was bright red. Not knowing what else to do, she quickly

pulled all of Jennifer's clothing off and let her sit naked on the floor. Almost immediately her crying stopped and within minutes the redness had gone.

"I don't think it's anything to worry about," the doctor said after he'd given her a pretty thorough examination. "Everyone has a different rate of metabolism and I think your daughter's is just set at one end of the normal range."

"But she eats like a sparrow," Melissa said. She'd always thought people with a high metabolism were also big eaters.

"I must say that surprises me, given her weight and height are perfectly normal for her age, but it's not just the rate of metabolism that's important, it's the efficiency of the process itself. In her case I suspect her body is just very good at converting the food she eats into energy.

"For now, just let her decide how much she wants to eat and how much clothing she wants to wear. I mean, really, in the climate we have here kids could go naked all year round and not suffer any adverse effects. In fact we're probably doing more harm than good wrapping them up as soon as it turns a bit cooler. Keep an eye on her weight and height, and make sure there's a pullover in easy reach for her to put on if she wants to."

He gave her a card showing the normal range of height and weight for children of various ages, and reassured her once again that everything was fine.

Now it should be borne in mind that, although the condition of autothermia was known to the medical profession at the time, it wasn't as widely known as it is now. In any case Jennifer's autothermia was relatively mild, certainly compared to the well-documented cases in the Collins and Thorpe families, and it is perfectly understandable that her doctor didn't identify this condition in her at the time.

Two years later when Jennifer started school, Melissa explained carefully to her teachers that she had an abnormally efficient metabolism and was unable to wear any heavy clothing. In primary schools in Queensland it was quite common for children to attend barefoot, so it really wasn't until she started high school that her dislike for footwear, another symptom of autothermia, became apparent.

She quickly made friends with another girl named Susan, and so close were they that at times their teacher thought they must be reading each others' minds. Both girls showed signs of great academic achievement, particularly in arithmetic and elementary science subjects, and were eager readers as well.

The transition into high school went smoothly enough. School dress regulations had been relaxed considerably over recent years, and shoes were now only required in places where there was a real hazard for bare feet, such as in the science laboratories. Jennifer could tolerate this, and for the rest of the time she was happily barefoot. She and Susan continued to do well in their studies.

Jennifer developed a strong interest in astronomy and subspace physics at around this time and her room was full of books on these subjects. Her parents actively encouraged her interest, buying her a high quality telescope on her thirteenth birthday and enrolling her in a special summer science school run by AusScience. She particularly enjoyed the lectures given by Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe on the discovery of subspace and the early days of first contact with the Eridanians. They were reluctant to say much about their more recent heroic exploits on Eridani, but from what she'd read this had been pretty traumatic for them.

It came as a big shock when she heard a few months later that Peter, Billy and his family had been kidnapped while attending a wedding on Eridani. She'd followed the news' reports intently as the story unfolded, and was relieved to finally hear they'd escaped and were now safe. In one of the photos was a picture of Billy's son, Jason, and she thought he looked really cute and much more attractive than the football hunks that made up the bulk of the male population at her school. She obtained a better quality print from the newspaper's website and pinned it up on the wall beside her bed.

About a year later the Collins family were in the news again when it was revealed they had defused a supernova in the Pleiades cluster. One of the reports mentioned it was the boy Jason who had first come up with the idea that led to the successful defusing operation. She felt so proud of this, probably, she reckoned, because he was about the same age as her. The fact she had a secret crush on him of course had nothing to do with it. She kept a copy of the article and pinned it up underneath the photo.

At the beginning of Year 12 Susan's family moved to Ashgrove. When she first heard the news Jennifer was devastated, but Susan convinced her parents to allow her to continue her schooling at Eatons Hill. There was a reasonably good bus service and sometimes she'd stay overnight at Jennifer's place, so it all worked out okay in the end.

In her final year Jennifer was consistently top of the class in mathematics and physics and scoring highly in her other subjects. When it came time to nominate her preferences for university courses, she placed Brisbane

University's science faculty at the top of the list. She'd read somewhere that Billy Collins had received his doctorate from there, and hoped his son might follow in his father's footsteps.

Her hopes were confirmed when the university admissions were published on the Internet. She kept staring at the screen where the name *Collins, Jason Thomas* appeared along with the code for *Brisbane University Science*. She eventually printed it out, along with her own admission details, and pinned them to the wall.

Jennifer had started having driving lessons as soon as she was old enough, and on her seventeenth birthday passed her test. She was a natural-born driver, careful and observant but not overcautious. She had good hand-eye-foot coordination and was skilful at judging speeds and distances. A few months later she attended a defensive driving course the school had organised and received a commendation from the instructor.

Her parents were much relieved they didn't have to worry about her doing anything stupid on the road, thus it was with total disbelief that, in the early hours of Boxing Day, they answered a knock on the door and found two policemen standing there.

Christmas morning had been like any other with various friends and relations calling round. Jennifer's grandparents had been the last to arrive and the family had then moved back indoors for the traditional Christmas lunch.

At the conclusion of the feast the presents were handed out. Jenny and Tim were both pleased with the gifts they'd received, and had both given freely and generously to their parents and grandparents. Her grandfather gave her a long talk about what to expect at university and her grandmother warned her to be very careful around all those boys.

Finally, after more tea was consumed, her grandparents left and she and Tim ran barefoot down to the park where their friends were about to start the traditional Christmas afternoon cricket match.

The game was keenly contested and evenly poised, and it wasn't until almost seven o'clock that the final wicket fell. Tim and Jenny had been on the losing side but they didn't care. It had been a wonderful game with each side rising to the ascendancy more than once only to be pegged back by the opposition. They walked home in high spirits and joined their parents for a light dinner.

The telephone rang just as Jenny was clearing away the dishes. It was Susan wanting her to drive around and watch a movie with a few other friends. Jenny quickly asked her parents if that would be okay, and when

they nodded she gave a startled Tim the dishes she was holding, grabbed her keys and dashed out of the house.

The movie Susan had rented was a well-crafted ghost story and she and her friends had thoroughly enjoyed it. Jenny didn't realise until she was back in her car that it was almost midnight, and hoped her parents weren't waiting up for her.

There was hardly any traffic about. She turned off onto Albany Creek Road and through the township of Albany Creek. The road was still deserted. As she came down onto Pinewood Bridge she saw headlights coming the other way. It was a four-wheel-drive vehicle and seemed to be travelling way too fast for the road. As it closed on her it suddenly veered across in front of her. She instinctively swerved to the left and avoided a collision by mere millimetres.

She started pulling back onto the road but a horn blasted from right behind her. She looked around and saw there was a truck travelling just alongside her. She had no idea where it had come from, but moved back onto the shoulder and then looked forward again. As soon as she did she knew it was too late but in desperation stamped on the brake pedal. All four wheels locked up and the car skidded down the final few metres before clipping the guard rail, spinning around and plunging into the river. Jenny hit her head during the impact and was knocked out. Slowly the car sank into the water.

The truck driver saw what had happened and as soon as he could he turned around and came back over the bridge. By now the car had disappeared but its headlights were still marking its position. He grabbed his phone and as he ran down to the riverbank he called the police and the ambulance.

The calls made, he pulled off his shirt and dashed into the water. He was a strong swimmer and had no trouble getting out to where the car was submerged. He dived down. It was sitting on the bottom in about three metres of water and luckily for him the driver's side window was open. He tried opening the door, but when he realised it was jammed he attempted to pull the girl in the driver's seat out through the window. He was thwarted by her seatbelt, though, and had to surface for air.

After taking a few deep breaths he dived back down. He reached in, grabbed the seat belt and followed it down to the buckle. He made two unsuccessful attempts to release it, but finally on his third attempt it came free. He grabbed the girl, who was luckily quite skinny, and pulled her out through the window.

He dragged her back to the shore and up onto the bank. She wasn't breathing and there was no pulse, but again fate seemed to step in, this time tipping the balance ever so slightly in Jenny's favour, for he'd just recently attended a first aid course and the techniques for applying CPR were fresh in his mind. He worked on her until he heard the sirens approaching and then, almost totally exhausted, handed his patient over to the paramedics.

They continued working on her all the way to the hospital, encouraged by signs she was responding. Upon arrival they wired her up and the young intern began applying all the standard treatments for an advanced drowning victim. A few times her heart began beating of its own accord and he thought he'd won, but then it stopped again and he resumed CPR. He worked on her for over two hours before finally giving in.

He stepped back, wiped his brow, noted the time and officially declared her dead.

Seeing Ghosts

I was ten years old the first time I read Peter's book. He'd just had it published and everyone was talking about it. I wanted so much to read it as it was all about us, but Mum said I was too young and wouldn't be able to understand it.

One night after they'd gone to bed I slipped out into the kitchen for a glass of water. On my way back I happened to notice a copy of the book stuck down the side of the sofa. I pricked my ears up, making sure my parents were still asleep, then grabbed it and tiptoed back to my room. I spent much of the night lying in bed reading it.

I reached the part where Mum, in the other time line, had given birth to baby Peter. I was so happy as it meant somewhere out there, in that other world, I had a brother. I wasn't an only child any more!

I read on to where little three-year-old Peter was playing with the matches. '*Don't do it,*' I thought, '*you'll burn yourself.*' I felt myself tensing up but my eyes kept reading.

The match burned down and suddenly his fingers began to get too hot. He flicked it away and it lodged in the curtains. They flared up, giving off thick black smoke. He backed away but was soon overcome by the fumes. I was stricken with grief but was forced to watch.

Now the bedding was alight. More smoke was billowing out. The smoke alarm was blaring. Julia and Billy came running into the bedroom, coughing. Julia rushed to where Peter was lying on the floor but just as she reached him the blazing curtains fell on her. Billy ran in to try to help but a part of the ceiling collapsed and they were trapped.

Mercifully I found myself outside the house. The fire brigade were pouring water onto the smouldering timbers while the paramedics carried three bodies into the waiting ambulance. A car screeched to a halt opposite the house and Todd came running across the street. He didn't see the taxi,

and the taxi driver was too busy watching the fire brigade to see him. There was a thud. The paramedics put down their burden and rushed over to where he was lying on the road, but the angle of his neck made it clear he'd not survived the impact. They were all gone now.

I threw the book onto the floor as my eyes became heavy with tears. It was a horrible book and I wished Uncle Peter had never written it. I cried and I cried and eventually cried myself to sleep.

I dreamed, and in my dream Dad and Uncle Peter had invented a magic mirror that let us see what was happening in other time lines.

I look in the mirror and see lots of tiny houses. Away in the distance is the sea. I remember that, in the other time line, Mum and Dad live in Brisbane, so that must be what we're looking at. Dad adjusts the controls and we zoom in onto one of the houses. It's a very nice house with a big yard and trees all around. Out the back is a swimming pool with a slippery dip going down into it, and as I watch a boy climbs out of the pool and runs around to the slide. It's my brother Peter! We zoom in closer, and then he looks up and sees me watching him. He smiles and waves, beckoning me to come to him. Without thinking, I run forward and jump through the mirror, landing with a splash in the pool. Peter comes sliding down and then wraps his arms around me.

"Jason, my little brother, you're here at last!" he cries. I'm so happy to be with him.

I look up at the house and see Mum and Dad running out. They look just like my real parents, and I jump out of the pool and run to them. They hug me and kiss me.

"It's so good to have you with us," Mum says. "Our family's now complete, isn't it Billy?"

"It sure is," Dad says, giving me another hug.

Peter comes over and throws a football to me. I catch it and pass it back to him. We run around in the yard throwing the ball back and forth between us, and I'm so happy.

Soon it starts getting dark, and I throw the ball back to him one last time and walk over to my parents.

"It's getting late now. I think it's time I went home."

"But this is your home now, honey," Mum says.

"No it's not," I say, now feeling scared. "You're not real. You were all burnt up when Peter set fire to the house."

"What makes you say that?" Dad asks.

"It was in Uncle Peter's book."

Suddenly there's a puff of grey smoke and the house turns into a pile of blackened rubble. I look up at them, and as I watch their skin starts to frizzle up and fall away. Within seconds they are just blackened skeletons.

"Well if it was in Uncle Peter's book then it must be true," Dad's skeleton says, and they start walking towards me with their arms outstretched.

I woke up. My heart was racing and I was covered in sweat. The reading lamp over my bed was still on, so I turned it off. Darkness filled my room and I immediately knew there were three skeletons hiding in that darkness. I turned the light back on.

Eventually I calmed down enough to pick up the book, then tiptoed out to the living room and put it back on the sofa exactly where I'd found it. It was to be five more years before I looked at that book again, but it wasn't the last time I saw my dead brother.

A few days later I was with Mum in one of the big shops in town. She was looking at some furniture and I happened to glance at a big mirror that was on display. I almost screamed, for in the reflection, standing behind me and grinning, was my brother. I spun around but there was nobody there. Cautiously I turned back to the mirror, but all I could see now was the reflection of a terrified little boy looking back at me.

About a week after that, when I was going to bed I started closing the curtains over my window, but for just a moment I was sure I saw my brother standing outside the house. I flung them shut and, without looking, locked the window.

The nightmares continued as well but I knew they were just dreams and could cope with that. In the worst one the skeletons caught hold of me and started peeling my skin off. I must have screamed out loud because a few seconds after I woke up my parents came running into my room. I told them it was just a bad dream, but I didn't elaborate on its contents. I wanted so much to tell them what was happening, but I knew if I did they'd know I'd been reading Uncle Peter's book and I'd be in serious trouble.

Finally I knew what I had to do. I told Aaron. He was my best friend and thus the fountain of all knowledge. And being a Jedi, too, he'd have to know what to do to make the ghosts go away.

"I know exactly what to do," he said with a broad grin on his face. "The first thing you have to do is make a drawing of your brother, the way he was before he turned into a skeleton."

I was pretty good at drawing so I thought I could do this fairly easily. I found my crayons and, with Aaron watching over my shoulder, proceeded to draw a picture of my brother. It was the best, most accurate drawing I've ever done, either before or since, and after I'd finished it I got scared just looking at it.

"Perfect," he said. "Now fold it up so he can't see you, and follow me."

I followed him down the street and into the forest. I repeatedly asked him where we were going but he wouldn't say. We walked and walked down a narrow track and I was scratched by bushes on both sides. I tripped on roots and rocks and cut my little toe, but Aaron kept going further and further into the bush, his bare Jedi feet knowing the way and avoiding all the obstacles.

Finally we came to a rocky outcrop and he led me around and into a crevice between two boulders.

"Grab as many small sticks as you can find," he said. I hobbled around the edge of the bush, picking up as many as I could carry. Four times he sent me back for more.

When I returned with my final load I saw he was building a house out of them. I sat and watched him intently as he selected each stick, broke it to just the right length, and twisted it in to form the walls.

"Now give me the picture," he said, and I handed it to him still folded up.

He unfolded it and placed it inside the house with the face pointing up. I was sure I could now see a look of fear and apprehension on the image of my brother, and I knew this was going to work. Aaron picked up some more sticks and began putting a roof over the house.

When he was finally finished he stood back and pulled a box of matches from the pocket of his shorts. Looking back on these events, that in itself seemed very odd, since from the moment I told him about my ghosts I'd been with him the whole time and we hadn't gone anywhere near any source of matches.

"You have to be the one to do this," he said, passing the matches to me. I nodded solemnly.

I tried striking a match, but in my nervousness I only succeeded in breaking it in two.

"Steady down," he said softly and placed his arm around my shoulders.

I tried as best I could to calm myself, and struck another match. It lit, and I applied it to the sticks on one corner of the roof. I lit another and set fire to the other side of the house, and put a third in underneath it. The fire slowly took hold, and black smoke, much more smoke than I'd have expected from such a little pile of sticks, rose into the sky.

It swirled around and I watched in horror as it took on the features of my brother. I heard, or thought I heard, a distant scream, and then a gust of wind caught the smoke and blew it all away. I looked down at the house and all that was left was a pile of ashes and a few burning twigs.

“Did you see that?” I whispered to Aaron, who still had his arm around my shoulders.

“Yeah, but he’s gone now, for ever.”

And so it was. I never again saw my brother in reflections or out of windows, and I never had any more bad dreams about him. Aaron’s magic was good and powerful, and I was so glad he was my friend.

* * *

It was three days after my Christmas nightmare when I saw another ghost. I was walking down the road to buy some milk from the corner shop when I happened to notice a barefoot girl in her late teens standing on the other side of the street. I looked towards her but I’d never seen her before, which was odd because I knew just about all the kids of around my age in Narrabri. She was very attractive and I smiled. She glanced up at me with an astonished look on her face and then vanished. Poof, just like that!

I stared into the empty space where she’d been, unable to comprehend what I’d just witnessed. Slowly I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, and then continued walking. I thought I must have been daydreaming, and wished she’d star in a few more of my dreams.

I saw her again a few days later in amongst a crowd of people. A truck went past, blocking my view, and when I looked again she was gone.

The real haunting began when I moved into my room in the college at Brisbane University. I was supposed to be sharing with Aaron but he was away visiting relatives and wouldn’t be arriving until the end of the week.

Dad had come with me on the drive from Narrabri. We shared the driving, but I managed to make sure he was at the wheel whenever we crossed any rivers. We stopped overnight in Goondiwindi, a place we’d visited on previous trips. The journey was largely uneventful, there was little other traffic about and my new car’s performance well and truly lived up to my expectations.

We arrived at the college in the middle of the afternoon and Dad helped me haul my belongings up to my room on the fourth floor. It felt really strange to think this tiny room was going to be my home for at least the next four years. I guess I was feeling homesick already. Once everything was unpacked he took me on a quick tour around the campus, making sure I

knew where the relevant lecture theatres and libraries were. He'd often spoken to me of his time here, and how he'd become friends with Todd and then ultimately his sister Julia, now my mother. I'd also read Todd's book on the subject, and walking around here with Dad I could feel a sense of history in the place. I wondered if in twenty years time I'd be doing a similar thing with a son or daughter of my own.

As the day drew to a close Dad suggested we drive out to the coast for a light dinner. Along the way he told me what it was like for him when he first came to Brisbane.

"I was absolutely terrified. It was the first time I'd ever been more than a couple of hours drive from Narrabri, and there was no-one I knew here. On top of that, my autothermia was at its peak and I was totally incapable of putting on a shirt of any kind. I was sure that from the minute I walked into my first lecture I'd become the laughing stock of the whole university.

"Of course that didn't happen. In any event, I snuck into the theatre just moments before the start of the lecture and found a seat in a corner right at the back where the light was dim. I concentrated intently on the lecturer, not allowing for any possible eye contact with other students, and as soon as it ended I left as quickly as I could. I know now I was being foolish, but like I said, I was terrified.

"The whole of my first year was like that. I guess I started to relax a bit when nobody made the slightest fuss about my shirtlessness, but I still didn't want to risk exposure and ridicule. When I wasn't attending lectures I was usually in the library, either studying or doing my own research into any aspect of physics that might help explain my experience with the multiple time lines. The other students probably thought I was nuts, but as long as they didn't say it to my face I didn't care.

"In second year one of them started sitting next to me. At first I felt very uncomfortable and tried to give him the cold shoulder, but he persevered. Eventually I realised Todd wasn't going to bite me, and that he really wanted to be my friend. After that, as they say, the rest is history."

We arrived at Wynnum and Dad took us to a little seafood restaurant with outdoor seating overlooking the ocean. He said he came here quite often during his student days.

"Billy, so nice to see you again after all these years," said the elderly waiter who had come out to take our order.

"Good to see you too, Simon," Dad said. "I'd like you to meet my son Jason."

We shook hands.

“Of course I’ve heard all about you in all the news,” he said.

We made our selection and Simon went back inside.

“That’s something else I want to talk to you about,” Dad said. “When I came to Brisbane I was an unknown little Aboriginal kid, whereas you may find yourself to be quite the celebrity, particularly amongst the physics students. I’m sure you’re level-headed enough to be able to take it all in your stride, but I just want to make sure you know what to expect. Just now was a good example.”

“Yeah, I know. I wish it wasn’t so, but hopefully once people get to know me they’ll realise I’m just a normal kid.”

“Most will, I’m sure, but be very wary of any persistent hero-worshippers, as they could cause some real trouble.”

“I will,” I said, but I had no real idea of what I’d do if some determined worshipper decided to stalk me. “Anyway, I’ll have Aaron to protect me.”

“Yes, I’m glad Aaron’s going to be with you. There’s a lot more to him than meets the eye, as I’m sure you know.”

I nodded. Just then Simon returned with our meals, and that was the end of our conversation.

We returned to the college, watched a bit of TV and then decided to call it a night. Dad was sleeping on Aaron’s bed, and his plan was to meet some AusScience people tomorrow and then fly back to Narrabri in the afternoon. I turned off my light and quickly drifted off to sleep.

“Jason?”

I was wide awake. That female voice had called my name again. I looked around the room, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Dad was still asleep. I waited, but nothing more happened and eventually I rolled over and drifted back to sleep. The rest of the night passed uneventfully.

The next morning I drove Dad into the city and dropped him off outside the AusScience offices. We hugged each other tightly and then rather awkwardly said our goodbyes. Finally he turned away and walked into the building, while I stood glued to the footpath looking vacantly at the door he’d passed through and out of my daily life forever. My childhood was now officially over, and as an adult I’d have to make my own way through life. I sighed and got back in the car.

I was about to pull out into the traffic when I realised I didn’t know where I was going. Aaron wouldn’t be here for another two and a half days, and I didn’t want to spend all that time just sitting in my room at the college. I pulled out the street map to see if there was anything of interest nearby,

and my eyes settled on the riverside park that was used back in 1988 as the World Expo site. There was something about that place that seemed to stir up an old memory, but I couldn't quite pin it down. I sighed again.

It was about a thirty minute walk from where I was to the park. I took a good look around to make sure I'd be able to find my car again afterwards, and that caused another wave of misery to go through me. If I ever became lost here, there'd be no-one I could call to come and find me.

I set out walking at a brisk pace and my spirits slowly lifted. There were crowds of people, almost all dressed up in their suits ready for another busy day at the office, but none paid any attention to the skinny little Aboriginal boy walking by in board shorts and bare feet. I started to relax a little.

The park was a lot less crowded and I slowed down once I'd passed through the gate. It looked very pretty with the trees alongside the river, and I decided to sit down on a bench for a little while and just soak up the vista.

A mob of mostly barefoot primary school children went running along the path in front of me and set up camp on the area of grass between me and the riverbank. They pulled fruit, biscuits and cake from their little backpacks and began nibbling away. After my meal last night it would be at least two days before I could even think about eating again, and I looked up at the sky and thought, *'why do I have to be so different from everyone else?'*

"Excuse me," said a tiny voice right next to me, and I looked down to see one of the children standing there.

"Are you really Jason Collins?" he asked timidly.

"Yes, I am."

"Oh wow! Can I have your autograph?"

He handed me a notebook and pen, and I scrawled a short greeting with my name underneath it. Before I knew it I was surrounded by kids all pushing forward with paper and pens.

I'd worked my way through about three quarters of them when their teacher walked over to me.

"I'm terribly sorry about all this, Mr Collins. The class has just been on a tour of the science museum where they saw that little ship your father built all those years ago, and then to see you of all people sitting out here, well, you know how it is."

"That's quite all right," I said, smiling. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to this sort of thing now that I'm living in the big smoke."

"Yes, I'd heard you were about to start your studies at the university here. I hope it all goes well for you."

"So do I," I laughed. She laughed as well, and then the remaining children pushed forward to claim their autographs.

After they'd gone I was about to stand up and continue my walk when I heard a voice from right behind me.

"You did well, Jason."

I spun around, but nobody was there.

Aaron's flight from Narrabri was due in at half past four. Not knowing what traffic conditions would be like, I gave myself plenty of time to reach the airport and ended up arriving three hours early. According to the display boards, the flight was on schedule so I slowly made my way to the arrivals lounge.

I'd almost fallen asleep when his plane nosed its way into the gate. The attendant pulled open the door, and then there was an inexorable wait before the first passengers started coming through. There were short ones, tall ones, fat ones and skinny ones, but none of them was Aaron. I hoped there hadn't been any last-minute problem that made him miss his flight, but as more and more non-Aarons kept streaming through I began to drift into panic mode.

At last I saw my barefooted friend walk through the door and then come running towards me. He managed to pull up before bowling me over, and we shook hands. It was as if we hadn't seen each other for years.

"You made it," I said.

"No, I'm actually an impostor."

By the time his baggage came out onto the carousel it was getting on towards six o'clock. I was about ready to eat again so I suggested we drive round to Dad's favourite little restaurant at Wynnum for dinner. Along the way he told me all about his week away and spared me the need to tell him what I'd been doing in Brisbane.

Later that night we were sitting quietly in our room reading when my ghostly stalker suddenly spoke up again.

"Jason?"

"What the hell was that?" Aaron said, spinning around to look in the direction from which the voice had seemed to come.

I was so relieved he'd heard it I jumped up and wrapped my arms around him. I'd started to think maybe I was going crazy, and even though going crazy may well have been a better option than being genuinely haunted, I was overjoyed.

"Settle down, Jase," he managed to say with a puzzled expression on his face.

"You can hear her too!"

"Who is she?"

I sat back down, took a deep breath, and told him the whole story.

“But who is she?” he asked again.

“I have no idea.”

A cold breeze suddenly swirled against my chest. Aaron felt it too, for I saw him pull his stomach in as it touched him.

“Jason?”

“I’m here,” I said, trying not to sound as scared as I felt.

“Help me.”

“How? How can I help you?”

“Find me.”

There was another puff of wind and I knew then that we’d lost contact with her.

“You have to find her,” he said.

“How?”

“Don’t ask me, she’s your ghost.”

He must have sensed my reaction to what he’d just said, for in the blink of an eye he was across the room and sitting beside me with his arm around my shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Jase, I didn’t mean it to come out like that.”

I turned my head towards him and nodded, and that brought a smile back to his face. Then suddenly he was standing up and pacing back and forth while scratching his chin.

“I’ve got it!” he cried, and sat back down again. “You said the first time you heard this girl calling you was on Christmas night, right?”

“Yeah,” I said dubiously.

“And that was just after you had the dream of drowning in the car.”

I nodded. He put his arm around my shoulders again and I could feel his excitement.

“Jase, what I reckon is, *it was her death you saw in the dream, not a premonition of your own.*”

I thought about it for a moment and, yes, it all made sense. I was so relieved I threw my arms around him and almost squeezed him to death.

“Steady down, Jase. You still have to find her.”

“Okay, let’s start searching with Girl+Car+Crash+Water,” he said, and I typed those words into the search engine.

“Damn. Three and a half thousand hits, give or take a few.”

“Okay, let me see. Um, put in Christmas, since it happened on Christmas night.”

“Better, we’re down to 750 hits.”

“I have a hunch. Put in Brisbane as well.”

“Bingo!” I cried, and showed him the news report of the accident. *Christmas Tragedy Strikes Brisbane Family*, the headline read.

The notorious Pinewood Bridge claimed another victim in the early hours of Boxing Day. Seventeen-year-old Jennifer Simpson was driving home from visiting a friend when her car left the road on the approach to the bridge and came to rest in three metres of water in the middle of South Pine River. Stephen Beaumont, a truck driver who witnessed the crash and bravely rescued the girl from her submerged car, said a southbound vehicle had crossed to the wrong side of the road, forcing Ms Simpson onto the shoulder. “She was too close to the bridge and couldn’t get back on the road quickly enough,” Mr Beaumont said. “Her car clipped the guard rail and spun out into the river.” In a further twist to this story, Ms Simpson was rushed to Strathpine Hospital where she was initially pronounced dead, but later her condition was downgraded to critical.

“What does that mean?” Aaron asked after he’d read the last sentence.

“It sounds to me like she might still be alive,” I said hesitantly, “in a coma, perhaps.”

“Or at least she was when that article was written. Do a search on Jennifer Simpson.”

January 3rd: Jennifer Simpson, the seventeen-year-old who stunned the doctors at Strathpine Hospital when she came back from the dead, remains in a deep coma. Her parents are maintaining a bedside vigil, but a spokesman for the hospital said she had little chance of recovery. ‘She’d been in the water for too long and has suffered severe brain damage,’ the spokesman said.

January 15th: The parents of Jennifer Simpson, the girl whose car plunged into South Pine River on Christmas night, today authorised doctors to remove their daughter from life support. A spokesman for the family said it appeared Ms Simpson had suffered massive brain damage in the accident and was clinically brain-dead. In spite of this, she continues to confound the doctors and has so far refused to give up the fight.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“We go and try to see her tomorrow, if she’s still alive. Then you say the magic words, kiss her on the forehead and she wakes up good as gold.”

“Don’t say that, not even in jest.”

“I’m sorry, Jase. You know what it’s like with me, my mouth runs away before I can stop it.”

A Helping Hand

It was eight o'clock the next morning and we were sitting in the college's dining hall. Aaron was eating a hearty breakfast while I was sipping a glass of juice. Watching him eat reminded me yet again of just how different I was to ordinary people, and I began thinking how much harder it must have been for my father, going through all this without any friends for support. While I was ruminating I must have been staring at him, for he suddenly looked up and met my gaze through the wisps of blonde hair that always hung down over his eyes.

"A Jedi needs a good breakfast," he said with a mouthful of toast.

"I wish I could too. Damn this autothermia!"

"Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry, Aaron. It's just from the moment I arrived I've been constantly reminded how different I am from everyone else. In Narrabri everyone knew me and accepted me as I am."

"You're homesick, that's the trouble, and so am I if you really want the truth."

I smiled, then he smiled back, and that was good.

"It wasn't that long ago you were always telling me how great it felt to go for ages without eating anything," he said.

"Yeah, you're right," I replied with a chuckle. "Remember that time we went camping for a week and you were determined to emulate me and eat nothing the whole time?"

"How could I forget? At the start I dumped all the food out of my pack when no-one was looking, so I wouldn't be tempted. For the first three or four days it did feel really great, but then I became so weak you almost had to carry me out. I kept wishing they'd invent an autothermia pill, and dreaming if they did I'd be the first in line to take one."

"Maybe they will," I said, and he looked up at me in anticipation.

We arrived at Strathpine Hospital at about half past nine and stood in line at the front desk.

“How can I help you?” the young lady said as we reached the front of the queue. I took a deep breath.

“I’m enquiring about one of your patients, a Miss Jennifer Simpson,” I said. She keyed the name into the terminal on her desk.

“Still listed as critical, I’m afraid.”

“May we see her?”

“Visitors in that area are restricted. Can I have your names please?”

“Sure. I’m Jason Collins and my friend here is Aaron Smith.”

“You’re not *the* Jason Collins, are you? But of course you must be, since you’re not wearing a shirt. It must be awful for you with that auto-whatsit disease.”

“There’s plenty of things worse,” I said with a forced smile.

“Look, I’m terribly sorry, Mr Collins, but it says here only immediate family members are allowed to see her at this time.”

“That’s okay, I understand,” I said, and we walked off.

“*He’s so cute*,” I heard her say to her co-worker as we were walking out the door, and I cringed.

“What do we do now?” I asked Aaron.

“I suppose we go and talk to the parents.”

“Do we have to?”

“Yes, unless you want to be haunted for the rest of your life.”

“Hey, I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“Everyone reckons we’re inseparable, right?”

“Too right, Jase.”

“Well then, if I’m going to be haunted for the rest of my life then you will be too.”

“That settles it, we’re definitely going to talk to the parents. Right now.”

We pulled up outside the Simpson residence and knocked on the front door.

“I don’t think there’s anyone home,” I said wishfully, but Aaron glared at me.

The door opened and I was looking at a tall middle-aged woman with bags under her eyes so heavy she’d soon be needing a porter. I felt absolutely awful that we were disturbing this woman in her time of grief. How could I possibly tell her I’d been communing with her daughter’s ghost, particularly when said daughter wasn’t even dead yet?

“Mrs Simpson?” I asked.

“Yes, how can I help you?” she said softly.

“My name’s Jason Collins and this is Aaron Smith.”

“Yes, I know who you are, Mr Collins.” I was starting to become very tired of everyone knowing who I was.

“Jason might be able to help your daughter to recover,” Aaron said before I could stop him. “May we come in?”

I expected to have the door slammed in our faces, but instead she invited us in and led us through to the kitchen.

“I was just making a cuppa. Would you like some tea or coffee?”

“A coffee would be nice if it’s no trouble,” Aaron said while making himself at home.

“And you, Mr Collins?”

“A coffee too, yes thanks.”

We sat in silence while she prepared the beverages. Aaron was looking around the room, taking in everything as if he were planning to burgle the place later on. Finally our drinks were ready and she handed us our cups.

“There’s milk and sugar there if you need it. Would you like some cake?”

“Mm, yes please,” Aaron said.

“What about you, Mr Collins?”

“Jason doesn’t eat,” he said before I could reply.

“Ah yes, the autothermia. You and my daughter would get along very well.”

She smiled, but I could tell the smile was forced. I poked Aaron in the ribs and he glared at me. ‘*Let the Jedi handle this,*’ was the thought he burned into my head. I looked him in the eye and he smiled.

“So, Mr Smith, what makes you think your friend here can help Jennifer?”

I was so grateful she had directed this question at him rather than me I immediately forgave his previous remark.

“Six months ago I was badly injured in an accident,” he said, now looking very serious as he pushed his hair back away from his eyes. “I almost died, but Jason called me back. I think he can do the same for your daughter.”

She looked right into him, prompting him to say more.

“Ever since Christmas night, Jason has, um, how do I say it, felt the presence of your daughter’s spirit, and to a degree so have I.”

I glared at him but he ignored me. I expected at this point she’d produce a carving knife and hold us at bay until the police arrived to take us to the funny farm.

“That’s fascinating,” she said as she stood. “Come with me, gentlemen, there’s something I want you to see.”

She led us down the hallway and into what I presumed was her daughter’s bedroom. I looked around, but as I did the world swam from under me and my legs felt as if they were made of soft rubber.

“Are you all right?” I heard her saying.

On all the walls were newspaper cuttings and photographs of me and my family, and across the top above her bed was a banner that read, simply, ‘*For the Love of Jason*’.

“Oh my God,” was all I could say.

“You have a secret admirer, Mr Collins, although had the accident not occurred it wouldn’t have remained a secret for much longer. Jennifer was enrolled in the same classes as you at the university.”

I looked around the room again. There were newspaper cuttings going right back to Dad’s involvement in first contact with the Eridanians, photos of me at all different ages, and even my birth notice from the *Narrabri Times*. On the bookshelf she had copies of *The Course of History*, *The Bane of Eridani* and *Emu and Dodo*.

“I can see you’re embarrassed by all this,” she said, and that would have to have been the understatement of the year. She led us back out into the kitchen.

“I have one more thing to say, and then you can decide what you want to do. You and my daughter have a lot in common, Mr Collins, and when she recovers you’ll find she’s a kind, gentle and highly intelligent person. I hope you may become friends, and it would be wonderful if you did. But on the other hand, if you cannot find a place in your heart for her, all I ask is you be honest with her. In time she’ll come to understand that some things are not to be, no matter how hard we may wish otherwise.”

“You have my word.”

“Now, if you wish, I can take you to see Jennifer and you can try whatever it is your friend thinks you can do.”

I nodded.

Jennifer was lying on her back, surrounded by myriads of electronic gadgets. It reminded me too much of when I first saw Aaron in the hospital, and I recoiled slightly. Aaron pushed me forward against the bed, and then he and Mrs Simpson stood back. I looked down at her face and recognized her immediately from the glimpses I’d caught of her ghost. She was pale and utterly still, and if it weren’t for the beeping of the instruments I’d have thought her to be dead.

I gently took hold of her hands and closed my eyes.

At first I felt a vast, cold and empty darkness, and I was afraid. But then, out of the darkness, I sensed her coming towards me.

“Is that you, Jason?” she called.

“Yes, it is me.”

I saw her fully now, and she was beautiful. Her hair was dark brown, almost black, and her skin was deeply and naturally tanned. She was taller than me, but not by much, and just as skinny. She wrapped herself around me and we became as one.

Before my eyes a montage of her life played out. I saw her diving under a wave on a sunny summer’s day, I saw her running barefoot trying to catch up with a bus she’d just missed, I saw her laughing with her friends over dinner, I saw her sitting quietly reading with her legs tucked up underneath her, and I saw her behind the wheel of her car trying frantically to avoid plunging into the river that was looming up out of the darkness to swallow her.

I felt I’d known her all my life. My love for her blossomed inside me, a tiny bud suddenly bursting into a beautiful flower.

I opened my eyes and kissed her on the forehead. “Sleep now, my love, and when you awaken I’ll be here.”

I released her hands, then turned and walked quickly from the ward. Aaron came running behind me and caught up with me in the lift.

“I need to think,” I said. “Let’s go to the park.”

We went to the riverside park and sat down on the same bench where I’d been swarmed by the school children a few days earlier. We sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Aaron turned to face me.

“So what happened in there?”

I attempted to describe what I’d experienced while I’d been holding her hands.

“Do you really love her?”

“Yes, I think I do. For a moment I saw right into her soul and shared her memories. I know it sounds like a cliché, but I really think we were made for each other.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s all so sudden. If I’d thought about it at all, I suppose I’d have expected to some day meet a woman, go on a few dates, get to know her, and, well, you know, all the usual stuff. This really wasn’t your textbook first date.”

“Is that what’s worrying you?” he asked, moving closer to me.

“Jase, I love you, and I wouldn’t be saying this if I didn’t. You seem to be hung up on how different you are from other people, and that’s so sad. The differences mean nothing, they’re superficial. What’s it matter if you can’t wear a shirt or you can’t eat breakfast? It doesn’t matter to me or any of your other friends, and it won’t matter to her. You’re a beautiful person on the inside, Jase, and that’s what we see and what we care about.”

I looked deeply into his eyes and saw the truth of what he was saying.

“I’m sorry, Aaron. I’ve been behaving like an ogre ever since I got here. I really don’t know how you put up with me.”

“Well, I need someone to practise my Jedi mind tricks on,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulders. “Come on, I’ll get you back to the hospital before she wakes up.”

The woman at the front desk recognised us and waved us through. As we emerged from the lift the first thing I noticed was the curtain had been drawn around Jennifer’s bed and I feared the worst. But then I saw Mrs Simpson and a man I presumed to be her husband and I could tell straight away there was good news. They were talking to one of the doctors, and when he saw us approaching he waved us over to him.

“Mr Collins, I’m glad you’ve returned. I’m Dr Murphy.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Shortly after you left, Jennifer’s EEG monitor started recording an increase in brain activity and over the past hour her condition has steadily improved. Right now she’s in REM sleep, which is a very good sign indeed, and I expect she’ll regain consciousness very soon. To be honest, I’m totally mystified by her recovery, given the degree of brain damage she appeared to have suffered.”

Before I could speak a nurse came from behind the curtain and walked briskly towards us.

“Excuse me, doctor, but the patient is rousing now.”

“Would you mind waiting here for the moment, and I’ll call you in when she’s ready to see you.”

He turned and disappeared behind the curtain. We walked over and joined Jennifer’s parents.

“William, this is Mr Collins, the young man I was telling you about,” Mrs Simpson said to her husband as we approached.

“I’m pleased to meet you in person,” William said. “I guess you know about Jennifer’s little collection.”

I nodded.

“Please call me Jason,” I said. “Oh, and this is my friend Aaron Smith.”

“Pleased to meet you too, Aaron. Are you also studying astronomy?”

“Yes, but after I graduate I want to become a Jedi master.”

“It’s an obsession he has,” I said, “but he’s pretty harmless.”

Aaron grinned at me and I couldn’t help but smile, but before I could say any more the doctor returned.

“Mr and Mrs Simpson, would you follow me please,” he said, and they disappeared behind the curtain. Aaron and I stepped back and waited.

Some time later they came out and walked over to us.

“She’s asking to see you now,” Mrs Simpson said to me. I walked towards the curtain and Aaron started following behind.

“You wait here,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said, with a wicked grin on his face.

I passed behind the curtain and Jennifer turned towards me and smiled. Her head and shoulders were now propped up on a pile of pillows and her previously pale complexion had been replaced by a healthy glow. I walked up to the bed and took her outstretched hand.

“You came for me,” she said, and I nodded.

“You’re looking a whole lot better now,” I said, sounding foolish to myself. I wanted to say something really profound but my mind had gone blank.

“Mum said she showed you my room.”

“Yeah. I hope I can live up to your expectations.”

“You already have.”

I bent over and we kissed, and it was the sweetest moment I’d ever had.

“I’ll come and visit you every day until they let you out, and then maybe when you’re well enough we can go on a date and be like normal people.”

“We’ll never be like normal people,” she said, smiling, “but that would be very nice, thank you.”

I stood there in silence holding her hand for a few more minutes, just looking into her eyes. Then the doctor walked back in and we both looked around.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but we’d like to run a few more tests and then she’d better get some rest.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” I said.

“I can hardly wait,” she said and blew me a kiss. I blew one back to her and then walked away.

The next morning as we arrived at the hospital the woman behind the desk called us over, told me Jennifer had been moved into a normal ward and gave me the room number. This in itself sounded very encouraging.

We entered the ward but the doctor was with her, so we started stepping back out. He saw us and waved us in.

“We got the results of our DNA tests back this morning, and I think I can explain her recovery,” he said. “It turns out she’s mildly autothermic, and it would seem this has led to the spontaneous regeneration of her damaged brain tissue. It looks like you have to try awfully hard to kill an autothermic.”

“I guess that means Jason can expect a long and healthy life,” Aaron said from behind me.

“Oh yes, of course, you’re *the* Jason Collins. Well, I guess you know a lot more about autothermia than I do.”

“I’m still learning.”

“Anyway, you can see by the look of her that she’s fully recovered from her trauma. I’m discharging her today.”

“Hey, that’s great news,” I said as I walked over to her.

“I feel absolutely brand new,” she said as I moved in to kiss her.

“Oh, have you met my friend Aaron yet? He’s also going to be studying astronomy with us, and then he’s going off to become a Jedi master.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Nah, it’s just a lot of hard work, really,” Aaron said.

“Is there anything I can do, like help you to pack or anything?” I asked.

“Well, not really, I didn’t have much in the way of luggage with me when I arrived here. No, just sit down, both of you, and tell me all about Narrabri.”

* * *

It was the first day of lectures and the host of new students were milling around the entrance to the lecture theatre. Aaron and I had agreed to wait for Jennifer outside so we could go in and claim our seats together. We’d been waiting for ten minutes and there was still no sign of her. I was beginning to worry.

“There she is now,” he said, pointing behind me. I turned around and our eyes met.

She looked splendid in a brightly coloured pair of shorts, a bikini top and, of course, bare feet. She ran towards me and I ran towards her and we met half way and embraced.

“Come on, we’d better find a seat before they’re all taken,” I said as we walked back over to where Aaron was standing.

“My father used to sit right in the back corner because he was shy about not being able to wear a shirt, but I think it would be better if we went right down the front.”

Aaron patted me on the back and I smiled at him. I was determined now to follow his advice and no longer hide away from my autothermia.

We entered the theatre together, Aaron and Jennifer on either side of me, and as we walked down the aisle all the other students turned to watch. I heard my name mentioned repeatedly in all the murmurings but paid it no heed. We settled into our seats and I took hold of Jenny’s hand. Aaron looked around, taking stock of all the faces behind us.

A door at the side opened and the lecturer walked in. All heads turned to the front and our studies began.

Promises

Four years later.

“I, Jason Thomas Collins, take thee, Jennifer Elizabeth Simpson, to be my lawful wedded wife, and from this day forward, to honour and to cherish thee, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.”

We had promised our parents we would wait until after finishing our honours' degrees before getting married, and we'd kept that promise. The wedding was held in the riverside park in Brisbane and a big crowd of friends and relatives were in attendance. Aaron, of course, was Best Man, and did a splendid job as MC at the reception. For a moment I thought I caught a glimpse of my brother Peter smiling at me from the back of the crowd, but I may have been mistaken.

Both Jenny and I received First Class Honours and were offered postgraduate scholarships in Astrophysics at Brisbane University. The race will be on to see who gets their doctorate first.

Aaron finished up with a highly commendable Second Class Honours Division One and has accepted a job with AusScience in Sydney. We've been almost inseparable since childhood and it hurts so much to think he'll be leaving soon. We've promised each other to visit as often as we can and to keep in touch by e-mail, but there'll still be a huge hole in my heart when he goes.

Jenny and I have no plans for any children until our studies are completed, but who can tell what the future may bring.

Jason Collins

Postscript

Jenny came home from the university and found me lying on the floor and sobbing like a lost child. When she asked me what was wrong I handed her the newspaper.

Aaron Smith, who had been drinking heavily, died from injuries sustained when he leapt from the roof of the Grand Hotel at Bronte in Sydney's eastern suburbs. Onlookers, who refused to be named, claimed Smith believed himself to be a Jedi Knight. Mr Smith, a former research assistant with AusScience, had lost his job six months ago in the controversial funding cutbacks and was unemployed at the time of his death. He was unmarried, and will be cremated in his home town of Narrabri tomorrow. AusScience Director, Dr Billy Collins, refused to comment.

I'd last seen Aaron eight months ago and he'd been his usual happy self. I simply couldn't understand why he hadn't contacted me when he lost his job, and I'd had no idea any of this had happened.

He had been the most wonderful and loving friend anyone could ever have hoped to have, and I'll grieve for him forever.

Jason

Part Five

Troubled Times

Death and Deceit

News of the death of Aaron Smith stunned me. I was in my office at Narrabri when Billy called to tell me, but I simply couldn't believe it. It was only afterwards, once the initial shock had worn off, I realised it was the circumstances surrounding his death more than anything that had me so puzzled. It just seemed so totally out of character. Certainly the only time I'd ever seen him drink anything alcoholic was at Jason's wedding three years ago, when he'd been forced to consume half a glass of champagne. *A Jedi never drinks*, he'd protested. It just didn't fit.

Jason was devastated. It had been only two weeks since I'd last seen him, when I'd flown to Brisbane and spent the weekend helping him with the draft of a major paper he was working on. It was an excellent piece of work, breaking new ground in the dynamics of supernova. While I was there I asked him how his father was going, but he said that apart from a brief letter some months ago he'd heard nothing from either of his parents since their move to Canberra.

The promotion of Billy to the position of AusScience Director came as a complete surprise to everyone. The former Director, Sean Fitzpatrick, had been very competent and well-liked, but had died suddenly at the age of fifty-seven. At first Billy didn't want the job, but we all convinced him it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and so it was that he and Julia sold their house and moved to Canberra. I was made acting head of the Narrabri Astrophysics Research Centre (it was now far more than just a radio telescope) and, while I'd received heaps of official communications from him, I'd had no personal contact with him since he left. I had assumed he must have been very busy coming to terms with his new job.

One of his first acts as the new Director was to announce the funding cutbacks in astrophysics. He said in his press release that the looming mineral shortage meant greater resources had to be put into assistance for the mining industry, both in better techniques for mineral extraction on Earth and in off-world mining ventures. The move, initiated by the

government, had been widely criticised in the media, and Aaron had been one of its first victims.

I met Jason and Jenny at the airport and drove them back to my house where they'd be staying overnight before attending the funeral tomorrow. Jason looked awful. In the events on Eridani and Genesis he'd been a tower of strength, but I feared this blow might well be too great for him to bear.

Three of his old school friends who were still living in Narrabri called around early in the evening and the four of them went out into the backyard, leaving me alone with Jenny.

"Peter, do you know any more about what happened, other than what was in the newspaper?" she asked as soon as he was out of earshot.

"Not really. Billy called me to break the news, but he was being very tight-lipped. That in itself seemed odd, but then Billy has changed a lot since he took on the Director's job. It's almost like the AusScience bureaucracy has eaten out his soul."

"He never even called Jase. He hasn't said anything, but I think that hurt him almost as much as the loss of Aaron itself."

"That's so sad. He and Billy were always so close."

There was a knock on the door a little after nine the next morning. Jenny and I had been up since dawn, but she said Jason had tossed and turned for most of the night and had only just fallen asleep. The service wasn't until mid afternoon so we were both happy to let him sleep all morning if he wanted to.

There was an Aboriginal man dressed in an expensive-looking suit standing at the front door, and it took quite a few moments for me to realise it was Billy. Perhaps it was his knocking on the door that threw me initially, for in all the years we'd lived as next door neighbours he'd never once knocked. If the door was open he'd just wander in, and if it was closed he'd call out, but he'd never knocked until just now.

"Hello Peter," he said as he offered me his hand. "It's a terrible tragedy, just terrible."

I put my hand on his shoulder and for a moment he flinched, but then he took hold of me and patted me on the back. At that instant a bleary-eyed Jason drifted into the room and stood facing his father.

"I was just doing my job," Billy said softly.

"How could you, Dad?" Jason cried, and then ran out the front door.

"He's just a bit upset, I expect," Billy said, showing no emotion. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I glared at him, then dashed out the door

after Jason. He was still running and was almost at the end of the street. I took off after him, finally catching up with him about two kilometres away.

“I’m not as young or as fit as I used to be,” I said while gasping for breath.

“You’re not too bad for someone your age,” he said and smiled for the first time since he’d arrived.

“What’s happened to Dad?” he asked after I’d caught my breath. “He’s changed so much over the last six months.”

“I honestly don’t know. It’s as if AusScience has reprogrammed him into becoming just another bureaucratic clone. He hardly ever speaks to me now, and when he does there’s never any warmth or friendship in it.”

At that moment a vehicle pulled up alongside us and Matthew Hardcastle came running over.

“Jase, I just heard the news,” he said as he wrapped his arms around him. “I’m so sorry, man, so sorry.”

“Thanks Matt, I appreciate the sympathy,” Jason said as they separated.

“Where’s Billy?” Matthew asked as he turned towards me.

“Back at my place.”

“Good, I need to talk to him.”

“Hello Matthew,” Billy said as we came back into the house.

“Hello Billy. So how’s Canberra treating you?”

“Busy, very busy. I seem to be spending every waking moment working. I only just flew in, and will have to fly straight back out again after the service.”

“Where’s Julia? Is she here?”

“She was feeling unwell and decided not to come,” Billy said, still displaying no emotion.

“I see,” Matthew said, and paused as if pondering what his next move should be.

“What’s wrong with Mum?” Jason cried as he stepped forward towards his father.

“It’s nothing serious, she’s just not feeling well. One of those women’s things, you know.”

“I want to call her, talk to her,” he said, his voice now rising. “What’s her number?”

“She’ll be resting, best not to disturb her right now. I’ll ask her to call you tonight if you like.”

“I want to speak to her now!”

“Well you can’t, son,” Billy said, remaining perfectly calm. “Like I said, she’s not feeling well and can’t be disturbed.”

Jason lifted his head and stared into his father's eyes, but he immediately turned away.

"You're lying!" Jason suddenly cried. "In fact everything is a lie. You're not even my father!"

"Take it easy, son. I know this has all been very hard for you."

"No," said Matthew, softly but firmly. "Jason's right. I don't know who you are, *but you're not Billy Collins.*"

Billy, or whoever he was, attempted to push past him and run for the door, but Matthew grabbed him and threw him against the wall. He spun around and when he was facing us again I saw he had a gun in his hand.

"The four of you, get over in the corner there," he said, now sounding nothing at all like Billy.

We all huddled together and, knowing I'd only have one chance at saving us, I drew them as close to me as I could. I closed my eyes and tried to visualise a three-dimensional picture of a dog with a bone. For a moment I sensed Jason's mind touching mine and together we pushed through. I heard a gunshot but it sounded far away, then opened my eyes and was very much relieved to find the four of us were now standing in an open forest. We were on Eden, Earth's twin across the subspace fold.

Technically we were now trespassing. The entire planet was declared a conservation park soon after its existence had been revealed, and because of the danger of triggering time cusps when travelling to and from Earth, visitations were restricted to tightly-controlled scientific expeditions.

"Could someone please tell me what's happening?" Jenny pleaded.

"That man was an impostor," Matthew said. "Very carefully selected and highly trained, too. I've been doing some probing into legal irregularities within AusScience I stumbled across a few months ago, and the closer I looked the more suspicious I became. It was then I started wondering about Billy. People change, but not as much as he has."

"So where's my real Dad?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. I hope he's still alive, but I honestly don't know."

Jason tensed and motioned us to be quiet. He turned and looked into the forest. For a moment I saw nothing, but then a dark shape appeared from behind a tree.

"Your parents were still alive when I last saw them," Elko said as he walked out into the clearing. Jason ran to him and hugged him tightly.

"Please, come with me," he said, and led us off into the forest.

We climbed onto the ridge and made our way to the cave Billy and I had gone to the first time we'd been here, and where Billy's father had found us.

The cave was quite dark, but as we entered I saw another person sitting right back against the far wall. He stood as we approached and said, “You sure took your time getting here.”

“Aaron!” Jason cried and ran towards him.

With a great deal of effort, Jenny and I eventually managed to prise them apart.

“I guess I owe you guys an explanation,” Aaron said. “I suppose it all started six months ago when Billy was made Director. Strangers began roaming through the corridors at work, anonymous men in dark suits. Then Billy dropped the bombshell and told us all we were out of a job. He called me to break the news, but said not to tell Jase because it would only upset him when he was supposed to be concentrating on his doctorate, and I agreed to that. He said once things settled down he’d make sure he found a position for me elsewhere in AusScience, but that was the last I heard from him.

“Then about a month ago I began hearing rumours that something underhanded was going on in AusScience, and as I was still unemployed I decided to do a bit of discreet snooping. I was astounded at what I found. There were whisperings of secret meetings between Billy and mining company representatives, and the story going around was that mining was about to be approved here on Eden. I knew Billy had been one of the prime instigators in getting Eden declared a conservation reserve and I just couldn’t believe he’d make such an about-face on an issue he was so passionate about. Then someone whispered in my ear that maybe he wasn’t Billy at all, and the more I thought about it the more it all made sense. That was a week ago, which was when Elko found me.”

“I’d been on Genesis helping with preparations for the resettlement of that world,” Elko said, “when I received word from Barrad that his operatives had observed unusual comings and goings on Eden. I was intrigued and decided to come and investigate, and it was then I learnt that Aaron’s probing had been noticed and he would ‘meet with an accident’ in a matter of days. Fortunately I found him before they did, and we decided to stage an accident of our own.”

“At first I wanted nothing to do with Elko’s plan, but he eventually convinced me that if I didn’t go through with it my friends would now be attending my real funeral,” Aaron said, now close to tears. Jason leapt forward and embraced him again, and we let them be.

“What became of Billy?” I asked Elko.

“At first I feared they’d killed him, but then I discovered he and Julia had been spirited away during their move to Canberra and were being held

captive. With the help of Barrad's people I eventually located them. They are here on Eden, in an isolated AusScience outpost a few days' hike from here."

"I suppose that makes us the rescue team then," Jenny said.

"Yes, I guess it does."

"So what are we waiting for?" I asked. "Let's get moving."

"We have about two hours of daylight left, so we should be just about able to make it to our first campsite by then."

The AusScience Conspiracy

We arrived at Elko's campsite just as the light was failing. It was a deep rock overhang, almost a cave, and offered us good shelter from the elements and any prying eyes. The latter became of particular concern when we heard a helicopter passing not too far from where we were and headed in the direction from which we'd come.

Along the way Aaron and Jason had walked side by side whenever there was room, or one behind the other when there wasn't, but they'd walked in silence. I think both were shocked by the ease with which they had gradually drifted apart over the last three years. Perhaps we all begin to take friendships for granted until we're suddenly faced with losing them, and perhaps that was equally true of Billy and me. Thinking back on the last six months, I simply couldn't believe I was so caught up in my work and other activities not to have noticed my best friend had gone missing and had been replaced by an impostor, and yet that was precisely what had happened.

"You're missing Dad, aren't you?" Jason said to me as if reading my thoughts. I nodded, and he reached out and placed a hand on my shoulder. Even in the dim light I could see the heavy tears forming in his eyes and then realised I was crying too.

"Don't worry, we'll get them back safe and sound," Aaron said softly as he placed one arm around my shoulder and the other around Jason's. For a moment I sensed a great feeling of hope, and wondered yet again if there was more to Aaron's Jedi talk than just a childhood fantasy. I looked up at him and he smiled.

"Dinner's ready, if any of you guys want to eat," Matthew called out from the other side of the camp. We disentangled ourselves and walked over to where he, Elko and Jenny had been cooking up a feast. Jenny and Jason embraced, then she whispered something in his ear and he smiled. They sat

down together, hand in hand, while Aaron and I helped Matthew and Elko dish out the food.

I slept fitfully and woke as soon as the sky began to lighten. It was early summer here, as well as at home on Earth, and the nights were only a little over six hours long. The others were still sound asleep but Aaron had already risen and was sitting out on the edge of the cave looking towards the eastern skyline. I walked over and joined him.

“Thanks for helping Jase,” he said softly to me as I sat down alongside him. “That was supposed to have been my job, and I failed.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. You figured out the truth about Billy before any of us did. I still can’t believe the impostor had me totally fooled for all that time.”

“He was very skilful, I’ll grant him that. The conspiracy is well funded and there are some pretty big names involved, from what I’ve heard.”

“Including the Science Minister?”

“Yes, I think so, and maybe even the Prime Minister as well. It’s big.”

“So what do you think our chances are of breaking them out?”

“If I were a betting man I’d say pretty slim. But I’m not, and we do have a pretty good team. I mean, Elko’s a hundred thousand years old and knows a trick or two, Jase managed to defuse a supernova when he was fourteen, and you helped save Eridani.”

“And don’t forget the great Jedi master sitting next to me.”

“The great Jedi master’s so scared I’m surprised you can’t hear his teeth chattering,” he said, and then brushed his hair back over his eyes as if trying to hide from the world.

We’d been walking for about three hours, following the ridgeline, when Jason suddenly stopped. He turned around and cupped his hands over his ears.

“The helicopter’s coming back. Everyone get down.”

We dropped to the ground and tried to hide behind what little cover there was. Unfortunately when we left Earth none of us were expecting to be hiding, and we were all wearing fairly bright clothing. Jason in particular was wearing iridescent yellow board shorts that shone like a beacon.

“Come close to me,” Aaron said as he fumbled around inside his backpack. As soon as we were all huddled around him he pulled out a camouflage net and threw it over us. Jenny whispered something to Jason and he wriggled around, pulled his shorts off and hid them underneath himself.

Seconds later the helicopter swooped low overhead. I could feel the downdraft as it passed and we all held tightly to the netting to stop it from moving or being blown away. I was sure we were going to be spotted, netting or no netting, but it continued on its way and eventually the sound faded away to nothing.

We camped overnight under another rock overhang. We were all pretty tired so once it was dark we bunked down for the night, trying to get as much sleep as we could during the few hours of darkness.

The next two days we walked mostly in silence. There was no further sign of any searchers and gradually our spirits lifted. Finally late on the third day we came within sight of the AusScience outpost, but still had no real idea of how we'd rescue them, assuming they were still there. I was fearful that after our confrontation with Billy's impostor they may have moved their captives elsewhere, or even killed them.

"They're still there," Elko said as he handed me the binoculars. They were in a fenced-off enclosure and sitting under a tree, while a short distance away two armed guards were keeping watch. Billy and Julia both looked gaunt and weary, as one would expect after six months of imprisonment.

"Any ideas?" I asked Elko.

"Stay where you are and place your hands over your heads."

I turned, and from behind us four armed men appeared out of the scrub. We did as we were asked, but it was then I noticed Aaron wasn't with us.

We were escorted into the compound. Billy and Julia were pleased to see us, of course, but it would have been much better had we not become prisoners as well. They had a lot of catching up to do with Jason and Jenny, so Matthew, Elko and I moved away a little.

"This is a fine pickle we're in," Matthew said.

"It could be worse," Elko said.

"Yeah, but not by much. I guess we can't escape by just flipping back to Earth, otherwise Billy would have done that long ago."

"There's another AusScience compound in the same location on Earth, but it's even more heavily guarded than this one. No, whatever we do, it will have to be done on this world."

I wanted desperately to ask him what had become of Aaron, but I thought it unwise to say anything if there was a chance we could be overheard by the guards.

Soon the sky began to darken and we were ushered inside the building where we were given a little food and some water. So far none of the guards

had asked us what we'd been doing, but I expected it wouldn't be long before the interrogations began. After the meal we were moved into a small room and the door was locked behind us.

"Tell me about the guards," Elko said.

"There are six of them here all the time," Billy said, "but their commander's based on Earth and only comes here occasionally. I expect word of your capture is being sent to him right now and we'll most likely get a visit from him soon. He's not a very nice person."

"Hopefully we'll be gone by then," Elko said, and then sat quietly thinking for a few minutes.

"I'm going to leave my body for a short while, so don't be alarmed," he suddenly said.

His eyes closed and then his skin seemed to harden. He didn't turn to stone like Raphus and Dromaius had been when we found them in the cave on Genesis, but he now looked rather like a clothing store mannequin.

We sat in silence for the five minutes Elko's spirit had been roaming, then watched in amazement as his skin softened again and he came back to life.

"What did you find?" Billy asked, but he'd say nothing other than for us to sit tight and take the lead from him.

About half an hour later the silence was broken by a loud thud on the roof, followed quickly by two more. From the sound of it, someone was throwing rocks at the building, and I had a pretty good idea of who that might be. We could hear the guards talking, and then two of them were dispatched to find out what was happening. The barred window of our room faced the gate and we saw them go out armed with guns and powerful flashlights. We could occasionally see flashes of light through the trees as they made their way around the compound.

Suddenly we could hear shouting, and then there was silence. I expected to see them return at any time with Aaron in custody, but we waited and waited and they didn't return. About twenty minutes later another rock hit the building.

Two more guards immediately went running off into the forest as the barrage of rocks intensified. A few minutes later there was more shouting and the rocks stopped again. Then a single gunshot rang out and everything was quiet. Jason, who had been peering excitedly into the forest, was stunned. His jaw dropped, then tears began welling in his eyes and he began to sob. Billy, Julia and Jenny huddled round him and tried comforting him. I couldn't bear thinking about what he was going through, firstly learning his friend had died, then finding him still alive, and now losing him again. I moved away and joined Elko and Matthew who were watching the gate.

Half an hour had passed. Jason remained huddled with Jenny in one corner of the room, his face buried against her shoulder. He'd stopped crying, but the silent despair now enveloping him seemed even worse. I wanted for all the world to be able to do or say something to ease his pain, but could think of nothing that might help.

Billy and Julia had come over to stand next to the window with us while Elko was sitting alone in the other corner with his eyes half closed and an expression of deep concentration on his face. I'd expected the guards to have returned carrying Aaron's body but so far they hadn't.

Suddenly another rock hit the building. Jason leapt up and yelled in triumph, but Elko looked at him sternly and shushed him. There was shouting from outside the room as more rocks rained down, and then the two remaining guards burst in and ordered us outside.

We stood in the floodlit compound while they panned the forest with their flashlights. Every couple of minutes another barrage would strike the building, and then it would go quiet again. I could tell they were getting more and more flustered, but then the rock-throwing stopped and all was quiet for about ten minutes.

Without warning there was a thud as a substantial lump of rock bounced off the head of one of the guards and he dropped to the ground. The other immediately began shooting indiscriminately into the forest while yelling for the rock-thrower to stop. Eventually he ran out of bullets, and that's when Elko leapt at him and pulled him to the ground.

"Grab his weapons!" he yelled, and we pounced.

"Disarm the other one too," he added, and it was just as well as he was starting to come around. At last it was over.

"All clear!" Elko yelled in the direction of the forest, and a few moments later the other four guards, tightly bound with vines, were marched into the compound by Aaron who was holding two of their guns. Elko directed them into the building and locked them in the room we'd been held in, then as soon as the door was secured we ran for the gate, not wanting to wait any longer than absolutely necessary in case reinforcements turned up.

As soon as we were out of sight of the compound we halted. Jason wrapped his arms around Aaron and they danced with joy until tripping over each other's feet and falling to the ground.

"How did you do it?" Jason cried between bouts of laughter.

"Jedi trade secret," Aaron said, and that was all Jason or any of us could ever get out of him.

We found a well-covered area in which to rest for the remainder of the night. Billy, courtesy of his autothermia, didn't seem to be particularly affected by his six months of captivity, at least not physically, but Julia was very weak and our escape had left her looking haggard and exhausted. I'd noticed Jenny and Jason discussing her condition, and got the impression she wanted him to try something.

"I'm afraid," I heard him say, "afraid of failure and afraid of success."

"Honey, what you have is a gift, not a disease," she said. Jason looked up and slowly nodded.

He approached his mother and explained as best he could what he was about to try. She nodded, and as they sat facing each other he took hold of her hands and closed his eyes. Everything was quiet and still. They stayed that way for several minutes, then Julia lay back down and closed her eyes.

"Sleep soundly, Mum, and awake renewed," he whispered, then released her hands and opened his eyes. He stood, wiped his forehead and walked off into the forest. Aaron followed, but when Billy and Jenny started following as well he waved them back.

Half an hour later they returned to the campsite, chattering away about a recent cricket match. Billy started to approach them but Aaron gave him a quick glance as if to say '*not now*', and he sat back down again.

I woke at dawn, surprised to see Julia was already up and about. The change in her was little short of miraculous. Her cheeks were rosy, her hair lustrous and she had a broad smile across her face.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

"Wonderful. I wish I'd known Jason could do that years ago."

Jason himself was still asleep, but Aaron was sitting on a log a short distance away and looking at him with a troubled expression on his face. I walked over and sat down next to him.

"Is something bothering you?" I asked.

"I'm worried about Jase. This power he has, the *healing hands* as he calls it, well I think it's getting stronger, and I fear there may be a dark side to it."

"What do you mean?"

"His power is neither inherently good nor evil. Now Jase, I know, is innately good, and so far he's only used it to help those he loved. But it's always easier to destroy than to build, and if he were to ever use that power against someone, say someone threatening Jenny perhaps, well that would be the beginning of the slippery slope to the dark side and I fear he'd be swallowed whole by it.

"He knows this, and that's why he's so reluctant to use it, or even to discuss it. Jenny and I have sworn to each other we'll do whatever it takes to

protect him from himself, but I fear when the test comes we won't be enough."

"You can count me in as well, although I don't know what I can do."

"Thanks, Peter," he said, now gazing into my eyes like Billy once did when we were camping in the Pilliga. "I don't know the full extent of his power but it seems to require physical contact, so the most important thing you can do is to never let him touch anyone he's angry or upset with."

I nodded, but he continued to gaze into my eyes.

"You're a good man, Peter. May the Force be with you."

That should have sounded silly and corny, but it didn't. Once again I felt sure there was more to Aaron than meets the eye. I'd known him since he was about five or six, when he'd first started hanging around with Jason. Outwardly he'd always been a happy-go-lucky clown, the perfect foil to Jason's more serious nature, but even as a small child I'd sensed something deeper within him, something I'm sure he was aware of but chose to hide with his Jedi antics. Deep undercurrents were stirring, and whatever was coming Jason and Aaron were at its centre.

I looked across at Jason, who was still sleeping peacefully, and felt the fear Aaron had expressed. He looked too small, too vulnerable, too fragile to contain whatever it was that was growing within him, and I shuddered.

We walked in silence. There'd been no sign of pursuit, not even the sound of helicopters or other aircraft anywhere. Elko led us westward but wouldn't say where he was taking us. We'd been steadily climbing all day, and just as the sun was nearly setting we came to the top of the ridge and paused, looking down over the other side. Below us, and stretching out as far as we could see, was a vast arid plain. We carefully descended and reached the beginnings of the plain just as the last light of day was failing.

"We've reached the western plains," Elko said. "On Earth this is all farmland, but here it's mostly desert as the rainfall in this part of Eden is considerably less than in its counterpart. We'll camp here tonight, and should reach our goal by sunset tomorrow."

"And just what is our goal?" Julia asked.

"You'll see soon enough," Elko replied and would say no more. He was still as cryptic as ever, and Julia sighed.

Hidden amongst a rocky outcrop was a cache of food and sleeping mats, and we quickly set up camp and prepared dinner. Elko, for all his silence, had certainly planned our escape route well.

We started walking into the desert as soon as the sun had risen. By mid morning some cloud cover had moved across and made conditions a little

more pleasant, but the ground was still hot under our bare feet. Elko had some sunscreen in his stash and those of us with light skin applied it liberally.

The world here was completely silent, save for the shuffling of our feet on the sandy soil. In places it squeaked as we walked and seemed so loud I thought we'd be easy prey for anyone following us. A couple of times Elko stopped and we'd all stand perfectly still while he scanned the horizon and listened for any sound of pursuit. At other times I'd had the feeling we were being watched and once when I spun around I thought I caught a glimpse of movement some way behind us, but I was so jittery I'm sure I just imagined it.

At noon we paused in the shade of a cluster of boulders for some water and a little food. Julia asked Elko how much further we had to go, but he'd only say it wasn't too far and we should be there by sundown. Soon we were underway again, with Elko, Billy and Julia in the lead. Aaron and Jenny kept close to Jason, as if forming a protective guard, while Matthew and I made up the tail of our procession. We walked in silence.

We came to a dry creek bed and followed it downstream. Ever so gradually the valley deepened and narrowed until we were in a gorge about three or four metres below the surrounding plain. I felt a lot better now we were out of sight.

At a bend in the creek was a pile of boulders where the wall of the gorge had been undercut. Elko stopped and then disappeared behind one of them. We followed him round and it was then I saw the boulder concealed a small opening into a cave. Inside was enough room for us all to stand and we gathered around him in the dim light.

"We need to walk about a hundred metres into the cave, and although it's fairly safe it would probably be a good idea if we all joined hands. Once around the first bend we'll be in total darkness."

We linked up and proceeded cautiously into the interior of the cave. The floor, which was refreshingly cool after the heat of the desert, descended gently before us.

It seemed like we'd walked a lot further than a hundred metres, but finally we rounded another bend and ahead of us was a faint shimmering light. As each of our party passed into the light they too seemed to shimmer and then pass out of sight. I was at the tail end of the line and as I approached the light I could vaguely make out the shapes of the others ahead but it was difficult to see. Finally I passed through and then blinked as I felt momentarily disoriented.

We were in a large well-lit room. Scattered around were a number of lounge chairs and coffee tables, and in one corner a counter separated off what looked to be a small kitchen area.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Elko said as he ambled over to the kitchen. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

We settled into the chairs, relieved at last to be off our feet, and a few moments later the silence was broken by the sound of boiling water. Elko brought out tea, coffee and an assortment of cakes and biscuits, and we dug in.

“Where are we?” Jenny finally asked after we’d all been suitably refreshed. I was wondering the same thing myself.

“This is my home,” he said. “It’s suspended in subspace between Earth and Eden, and is accessible from both via that cave. If you’re all agreeable, we’ll stay here tonight and then decide in the morning what our next move should be. Come, I’ll give you a quick tour of the place.”

Elko’s home was a veritable palace, and I suspected we only saw a very small part of it. There was a great deal of art and sculpture from down through the ages, and occasionally I caught glimpses of other people wandering around. He told us there were many families here, some refugees from Genesis and their descendants, others who had come from other worlds to work and live here. When asked, though, he wouldn’t elaborate on what his ‘work’ consisted of, much to Julia’s dismay.

In one of the rooms was an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and we all took advantage of it to wash away the dust from the desert while Elko went off to attend to other matters. Aaron went totally berserk as soon as he hit the water, dive-bombing everyone and then swimming underwater, grabbing our legs and pulling us under. There was method to his madness though, I realised, for his antics got us all laughing and were the perfect antidote to the tremendous stress we’d been under.

When Elko returned we were all stretched out on the deckchairs except for Aaron and Jason who were still engaged in a water fight in the pool. Jason looked up as he approached and that was his downfall as Aaron leapt at him and pulled him under. He eventually surfaced, spluttering, and conceded defeat.

“When those two have finished trying to empty my pool I’ll take you to the dining room and we can have some dinner,” Elko said. Aaron and Jason grabbed their towels and began drying themselves off, but that soon degenerated into a towel fight. I wondered where they got all their energy from, and then realised I must be getting old.

Elko led us through a maze of corridors and finally into a huge dining room, in the centre of which was an equally huge oak table. As soon as we were seated a procession of helpers brought us wine and a vast quantity of food. I was afraid Aaron might start a food fight with Jason, but it seemed he had left his hi-jinks behind in the pool and was impeccably behaved at the table. I also noticed he was the only one who left his wine glass untouched while the rest of us had several refills and became progressively more relaxed and wobbly-headed.

The after-dinner conversation slowly ebbed and several of us had started yawning when Elko rose and escorted us to our rooms. The two married couples had rooms of their own while Aaron, Matthew and I shared a third. I use the term room in the sense of a five-star hotel room, for within it were three separate bedrooms, an immense bathroom and a well-furnished lounge area. All that was missing was a television set.

As soon as Elko had gone, Matthew said, "I don't understand what's going on. Why are we here?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I'm not complaining."

"Elko knows a lot more about what's been going on than he's letting on. I'm not sure I totally trust him."

"I think you can trust him," Aaron said.

"I'm not sure I can trust you either," Matthew said, now grinning. "How much do you know about all this?"

"A little, but you're right, there's something going on that Elko's hiding from us. Perhaps tomorrow he'll fill us in."

"I certainly hope so. So far I feel I've been little more than baggage."

"Me too," I said.

"No, there's a reason Elko brought you both here," Aaron said, but would say no more on the subject.

At some time during the night I woke. There was someone running down the corridor outside our room and in the distance I could hear voices shouting. Then all was quiet again and I drifted back to sleep.

"What do you think would be the ultimate weapon?"

We were sitting around the table in the dining room, and the normal people (Julia, Aaron and Matthew) were digging into a hearty breakfast. The rest of us with our varying degrees of autothermia made do with fruit juice, coffee or water. Elko's question was unexpected and took us totally by surprise.

"You mean some kind of bomb?" Julia asked.

"Or maybe a tame supernova?" Jason added.

“No, I was thinking of something less destructive but much more effective at getting rid of enemies, before they even knew they were enemies.”

There was a gasp and everyone turned around to look at Billy. He was ashen.

“Time travel,” he whispered. “Travel back in time and stop your enemies from being born. You know then?”

“Yes, I know,” Elko said, and then turned to address the rest of us.

“You all know about time cusps. Peter and Billy lived through their fair share of them when they were younger, and some of you experienced the one I created at the time you were kidnapped on Eridani. But experience has shown that such cusps are inevitably short-lived and sooner or later the original time line takes over again. I guess the holy grail of aggressors over the eons has been to find a way to create a permanent cusp, in other words to rewrite history with indelible ink.

“Billy did a lot of research into time cusps after first contact with the Eridanians, with the intention of trying to predict and prevent them, but he accidentally stumbled across the secret to indelibility.”

“Once I realised what I’d found, I encrypted all my notes and abandoned that line of research,” Billy said, “but it was soon afterwards that Andushin and Barrad became very keen on coercing me into working for them. Did they know?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I suspect they did.”

“To do it you need a pair of planets linked across the subspace fold and with a time-slip between them, and the only such pair of planets known to exist in the galaxy is Earth and Eden.”

“Correct, if you ignore Eridani and its now-defunct twin,” Elko said. “I have reason to believe someone is trying to do precisely that.”

There was total silence. Everyone looked around at each other until finally Elko spoke.

“I have the ability to create cusps, although it’s something I rarely do, but I’m also able to sense their presence. There’s another time line in existence now and it’s growing stronger. The moment of coalition with this one is probably only weeks away and unless we can stop it the world as we know it will change forever.”

He turned to Matthew.

“Matthew, could you come here for a moment? I’d like to touch your mind if you’re agreeable to that.”

Matt nodded and walked over to him. Elko placed his hands on his shoulders and stared into his eyes, but whatever passed between them took only a few moments and then he released him.

“It’s as I thought. Matthew is pivotal to this time cusp and I should have realised that long ago.

“Peter, you recorded the events that took place when he was stabbed by one of the bullies who were tormenting him when you were children. What were the words the other bully used immediately afterwards?”

I thought about it for a moment and then said, “He yelled ‘*You idiot!*’, and then they both turned to dust and Matthew became unstabbed.”

“He yelled ‘*you idiot*’. Don’t you see? The bullies knew if Matthew died the time line they were in would cease. That time line was the first unsuccessful attempt by our enemy to change the course of history.”

“It was only a few moments later the whole time line Peter and I had been sharing collapsed, and after that Peter had never come to Narrabri,” Billy said and I nodded in agreement.

“This is my theory,” Elko said, “and only last night Barrad confirmed many of the details for me. In 1986 a group of his operatives attempted to make contact with Tom Collins and the team of SETI researchers. Their intention was to pave the way for a takeover of the planet, but they were thwarted at the last moment by an Eridanian customs patrol. Except in another time line, the one in which Tom Collins went missing and Peter came to Narrabri, that patrol ship crashed and didn’t make the intercept.

“In that time line, things started going wrong for Barrad’s people almost straight away. There was the unfortunate death of a research assistant that cast suspicion towards them and then Tom’s disappearance sent them underground for several years. They had no way of contacting their people, but eventually came up with a plan. Two of them, dressed as high school seniors, started turning up at Matthew’s school during the lunch hour and bullying him. The idea was that, after this had gone on for a few months, one of them would confront Matthew’s father, who was head of security at the telescope, and offer to stop the bullying if they were given access to the facilities. The plan may or may not have worked, but it backfired on them when one of the bullies, in a fit of rage, fatally stabbed Matthew. In the end their attempt failed. That time line ceased, replaced momentarily by an unstable one in which Peter was still in Narrabri but Matthew was unbullied, but then it too collapsed and the original time line resumed.”

“So now they’re trying again?” Matthew asked.

“Yes.”

“But aren’t all Barrad’s people now on our side?” I asked.

“Most are, but not all. The original group involved in the failed takeover of Earth remain renegades and their whereabouts is unknown.

“We come now to the recent abduction of Billy and Julia, and Billy’s replacement with an impostor. I’m pretty sure the whole purpose of that was

for the impostor to gain access to Billy's research. All that stuff about deals with mining companies was a smokescreen to divert anyone who became suspicious. I believe they found what they were looking for and last night made their move. Their new time line is getting stronger by the minute."

"Then they've already succeeded," Billy said.

"Not quite."

"What's your plan?" Aaron asked.

"Some of you will have to go into that time line and, once there, take out their leader. They'll probably have a device similar to that used by Andushin to create cusps, and if so you'll need to destroy that as well. If you succeed the cusp will terminate and you'll be returned here."

"And if we fail?" Billy asked.

"Then you, and the rest of the galaxy, will be forever trapped in their new time line. But you won't be going, Billy."

"Why not?"

"Because in their new time line you and Julia are already dead. You were murdered three days ago."

"What about the rest of us?" Aaron asked.

"The rest of you are still alive and, by a stroke of good fortune, all living together in Narrabri. When you go back, you'll have all your memories of that new time line plus an awareness of your task. I don't have the strength to give you any more than that."

"What if some of us don't want to go?" I asked.

"That's fine, but the more who go over the greater your chances of success."

"I'll go," said Aaron.

"Me too," said Jason.

"And me," said Jennifer.

"Count me in," said Matthew.

"I guess it's unanimous," I said.

"When do we go?" Aaron asked.

"The sooner the better," Elko said.

So, after saying our farewells to Billy and Julia, the rest of us joined hands in a circle with Elko, and as he closed his eyes the room around us shimmered and disappeared.

The Empress

The murder of Billy and Julia had been the last straw, and the time had come to act.

The troubles had started some three years ago when, simultaneously across the world, governments were overthrown by heavily-armed militia. In every case the uprising had been led by a government member, and in Australia's case that had been science minister Rebecca Gosling. She had now become the self-styled Empress of Australia, and together with the Emperors and Empresses of North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa, they had taken complete control of the planet within a matter of a few weeks.

For the first year or so everyday life was largely unchanged. There were some people who'd lost their jobs and rumours of others who had disappeared, but by and large most of us were unaffected. But behind the scenes a large scale militia recruitment campaign was going on, and about a year ago they were unleashed onto the streets to 'keep the peace'. The regular police forces were either absorbed into the militia or disbanded, and the control over our lives was gradually tightened. Firstly shopping hours became more and more restricted, then night time curfews were imposed, and finally the process of 'managed employment', whereby individuals were assigned jobs by the government, was introduced.

Soon after the uprising Billy and I left AusScience and went to live on the farm with his parents, and a few weeks later Jason and Jenny joined us as well. Tom and Sarah had been complaining for ages that the farm was getting too big for them to manage so they welcomed us with open arms. We'd hoped that by being out on the land and away from the limelight we might have passed unnoticed by the militia, but sadly that belief was to be proven horribly wrong.

It began innocently enough with a phone call from the new manager at the Narrabri Astrophysics Research Centre asking Billy if he'd mind coming in to help out with a problem they were having. The 'helping out' turned out to be a seven hour interrogation. When Billy arrived back at eight o'clock he was terrified, and he and Julia immediately packed what they needed into their car and departed. He said for our own safety it would be best if they didn't tell us where they were going, and in fact conceded they had no real idea themselves, other than 'far away'.

A few hours later two militia officers were at the door, but they weren't looking for Billy. They'd found him, or what remained of him. They told us his car had hit a tree and burst into flames, incinerating both him and Julia, however they left us in no doubt they'd been murdered.

Matthew, who had been heavily involved in the 'Greens' political party for some years, had by default become a member of the underground resistance following the uprising, using his legal talents and contacts to ferret out information. Under cover of darkness he'd come to the farm via the back paddock and had arrived just as Sarah was serving dinner. We were very much relieved he'd reached us unscathed, and apparently undetected.

We'd just begun to eat when there was a knock on the door. Fearing it to be another visit from the militia, Tom told me to take Matt down into the cellar while he got rid of them. We made our way quickly down, securing the door behind us, and I led him through the maze of wine racks, bookshelves, work benches and farm machinery that made up the more visible part of Tom's cellar. In the far corner, behind a rusting tractor engine and a pile of old newspapers, was a carefully concealed trapdoor and we crawled through there and down a ladder into what Tom called his priest-hole. As soon as we reached the ground we pulled the ladder away and moved around the corner out of sight of anyone who might find the door and look down. We waited in total darkness.

A few minutes later a green light on the wall flashed four times, Tom's signal that all was clear. When we returned to the dining room I saw Sarah was setting another place, and then a hand fell on my shoulder.

"It's been a long time, Peter," the voice behind me said.

"Aaron!" I exclaimed as I turned around and saw who it was. "It sure has. Are you up here for good or just visiting?"

"I don't know yet."

"Sit down and dig in," Tom said, "and after dinner we can talk about where we go from here."

The food was excellent and the wine plentiful, although Aaron as always abstained from the latter. He'd developed a passion for grape juice, he explained, and had brought along ample stocks along with him. There was some distant echo in my mind relating to Aaron and alcohol, but I couldn't quite bring it to the surface. It was enough to make me shudder, though, which he of course observed through the veil of blonde hair that perpetually covered his eyes. He gave me one of his knowing Jedi looks that always spooked me out, and I shuddered again. I liked him, but sometimes he really scared me.

When coffee was served we adjourned to the living room. Aaron and Jason made themselves comfortable on the floor while the rest of us adopted the more conventional line of occupying the lounge chairs. Tom stood and straightened his shirt as he always did before making a speech.

"The time has come to make a stand. For far too long we've let the militia, and those behind them, walk all over us. It's too late now to save Billy and Julia, but maybe it's not too late to save others, even ourselves. Matthew here has connections with the underground, and I'm going to advocate tonight that we join with them and do whatever we can to bring an end to this abomination that calls herself Empress."

"That's tough talk, Granddad," Jason said, "but do you have anything in particular in mind that we can do to get rid of her?"

"As a matter of fact I do. Matthew says his people can lead us into the palace through a disused service entrance. Once inside, there's an air conditioning shaft that will take us directly into what used to be the parliamentary cabinet room, and which is now her throne room. Once there we use our secret weapon."

"And what's that?" Jason asked.

"Why, it's you and Aaron of course. Aaron has, well, a remarkable power of persuasion he can put to good use in diverting the guards."

"I don't like the sound of this," Aaron said.

"And you, Jason," Tom continued, ignoring him, "your *healing hands* gift, as you call it, I'm sure works the other way as well. You'll use your *hurting hands* to dispense with our beloved Empress."

"Are you mad? No way! I refuse to even think about it! Absolutely not! I've sworn never to use my gift in that way. Count me out. Absolutely. Game over. Forget it. Um, what do you reckon, Aaron, would it work?"

Aaron turned white, but he stood and seemed to grow in stature. The room became so quiet the sound of a pin dropping would have been deafening. He brushed his hair away from his eyes and they almost seemed to glow with a bluish light.

“There are forces at work here that even I do not understand. There’s more than one time line in existence now and it’s by no means clear which will become the future. We have a part to play in determining that.

“Jason has a gift,” he continued, his voice dropping even lower. “I’ve counselled him never to use that gift in anger, and especially never to use it to destroy life, for down that path lies darkness. My counsel would be unchanged, even though the Empress is evil beyond doubt, save for one fact.

“Matthew, I want you to think back to your childhood, to a time when you were being bullied by two older boys at school. Do you remember that?”

“How could I forget? I was fourteen then, and those two turned up at the school and started harassing me. They’d trip me up in the playground, steal my lunch, and were constantly threatening to kill me. I was terrified. Then all of a sudden they stopped. I never saw them again.”

“They were using you to get to your father. They were aliens, you see, and they needed to gain access to the radio telescope to contact their people. That was the beginning of what we are now enduring, and it’s where this whole damn time line went wrong.”

He paused for a moment to let this sink in.

“Rebecca Gosling is a renegade Eridanian. She and her associates slowly but surely infiltrated every single government on the planet. It took them over thirty years, but it was all meticulously planned. And it worked, this time, for she tried once before and failed, in a different time line. She has bent the course of history, and only by killing her can we return it to its proper course.”

With that he blushed, grinned and sat down. We all stared at him but he would say no more.

“Are you with us, Jason?” Tom finally asked. Jason looked across at Aaron who nodded ever so slightly, then at Jennifer who shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m afraid, terribly afraid of what I might unleash if I do as you ask. The power within me is strong and getting stronger. Perhaps that’s how it’s meant to be, and I’m destined to perform this task. But what I fear most is if I kill the Empress I may become the new Emperor and in my reign of terror destroy all that I have loved. Would you have me take that risk?”

“We have no choice,” Jennifer said. “If I understand Aaron correctly, if we succeed history will revert to its former course and this time line will disappear. If that’s true, your fears will come to naught.”

He looked at Aaron who nodded again.

“Very well, I’ll do my part, but if we succeed and this time line persists, promise me you’ll kill me if I become snared by the darkness within me. Don’t let me take her place.”

“I promise,” Aaron said softly, but I wondered if, should the need arise, he’d be able to keep that promise, and I shuddered.

* * *

Matthew led us out through the back paddock to a narrow dirt road. We walked in silence, our way lit only by starlight on this clear, moonless night. We were all barefoot. Aaron said it was important none of us wear shoes, though he couldn’t say why.

At the sound of an approaching vehicle Matthew moved us off the road, and as the car came within sight it slowed. There was loud music playing from within and this must have been a signal to him for he dashed out and waved it down. Tom, Julia and Jennifer were ushered into it, and he said there’d be another one along shortly for the rest of us. Sure enough, about half an hour later another vehicle approached and, once the signal had been given, we climbed on board.

We were driven through the countryside for over an hour before turning off the road and pulling up outside an old abandoned farmhouse. As soon as we were out of the car it was secured out of sight in a shed and we were escorted into the building and down to the cellar. There we were introduced to Phillip, the leader of the squad, and then shown to our stretchers where we could get a little sleep ahead of what was going to be a busy day.

I was woken by Matthew and he took me upstairs where we were introduced to the underground members who would be taking us to Canberra. We’d be travelling in a truck under the guise of fruit-pickers, and Phillip had false ID papers ready for us.

We avoided the main highways as much as possible and it was well after dark when we arrived at the city checkpoints. The militia manning the gates gave our documents a cursory glance and waved us through. So far so good. We drove on through the suburbs, finally pulling in at an old rundown hotel. After dinner we adjourned to our rooms where we were given our final briefing for the night’s operation.

We walked from the hotel to the palace precinct, as we didn’t want to risk having our vehicle challenged. The night was cold and a thick fog had descended on the city, for which we were extremely grateful. Our entrance to the building was via a maintenance shed on the perimeter and we reached

it without incident. Phillip produced a key and inserted it into the lock. If this didn't work we would be defeated before we'd even begun.

The door opened and we quickly slipped inside. In the dim light coming in through the one high window I could make out a lawnmower, a wheelbarrow and other assorted gardening tools. Phillip quickly moved the wheelbarrow aside and pulled open the trapdoor concealed beneath it. A ladder led down about four metres to a narrow passageway, and once we were all down and the trapdoor closed Phillip turned on his small flashlight and led us forward into the bowels of the palace.

The passageway eventually took us into a disused boiler room. From the centre a shaft led up through the core of the building, and a metal ladder along one side provided our access into the services closet next to the Empress's reception area. There we made ourselves as comfortable as possible and waited out the remainder of the night. I nodded off a few times but couldn't stay asleep for long.

After what seemed an eternity we finally heard voices coming from the other side of the door as the clerks readied the throne room for the day's formalities. We continued waiting until at long last we heard the unmistakable voice of the Empress. She was discussing her schedule of appointments with her assistant, and we readied ourselves to pounce as soon as she left the room and entered her office.

Tom pushed open the closet door and we stepped forward. The four armed guards immediately pointed their weapons at us, but Aaron raised his hands and spoke in a deep and commanding voice.

"We're friends of the Empress and must see her. Let us pass."

"Let them pass," one of the guards said, and another opened the door for us as we marched into the throne room. The Empress stood up and backed away from her throne, at first seeming genuinely alarmed, but then she smiled. The guard nodded and closed the door behind us.

"Tom, so nice of you to drop in, but we would have preferred it had you made an appointment."

"I'm sorry, Rebecca, but you know me, I hate red tape."

"We see you brought the whole family with you. Jason, we know you of course, and Dr Thorpe, a pleasure as always. Perhaps you could introduce us to the others."

She was obviously playing with us, trying to assess what sort of threat we represented. I was sure had any of us made a move to draw a weapon we'd have been dead in an instant.

"You killed my parents," Jason snarled and began moving forward.

"Now what on Earth would make you think we'd do a thing like that?" she said, sounding genuinely shocked. "Billy and Julia were always counted

amongst our closest friends, you know that, and we were shocked to hear they'd been involved in such a tragic accident. A terrible shock, yes indeed. Jason, you have our deepest sympathies."

She reached out for him and took hold of his hands. He closed his eyes and a moment later she grimaced in pain and tried breaking away from him. He held tightly to her, though, and forced her down onto the floor. She gasped for air, shuddered and then collapsed. Tom rushed over and checked her pulse.

"She's dead."

We all stood there, looking around at each other, unsure of what to do next. It had all been too easy.

"Something's wrong," Aaron said. "This time line should have ended."

"Maybe she had one of those Eridanian orbs," Tom said. "Quickly, search the room, it will be close at hand."

I opened what I presumed was a drinks' cabinet in the corner, and inside was a glowing sphere.

"Is this it?" I asked, holding the object up.

"That's it. Destroy it, Peter."

"No, wait," Jason said, and we all turned towards him. "Why should we end this time line and face a whole lot of new uncertainties? We can take control here, undo the evil she has wrought and bring a new era of peace and happiness to the world. With the orb we have absolute power."

"And absolute power corrupts absolutely," Aaron said softly but firmly. "Destroy it, Peter."

"No, give it to me," Jason commanded, and I began moving unwillingly towards him.

"Stop it, Jason," Aaron cried and leapt at him, but Jason grabbed hold of him and he screamed in pain.

"You can't stop me, Jedi," Jason snarled, and threw him to the floor. Aaron gasped once, a look of total bewilderment on his face, then his eyes glazed over and he died. Before anyone could react the door opened and the Empress's assistant stepped in. She saw what had transpired and opened her mouth to call out.

"Make no sound, and close the door quickly," Jason commanded and she obeyed instantly. "I am your new Emperor now." She knelt on the floor and bowed her head.

"Your will, my lord," she said.

For a moment his attention was focused away from me and I recovered my self control. I hurled the orb at the wall and it shattered in a shower of sparks.

“NO!” Jason cried and leapt at me, but before he reached me his skin hardened and cracked, and he turned to dust. I looked around as all the others crumbled away as well. The sparks from the shattered orb flew all around me and then the world turned to grey.

Far away I could hear voices singing what sounded like a hymn, and realised I was singing too. It was the 23rd Psalm. Then the world solidified around me and I found myself amongst the congregation in a small chapel.

Time's Orphan

“Jason, who was Aaron’s best friend, would now like to say a few words,” the priest said at the conclusion of the hymn, and Jason walked slowly to the front of the chapel and stood alongside the coffin.

“Thank you all so much for coming. Most people who didn’t know him well probably saw Aaron as a good-natured clown, and if they caught him in one of his Jedi moments they’d have thought he was a few sandwiches short of a picnic too. But he could always bring a smile to anyone’s face, even in the darkest of times, and beneath all his kidding around there beat a heart of gold.

“I first met him in kindergarten where we latched onto each other right from the very first day. We played together, we studied together, we went off exploring in the forest together. In our early teens we both joined the cricket club and he quickly developed a prowess with the bat. I remember a newspaper reporter describing him as the next Allan Border, but the driver who ran into his bicycle and badly messed up his arm put an end to any sporting career he may have had. Aaron, though, took it all in his stride and never let it get him down.”

He snuffled and wiped a tear from his eye.

“But he had a weakness, a weakness only his closest friends were truly aware of. It began innocently enough during our first year at university. If we had a free afternoon we’d occasionally go to one of the nearby hotels for lunch and to down a few ales. The more he drank the funnier he became, and I really believe it was nothing more than his desire to make people laugh that ultimately led him into alcoholism. I blame myself for not realising something was wrong sooner, but perhaps even then it might have been too late. I don’t know what happened down in Sydney that led him to the roof of that hotel, I don’t know what made him think he could leap off and fly away, and I really don’t think I want to know. I’d rather remember him as

the faithful friend who was always there when I needed help, to cheer me up when I was feeling low, and to pull me back onto the straight and narrow when I strayed. Aaron, if ever there was a time I needed you, it is now.”

He put his hands over his face and slowly made his way back to his seat. This couldn't be happening. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. I leapt to my feet and pushed my way towards the front.

“No, it's all a mistake! Aaron's not dead! Look in the coffin and see for yourself. He's not in there!”

I reached the coffin and tried to start unlatching the lid, but half a dozen hands took hold of me and pulled me away.

“No, he's not dead! Look in the coffin, look!”

“Peter, what's wrong with you?” said a voice from behind me. I turned around and it was Billy, only then I remembered he'd been kidnapped, which meant this must be the impostor.

“Get away from me! You're not Billy, you're an impostor!”

“He's delirious, better call an ambulance,” I heard someone else say, and then the three people holding me pulled me to the ground.

“Let go of me! That's not Billy Collins, it's one of Gosling's men!”

“Gosling? You mean Rebecca Gosling, the science minister?” the impostor asked.

“Yes, but she's an alien, one of Barrad's renegades!”

The impostor slowly shook his head. “I'm afraid he's lost it big time. Where's that ambulance?”

“No, listen to me! It's all a plot to take over the Earth. Can't you see? Can't any of you see? HE'S NOT BILLY COLLINS!!”

At that moment I felt a sharp jab of pain in my arm and snapped around to see a paramedic withdrawing the huge syringe he'd just emptied into me. The world faded.

* * *

I drifted back to consciousness. I was in a hospital bed, and looking down on me were Jason, Jennifer, Billy and Julia.

“How are you feeling, Peter?” Billy asked softly. I looked closely at him and then at the other three, and realised this was the real Billy.

“Relieved to see you here and not that impostor.”

“There was no impostor,” Billy said.

“But there was. Matthew exposed him. You were there, Jason, tell him what happened.”

“Matthew?” Billy asked with a puzzled look on his face.

“Matthew Hardcastle. He uncovered the plot.”

“Matthew died when we were fourteen, Peter. He was stabbed outside the library. Surely you remember?”

The world turned grey again and I must have passed out, for when I opened my eyes they were gone and I was alone in the room. This was all too crazy.

A week later I was back in my home. At least superficially it looked like my home, but the closer I looked the stranger it was. There were books on my bookshelf I didn't own, CDs in my music collection I'd never bought, even food in the refrigerator I didn't like.

The doctors said I had dormant schizophrenia, brought out by the trauma of Aaron's death. Most of my life, most of what I remembered, wasn't real, or so I was told. There was no subspace, no Eridanians, no Genesis or Eden. We were a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century but were still driving petrol-driven cars and burning coal to make electricity. Billy and I worked together at the Narrabri radio telescope, that much was real, but our jobs involved nothing more exciting than cataloguing stars and galaxies.

With the help of Billy and my parents I managed to piece together what my life had really been like. Up until the age of fourteen I'd lived in Brisbane and everything was as I remembered it. Then Dad had received a temporary posting to Narrabri to replace Billy's father who was on overseas study leave. Billy, Matthew and I all attended Narrabri High School (there was no private school that encouraged bare feet, much to my dismay), but Matthew was being bullied by two older boys and in July of that year was fatally stabbed by one of them. The bullies were arrested and sent to prison. Soon after that Dad was transferred to a permanent posting in Sydney where I spent the rest of my childhood. Again my time at high school and then at Sydney University was pretty much as I remembered it, except my doctoral thesis on dark matter only talked about dust clouds and supermassive subatomic particles and made no mention of Hodgeman hyperspaces or anything to do with subspace.

Upon completion of my doctorate I'd applied for a position at AusScience and was made Assistant Astronomer at the Narrabri radio telescope. It was there I met Billy again as he'd received a similar posting a few months earlier. We filled our days mapping the radio sky and our weekends with frequent bushwalks.

I still had absolutely no recollection of any of this, but in the end had no choice but to accept it was true. The doctors assured me that in time, and with the help of the medication they'd given me, my memories would return and usurp the fantasy world I'd created. I wasn't sure I really wanted this to happen, though.

The months slipped by. As part of my therapy I wrote down all I could remember of my fantasies, making it into a work of science fiction I called *'Barefoot Times'*, but I still wondered if there really was an inhabited planet called Eridani, and whether it had now lost its atmosphere through a hole across subspace. I wondered too if Earth did have a twin on the opposite side of the galaxy, and if there was a mansion suspended in subspace between the two worlds and inside that an old man who would someday rescue me, but even as I thought about it I realised how stupid it all sounded.

“So we all went barefoot over there and Jason and I had this autothermia thing that prevented us from wearing shirts,” Billy said after reading my story. “Quite bizarre, when you think about it.”

I'd observed that he and his family almost always wore jeans and sneakers now, and in my extensive photo collection there was rarely a bare foot to be seen, even on me. When I'd inspected my closet after being released from hospital I'd found no less than ten pairs of shoes, two suits and three pairs of jeans, but no board shorts. It was very depressing.

“Do you think there really could be such a thing as subspace?” I asked Billy.

“No, if there was it would have been discovered by now.”

He was probably right, but even so I yearned for that other universe in which I'd seemingly lived much of my life.

I'd been back at work for a few weeks. The stuff I was doing was mind-numbingly boring compared to my fantasy life, but it was probably the perfect tonic for me. There were observations to make, data to analyse and equipment to maintain, all routine but requiring my constant attention. But then Billy said something that threw me into even deeper confusion.

He called me into his office one morning and showed me what he'd observed on a star he'd been monitoring.

“You wrote in your story that there was a star in the Pleiades cluster about to go supernova, so I thought I'd do a bit of snooping and here's what I found,” he said as I was pouring through the data.

“It's going to blow, isn't it?” I whispered, not knowing now what to believe.

“I think so, sometime in the next thousand years I reckon, but we should be able to narrow it down a lot closer as we accumulate more readings.”

“If you ask me, we'll see it blow in about 390 years.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Well, the Pleiades is four hundred light years away and if I’m right that thing would have gone off ten years ago.”

“Fascinating,” he said, sounding just like a certain pointy-eared character from *Star Trek*. “I guess we’ll find out how close you are as more data comes in.”

“The radiation burst when it gets here will pretty much wipe out all life on this planet.”

“Well, if you’re right with the date we’ll be long gone by then.”

A week later he came up to me with another pile of printouts.

“Four hundred years plus or minus fifty,” he said without any further comment and continued on his way.

I woke to the sound of a ringing telephone, and when I answered it Jason was on the other end of the line. He had some wonderful news to tell me. Jenny was pregnant. I was so happy for them and promised I’d come and visit them in Brisbane as soon as I could. For the first time I felt I was really living in this universe, and smiled to myself.

Eight months later Mark Collins came into the world and was declared fit and healthy by the doctors. It had been an easy birth for Jenny too and she looked a picture of health as she nursed the baby. Billy and Julia were beside themselves at becoming grandparents, and that came as quite a shock to me as I was only one day younger than Billy.

Two years later I was visiting Jason and Jenny in Brisbane. It was in the middle of what used to be called winter before global warming made a mockery of such terms, but the day was unusually cold. Jason beckoned me over to the window and I observed Mark playing naked in the backyard.

“In that story you wrote you talked about a condition called autothermia.”

I nodded.

“Well, I think Mark may have it. He goes bananas whenever we try to put anything more than a nappy on him, and look at him now, totally unfazed by the cold wind out there.”

“Is he a big eater?”

“Like a sparrow.”

I nodded again.

“You don’t think any of that stuff could really be true, do you?” Jenny asked.

“Once upon a time it was, and sometimes I wish it still was.”

As Mark grew older his autothermia became more apparent, at least to me. The doctors had all sorts of wild theories but couldn't offer any specific diagnosis or suggest any treatment or cure. His school agreed willingly enough to allow him to unbutton his shirt or take it off if he got too hot, and as shoes were optional in Queensland schools his insistence on keeping his feet bare went almost unnoticed. In many respects he was very much like Jason had been in another version of reality I'd once known.

For his twelfth birthday his parents gave him a copy of my story. He was totally enthralled with my version of reality and was constantly asking me questions about it. He said more than once that maybe he really belonged in that reality instead of this one and I laughed, but deep inside I wondered if there might have been some truth in that.

But the years rolled by and I lost all hope of ever returning to that other reality. Maybe the doctors had been right all along and it was just a figment of my imagination. Either way, I was happy with my life here, or so I thought.

Journey's End

I was woken by a persistent knocking on the door and staggered out of bed, my mouth dry and my head aching. Billy and I had celebrated our 70th birthdays the night before, and I feared we may have celebrated a bit too well.

Since retiring from AusScience ten years ago I'd busied myself in the Narrabri Ecological Society and was currently president. The greenhouse problem was continuing to worsen and much of the state west of the Great Dividing Range was now desert. Even though much progress had been made in the development of ecologically-sustainable energy sources and carbon dioxide emissions were coming down, it really was a case of too little too late. But with the Pleiades supernova due to hit us in a bit under four hundred years it probably didn't matter much any more if we wrecked the planet. Sometimes I wished the radiation from that explosion would just get here now and save us all the bother.

I eventually made it to the door and when I opened it Mark Collins was standing there, barefoot and shirtless as always and with a big grin plastered across his face.

"Good morning, Peter. I hope I didn't wake you."

I grunted, and then noticed he had a stack of topographic maps in his hand. My curiosity was aroused and my hangover receded a little.

Mark was seventeen now and was considerably taller than his father and also lighter of skin. He was a perpetually happy kid and in a way he reminded me a lot of Aaron. I sighed when I thought again of that life cut so tragically short, but Mark ignored me.

"Remember in your story how you and the others trekked out into the desert on Eden and eventually came to the entrance to Elko's home?" he asked after we'd exchanged pleasantries and I'd invited him into the kitchen.

"Vaguely. It was a long time ago and I'm an old man now."

“Well, you also said the topography of Eden was much the same as Earth, so I thought I might try to trace the path you took and see what I could find.”

“Go on,” I said, my hangover now totally forgotten. He unfolded a couple of his maps.

“This area was once all privately-owned farmland, but now it’s just a part of the Great Western Desert, so we shouldn’t have any trouble gaining access.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m pretty sure this is where you came down onto the plains. Allowing for the speed you were walking, it’s a pretty good guess that the dry watercourse you came to is this one here. Now if you follow it south it goes into a ravine, just as you described, which means the entrance to Elko’s home must be around about here.” He had a spot marked with an X on his map.

“I take it you want to go find it.”

“No, I want us to go find it,” he said, grinning again.

* * *

The road we were driving down hadn’t been used for many years and was decidedly worse for wear. I hoped the car would stay together, because although we had some water with us, it wouldn’t be anywhere near enough if we had to walk back to Narrabri in this oppressive heat. The sky, which had been a deep blue earlier in the day, was now an almost-blinding white and the horizon was lost in the haze. I felt a headache of the first degree coming on.

“We should reach the watercourse in about ten kilometres,” he said as he followed our progress on the map that was spread out on his lap. I swerved to avoid another enormous pothole and almost ran right off the road.

“I sure hope there’s a pot of gold waiting for us there,” I said after I’d regained control of the vehicle. I knew I was driving too fast, but if I slowed down the corrugations in the road would shake us to pieces in no time.

We eventually reached the watercourse without doing any terminal damage to my car. It appeared there’d once been a bridge across it and the road continued on the other side, but it had long since rotted away and we could go no further in the vehicle.

“Where to now?” I asked as we stepped out of the car. The heat was like a blast furnace and the air was bone dry, but Mark didn’t seem to be at all bothered by it. ‘*Ah, the adaptability of youth*’, I thought.

“We have to walk about three kilometres south from here, following the watercourse.”

He and I were both barefoot and I could already feel the hot sand burning into my soles. He must have noticed me standing first on one foot and then the other, for he gave me a rather worried look.

“I want to try something, Peter. Give me your hands.”

I had no idea what he was doing, but I extended my arms and he took hold of both hands and closed his eyes. Suddenly I felt a rush of coolness and vitality flowing into me, as if someone had just turned on an air conditioner. I felt better than I had since, well I don’t know when. He opened his eyes and released my hands.

“That was great. How did you do it?” I asked.

“I really don’t know, but I guess it’s the same as what Granddad did in your story when he warmed you up out in the forest.”

My mind immediately went back to that wonderful bushwalk Billy and I had done as kids in a universe that no longer existed. More than ever I was convinced my ‘fantasies’ had been based on some sort of alternate reality, although no-one other than Mark ever really believed me.

“Let’s go before it wears off,” I said, and we quickly clambered down onto the dry creek bed.

The world was silent save for the squeaking of the sand beneath our soles. The once-abundant bird life in this part of the world had long since headed east in search of water, or died out, and we were totally alone in this immense landscape. The heat grew even more intense and the haze thickened so that visibility was now little more than a kilometre, but Mark’s injection of cold was still holding up.

The creek bed gradually descended into something of a gully, and on a bit of a bend the undercut rock provided a little shade from the relentless sun. We paused for some water and to take a breather. Mark unfolded his map again and studied it intently, occasionally nodding to himself.

“About a kilometre to go,” he said. “Reckon you’ll make it?”

“I reckon so, but I don’t know about getting back again though.”

He gave me a strange look, as if he’d been about to say something but then thought better of it. I glanced around at the landscape and began to feel a sense of *dèja vu*. I’d been here before, but not on this world.

My feet were propped up on a rock in front of me with my toes spread well apart to catch any hint of a breeze, and I noticed Mark looking at them.

“I wish Mum and Dad would go barefoot more often. It would be good for them, I reckon.”

“In another world they never wore shoes, but everyone tells me that world only existed inside my damaged mind.”

“Well they’re wrong. That world was real, more real than this one I reckon.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

I looked at him quizzically but he would say no more. Finally he helped me up and we continued walking.

We rounded a bend and there it was, the pile of boulders that hid the entrance to Elko’s cave. I stopped and just stared at it until Mark finally urged me forward. The hazy sky seemed to have darkened somewhat and it was becoming cooler.

We walked around behind the boulders and there was the opening into the cave, exactly as it had been on Eden. As we squeezed into the hole the light outside faded to a dull grey. Mark pulled a flashlight from his pack and we moved deeper into the cave.

We rounded a bend and ahead of us was the shimmering entrance to Elko’s abode. At that moment the light from Mark’s torch faded away to nothing.

“This world is ending, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is,” he said with no hint of emotion. “There’s no turning back now, you must go through.”

“What about you?”

“For me this is journey’s end too, for now at least, but I hope I might have another chance at life in some other place, maybe sometime soon.”

I took hold of him and hugged him tightly.

“Are you sure you can’t come through with me?” I asked, but I already knew the answer. I was the interloper in this world and this exit was for me and me alone. I turned and walked towards the doorway.

“Goodbye and good luck,” I heard him say but he sounded very distant now. The doorway loomed around me and I stepped forward, but as I did the shimmering light disappeared and I fell into darkness.

It was totally black. I couldn’t see anything, but I could faintly hear the murmuring of many voices and in the distance what sounded like bagpipes playing a slow lament. I strained to listen, trying to catch what the voices were saying, but couldn’t.

I was uncomfortable, and then realised I was freezing. The cold ate right into me and I started shivering. I’d never been so cold in my life, but then

without noticing any real change the intense cold became intense heat. I could feel sweat running down my forehead and stinging my eyes.

“Please, can somebody help me!” I called out, and the sensation of heat disappeared.

“Sounds like another newbie, Maud,” one of the voices said.

“They’re always the same, aren’t they Harry,” a voice I took to be Maud answered.

“Where am I? Why can’t I see?” I cried.

“Because it’s dark, you idiot,” the one called Harry said.

“It’s always dark here,” another voice said, and that was followed by a chorus of sick laughter.

“Hey, you’d better get used to it, buster. You’re gonna be here for a long, long time.”

“Yeah, like forever.”

I turned away and put my hands over my face as I started sobbing to myself. Although not specifically religious, I’d always kept an open mind on the possibility of an afterlife but had never expected anything like this. A hell made of fire and brimstone may well be unpleasant, but this hell filled with darkness and contempt was far worse. The murmuring voices continued as I sank further and further into despair.

Sheol, they called it in some of the stories I’d read, the limbo between Heaven and Earth, a place for lost souls trapped in an eternity of loneliness and sorrow. I felt hollow and empty and worn out. Mark had wished me good luck, but I couldn’t see how I could have any luck here. Then a voice behind me rose above the others, and it was calling my name.

I turned and could see a faint glow which resolved into the shape of a person coming towards me. At first I thought it was Mark, but as he came closer I realised it wasn’t. Rather it was Jason, but as he’d been as a much younger man. He came to me, glowing brightly in the darkness, and took hold of my hands.

I felt a momentary dizziness and then the darkness receded. I was lying on a bed and Jason was hovering over me, still holding my hands. He opened his eyes and looked at me, and then he smiled. I tried to sit up but my head started to swim. I was very weak. He handed me a glass of water and told me to sip it very slowly, and I obeyed.

“Good to have you back,” said a voice from the other side of the bed. I turned my head and saw it was Aaron, and I started to cry.

“They all said you were dead,” I said hoarsely, “but I didn’t believe them.”

“You obviously have a tale to tell, but right now you should rest,” said another voice I recognised from long ago. Elko walked forward and stood beside him.

“They said you didn’t exist,” I whispered, but before I could hear any reply I’d drifted off to sleep.

“Matthew, Billy, Julia and Jennifer returned home to expose the conspiracy in AusScience,” Elko began telling me the next morning, “and from the reports I’ve seen all hell has broken loose back there. Rebecca Gosling, facing arrest, apparently took her own life and the rest of the conspirators surrendered without a struggle.

“When you came back from the alternate time line with the others you were comatose. Jason and Aaron stayed here with me to try to bring you back, and Jason has been probing your mind for days now searching for your soul.”

“He found me,” I whispered, but I wasn’t yet ready to say anything more of my experience.

The days passed and my strength slowly returned. Strangely the hardest thing to come to terms with was being fifty again instead of seventy. Jason and Aaron were with me much of the time and did a wonderful job of cheering me up. They didn’t push me to talk, though, and I was grateful for that.

Eventually I did tell my tale and Elko was keenly interested in the nature of the time line I’d been trapped in. There were elements in it that didn’t quite fit, such as Matthew’s stabbing, the supernova and Mark’s autothermia, and this led him to believe it was initiated by an interaction between the disintegrating orb and my own mind. With much of the scenario seemingly based on my own deepest fears, I had to agree with him.

Billy sent word that he wanted us to meet him at Tom and Sarah’s farm as soon as I was well enough. I said I was fine, and physically I probably was, so Elko took us in a subspace shuttle for the very short journey to Narrabri.

Jenny had been waiting impatiently for Jason and as soon as he stepped from the shuttle she ran at him and tackled him to the ground. They rolled around on the grass for ages, kissing and hugging each other, both clearly relieved this whole traumatic experience was drawing rapidly to a close.

Tom and Sarah, although definitely getting on in years, were still quite sprightly and invited us into the house where they served up copious quantities of tea, coffee and finger food. Everyone had a story to tell, but eventually there was a lull in the conversation long enough for Billy to grab

our attention. He stood and, not wearing a shirt he could straighten as Tom had always done, adjusted his board shorts instead.

“The conspirators are all in custody, save for Gosling who took her own life. There was strong evidence linking her to the death of Sean Fitzpatrick as well, by the way. The new science minister, Tony Wilcox, invited me to continue on as AusScience Director, but after talking it over with Julia I’ve decided instead to hand in my resignation. AusScience is making an *ex gratia* payment of about five million dollars to us as compensation for our suffering, and we’ve decided to make our long-awaited move to Coolum Beach so Julia can be close to her parents and I’ll be able to buy that yacht I’ve always dreamed of. The rest of the money we’ll be putting into setting up our own subspace research company and we were wondering if, well, if any of you guys would like to join us.”

“Sounds great,” we all said in unison and then laughed.

“Matthew has agreed to handle the legal technicalities involved in setting up the business and in retrieving some of our intellectual property rights from AusScience, and reckons we should be right to go in about three months.”

“Make it two,” Matthew said. “There’s actually less red tape involved than I’d expected and the AusScience lawyers are being unusually cooperative.”

Tom produced a bottle of champagne out of thin air and then deftly planted glasses in front of each of us.

“If nobody minds I’d rather toast our new venture with something non-alcoholic,” Aaron said.

“Me too,” said Jason.

“And me,” said Jenny. “Alcohol is supposed to be bad for pregnant women.”

There was stunned silence, but then everyone started congratulating them at once.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Sarah asked.

“I only found out this morning.”

Tom took away the champagne and returned with a bottle of grape juice, and we drank a toast to both our new business venture and the new parents-to-be.

* * *

We’d been in our new business premises for about a month. Billy had spared no expense in providing just about everything we could possibly want, including a beautiful view of the ocean. We’d already picked up

several lucrative contracts and were well on the way to turning a handsome profit in our first year of operation.

The telephone in my office rang, and when I answered it I was surprised to hear Todd Myers on the other end of the line.

“I was wondering if you guys would like to take a short trip to Eridani. I have something to show you.”

He met us at Brisbane spaceport the following evening and flew us to Eridani in his ambassadorial shuttle. He warned us beforehand that we’d be emerging from subspace in the southern hemisphere at a latitude of about 50 degrees, and advised the non-autothermic members of our party, namely Julia, Aaron and Matthew, to rug up. Aaron, not surprisingly, ignored the advice and turned up in just board shorts. Julia shook her head and sighed.

It was night when we arrived and Todd ushered us into a lodge where we were served a veritable banquet. He’d say nothing at all about his reason for bringing us here, though, except that we’d find out in the morning. We spent much of the evening chatting with him and Elissi, reminiscing over the events of the last few decades.

I slept well, and when I woke it was daylight and I joined the others in the common room. When everyone was ready Todd led us outside.

We were on a small hill, and stretching out in front of us as far as we could see was an ocean. There was a small swell running and we stood in silence listening to the waves breaking on the shore.

“For the first four years our attempts at restoring the southern ocean were getting nowhere. All the water we poured in either soaked into the ground or quickly evaporated. But gradually the humidity level rose, and about a year ago we began to make some real headway. We reckon we’ve collected about half of the water that’s trapped in the rings surrounding the remains of our twin planet, and it will probably take the best part of a decade before we have the rest back. The final sea level should be about twenty metres higher than it is now, and the ocean will extend north by about another ten degrees of latitude.”

“Hey Jason, remember me?”

We all turned to see a young Eridanian man running towards us.

“Hey, Norrie!” Jason cried and ran towards him. It took me a few moments but I finally remembered him. He was Elissi’s nephew, and when we’d last met he was just a boy. Todd told us he was now one of the chief scientists working on the southern ocean restoration project.

Later in the day Jason, Norrie and Aaron decided to be the first ones to go swimming in the new ocean. The water was extremely cold, only two or

three degrees above freezing, but they said it was great even though Aaron's teeth were chattering as he said it! Jason wanted Billy and me to join them but we declined, so Aaron threw a bucket of seawater over us instead.

Todd said there were a number of groups on Eridani who might be interested in engaging our company's services, and before we departed we left him with a stack of business cards to spread around.

* * *

On the day Mark Collins was born there was a warm north-easterly wind blowing, and Billy and I had been out sailing around the coastal islands. We'd anchored in a sheltered bay and while we were swimming a pod of dolphins had come in to join us. One of them surfaced between us with a beautiful heart-shaped shell in its mouth and gave it to Billy. In turn Billy, sensing whom the gift was truly meant for, presented it to baby Mark, and even though new-borns are supposed to be unable to smile, I'm sure that he did.

Peter Thorpe

Part Six

In the Fullness of Time

The Firstborn

The crippled spacecraft came to rest in shallow water adjacent to one of the many small islands close to the equator. There were no serious injuries and no signs of pursuit, but the craft was damaged beyond repair.

Gallad, who had been captain of the ship, naturally fell into the role of community leader as the barefoot castaways set about building themselves a village. All his people were autothermic but in this galaxy, or at least in the part of the galaxy where they had crashed, the stars were much sparser than at home and as a result there was relatively little subspace energy to draw on. Fortunately, though, there was plentiful nourishing food available both on the land and in the sea, and the climate was warm and pleasant.

Not far from the beach they found a large cave concealed behind a waterfall, and immediately recognised this as a good defensible hiding place should the Enemy find them. They set about tunnelling deep inside the hill from the back of the cave.

But the Enemy didn't come. The years slipped by and became centuries as the community thrived. This world was rich in natural resources and all the usual industries became established. Children were born and the population grew. In time they would be strong enough to get back into space but for now were content to live off the land.

Sailing amongst the many islands became a popular activity. Some even ventured as far east as the mainland but found it was desert and didn't stay long. But as the population grew Gallad eventually put together a team of explorers, for even in the desert there may be found mineral wealth.

The land rose steadily as they progressed inland until they found themselves atop an immense plateau, cut in places by deep ravines. At the head of one such ravine they halted, an uneasy feeling coming over Gallad. Far below them a momentary flash of light, sunlight off polished steel, caught his eye, and he knew.

“The Enemy is here,” he whispered. They ran for days before finally reaching the shore and their boats. As they made their way out through the breakers they saw a dozen or more armoured warriors running out onto the sand.

The alarm was raised and everyone from the village moved into the cave behind the waterfall. That night they could see the flames as their buildings were torched and in the distance were loud explosions. But it was to be another three days before an enemy scout spotted the cave. Gallad’s archers, who were concealed amongst the rocks higher up, quickly dispatched him, but they knew the assault would not be far behind.

The cave was well defended and the Enemy’s losses were high. The siege quickly developed into a stalemate. Gallad’s people had supplies enough for years and there was little the Enemy could do to breach their defences. Sorties were sent out during the night, inflicting further losses on the Enemy’s forces, but they seemed to have plenty of warriors in reserve. The weeks dragged on.

Then one morning the commander of the Enemy’s forces came forth, hands raised, calling for parley, and Gallad came forward to meet with him. He was pleased to see that his opposite number was Torg, who although firmly entrenched on the side of the Enemy, nonetheless had a reputation as an honourable and trustworthy opponent.

“This battle is futile,” Torg said, “and this planet is big enough for us to share.”

“What is it you propose, Torg?” Gallad asked.

“We will allow you to live on the islands in peace, and in turn you’ll stay away from the mainland.”

“I’ve heard such words before, and have been betrayed. What surety do you offer?”

“I have nothing to offer but my word, and the word of my Lord.”

“I’ll need time to consider this,” Gallad said, shaking his head slightly. “Return at this time tomorrow.”

“Very well,” Torg said. “Until then.”

Gallad turned back towards the cave.

Astel, Torg’s second in command, was concealed in the top of a tree overlooking the entrance to the cave. He’d argued strongly against Torg’s parley with the Barefooters, considering it a sign of weakness, but in the end, as always, Torg had prevailed. Some day he would be strong enough to mount a challenge, but not yet, so he watched as Gallad and Torg spoke, his bow drawn ready to fire if there was any hint of trouble. He watched as Gallad shook his head and then turned back towards the cave. Clearly the

parley had failed, as he knew it would. He took aim at Gallad's back and released his arrow. Moments later Gallad fell to the ground, rolled and slipped into the pool.

The water, which until then had been crystal clear, turned cloudy and he was never seen again.

All hell broke loose as Gallad's archers, who themselves were concealed in the rocks and trees on either side of the cave, opened fire, and Torg was the first to fall. Many of his men died, and those who lived retreated back to their boats and returned to the desert. Astel seized command of the remaining men, but there was much vocal opposition and three had to be executed before the rest fell into line. *'Torg has been much too soft and lenient'*, he mused, and vowed to make amends.

That night, while he slept, one of his men quietly crept up on him and slit his throat. His body was sealed in the cave along with his armour and possessions. But Astel's ghost was restless, it seemed, for soon the ravine developed a reputation for accidents and deaths. Before long the remaining men returned to their ships and fled home. To avoid being sent back they reported to their Lord that all the Barefooters had been killed. He, perhaps unwisely, accepted their word and turned his attentions elsewhere.

The millennia passed. The Barefooters in time redeveloped subspace technology and many travelled around the galaxy, searching out life and implanting the seeds of civilisation. Others converted a nearby hydrogen cloud into a star nursery, boosting the level of subspace energy they could draw upon in the region. At the centre of the cloud a giant blue star was formed and became their shining jewel in the sky.

Erosion and tremors eventually removed some of the rocks that had been sealing the entrance to Astel's cave, and one day a young man named Barrad, eldest son of the leader of the island community, stumbled across it while out exploring with his friend Elko. Astel's spirit, taking advantage of the boy's bravado, seized him. Whether by coincidence or design, a few decades later a rain of radiation and debris from the erupting blue star achieved what Astel in life had been unable to - the destruction of the Barefooters.

For a hundred thousand years no-one set foot on the planet. The pool in front of the cave, which had been declared sacred following the death of Gallad, was untouched in the meteorite bombardment and remained undisturbed until the day a child from a distant world slipped and fell into the water. That child was Jason Collins, and the vine that entangled him left

something in him that remained long after the welts on his ankles had disappeared.

The Son of Gallad

Billy and Peter's 60th birthday party raged until the early hours of the morning, and by the time it ended Mark and I were the only sober ones left.

As Mark, being only seven, was too young to drive, I ended up with the job of getting everyone home safely. After all, that's what Jedi are for.

Given that Mark's parents were both autothermic, and given the somewhat interesting history of his father's family and the unorthodox way Jase and Jenny met, I had expected from the moment he was born that he'd be an unusual and exceptional child. I wasn't wrong! By the age of one he was talking in sentences, and by the time he was three he was reading, writing and doing basic arithmetic.

It was on his fifth birthday, though, that I really got a taste of what lay in store for us. We'd been playing backyard cricket in the afternoon and I'd noticed Mark watching me intently as I attempted to wield the bat.

"Uncle Aaron, why don't you bend your right arm?" he asked later.

"A long time ago when I was a boy my arm was broken pretty badly, and this was the best the doctors could do for me."

He looked at me with an expression that was far too serious for a five-year-old, then wrapped his hands around my elbow. I felt heat and an odd tingling sensation, and when I looked up everyone was watching us intently. After a few moments he let go and looked at me expectantly. I tried flexing my arm, and to my great surprise it bent. I flexed it a few more times, and each time it moved a little more.

"Is that better?" he asked.

"Much better, yes, thanks," I muttered, still in something of a state of shock.

Jase, with his *healing hands*, had tried several times to mend my elbow but had failed to make even the slightest difference. I'd suggested to him that maybe his gift only worked on heads, and he'd laughed and said I was

probably right. Perhaps Mark's gift only worked on elbows, but I wasn't about to offer him my head to find out.

With use it improved even further and after a few weeks was as good as new. Jase urged me to get back into competitive cricket so I signed up with the local club. In my first match they put me in at number four and I scored an unbeaten double century. In subsequent matches I didn't do quite as well, but at the end of last season one of the Queensland selectors spoke to me about the possibility of my being called up into the state team. I was probably too old to have any chance of making the national side, but hey, I could dream, couldn't I?

When I finally arrived home after dropping off all my wobbly-headed friends, I saw my front door was open and a light was on inside the house.

"Hello, who's there?" I called out, prepared to run like hell the moment the intruder showed himself.

"Ah, you're back at last," said a deep resonant voice from within and I relaxed.

"Elko, what are you doing here, and why didn't you come to the party?" I asked as I walked in the door and closed it behind me.

"I don't go in for partying much these days, and besides, I forgot."

"Likely excuse. I presume you're not just here to burgle my house, so what's up?"

"All in good time, Aaron, but first up I think you should make us both a pot of tea. What I have to say is going to take quite a while, I think."

It was already well past midnight and I'd been looking forward to getting a bit of sleep. I sighed. Elko had a knack for always showing up unexpectedly and at the most inopportune time. I put the kettle on and fished out a couple of cups and some leftover fruitcake to nibble on.

"First things first," he said once we'd settled into the lounge chairs. "In a couple of months the last of the x-rays from that rogue star in the Pleiades will slip past Genesis and the planet's surface will once again become habitable. Raphus and Dromaius have asked me to invite all of you to come along for the celebrations."

"Has it really been eighteen years since Jase performed his minor miracle out there?" I asked, but I knew the answer was yes. Much had happened in the intervening time and the years had somehow slipped by without my noticing.

"Yes indeed," he said. "So tell me, how are Jason, Jennifer and young Mark?"

“They’re all well. Jason’s autothermia is showing no sign of diminishing while Mark’s, um, powers are growing.”

“In what way?”

I flexed my right elbow and he immediately saw the significance.

“Mark fixed it and I’m now playing grade cricket again. I might even make the state side next season.”

Elko sat in silence with a look of deep concentration on his face. I yawned.

“Hmm, yes, well maybe I should leave any further discussion until morning. May I stay the night?”

“Of course. You know where everything is.” I yawned again and almost dislocated my jaw.

That night I dreamed I was in a dark place. There were murmuring voices all around me and in the distance what sounded like bagpipes playing something sad.

Mark has hold of my hand and is pulling me forward. ‘Come on, Uncle Aaron, it’s over this way,’ he says as he drags me along through the blackness. I tell him to slow down but he pays me no heed. Someone or something bumps my shoulder and his hand slips out of mine. I stumble forward, calling out his name. ‘I’m right here,’ he says. I reach out my hand in the direction of his voice and another hand grabs it, but it’s not Mark’s. I shriek and pull my hand free. ‘Where are you, Mark?’ I call out. ‘Right here,’ I hear him say, but now he sounds further away. ‘Come towards my voice,’ I cry while at the same time pushing forward. ‘Aaron, I can’t...’

‘Mark, where are you?’ I call, but there’s no reply. I keep calling his name as I push my way forward, but I’ve lost him. My foot hits something solid and I fall forward. I feel a terrible sense of foreboding and when I reach down my worst fears are confirmed. Mark is lying at my feet, dead. All is lost now.

Morning came. There was a knock on the door just as I’d taken a mouthful of muesli.

“That will be Peter,” Elko said. “I took the liberty of asking him to come around.” When I opened the door Peter came in.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your breakfast,” he said. “Only the way Elko spoke it sounded pretty important.”

“Can I get you anything?” I asked him, having managed to swallow my mouthful of food.

“Just a coffee if you’re making it. My head’s still a bit sore after last night.”

“In Billy’s write-up of the events on Genesis, he quoted Raphus’s description of how the Firstborn came to this galaxy,” Elko said once we were all seated around the kitchen table.

“He said they came as spirits when the galaxy was new, then ultimately took physical form and began spreading life amongst the stars here,” Peter said.

“I was told the same story when I was a boy,” Elko said. “It’s a nice tale to tell young children, but like all good legends it bears little resemblance to the facts. Over the past fifteen years I’ve been searching through the surviving archives on Genesis, trying to learn the truth, trying to find something to explain the powerful entities that have become Jason and now Mark.”

Peter and I stared at him in silence as the world seemed to close in around us.

“I finally pieced together enough of the story to answer some of my questions, but before I go on, I’d ask that you say nothing of this to anyone, especially to any of the Collins family.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“I may yet be proven wrong, and I don’t want to alarm them unnecessarily.” I didn’t think this was the whole truth, but I nodded and so did Peter.

“The original inhabitants of Genesis, my ancestors, came from a galaxy far from here. Millions of years ago, a mighty civilisation spread itself out amongst their nearby stars, but they were a violent people and wars were frequent and terrible. Then one day a team of military biologists discovered they could graft fractal crystals into living cells, giving them the ability to draw energy from subspace. They developed a virus to insert this gene into their soldiers, giving them amazing strength and endurance under extreme conditions. But some years later the modified cells began breaking down, leading to a slow and terrible death, and the research was abandoned. Some of the soldiers had children before they died, though, and when both parents carried the modified gene the child not only survived but thrived. These children were immune to every known disease, required almost no food and could live and work comfortably in extremes of temperature that would kill a normal person. Their lifespan was extended so greatly they were for all intents and purposes immortal, and they had the power to enhance or inhibit

cell metabolism in those they touched, curing them of disease and injury, or killing them.

“Over the centuries and millennia this race of super-people grew and used their powers to enforce peace throughout the galaxy. They became known as the Barefooters, for their autothermia made it both unnecessary and uncomfortable for them to wear any form of footwear, and their renown was great. But eventually a small group emerged that began using their powers for self-gratification. They turned on their brothers in a war that almost destroyed the galaxy, and all but a handful of the Barefooters were wiped out. The survivors escaped in an intergalactic ship, with their Enemy in close pursuit, and they crashed on Genesis. They were the Firstborn.

“Their leader, a man named Gallad, died in the final battle between the Barefooters and their pursuers, and his body fell into the pool at the opening to the cave, never to be seen again. The one who killed him was soon betrayed by his own people, and it was his spirit that took control of Barrad thousands of years later. But then the blue star in the Pleiades cluster erupted and Genesis was devastated. The surviving descendents of the Barefooters fled to other worlds, including this one, where their spirits were carried through from generation to generation as you saw with Raphus and Dromaius. Jennifer, also, is a descendent of one of the Firstborn, Gallad’s wife Marinda if our genetic records are to be believed.

“But Jason is different. He’s not carrying the spirit of a Firstborn, like you and Billy were, Peter, and yet he is autothermic and has exceptional psychic powers. This had puzzled me ever since I first met him and sensed the power within him, but only now has the riddle been solved.

“At birth he inherited his autothermic DNA from his father and that made him susceptible to what was to follow. Eighteen years ago, on Genesis, he fell into the pool at the opening of the cave, the same pool in which Gallad’s body had disappeared. While in that pool he was grabbed around the legs by a vine and almost drowned. The welts on his ankles quickly disappeared and Elissi could detect no after-effects, but she was wrong. A tiny virus, a mere speck of DNA, was injected into him and rapidly grafted itself into every cell of his body. For all intents and purposes, at least on a biological level, *Jason became Gallad.*”

“Then if Jennifer is a descendent of Gallad’s wife,” Peter said, “Mark must be Gallad’s son.”

“Precisely,” Elko said. “If what Aaron has told me is correct, Mark’s powers have already begun to manifest themselves. He is a true Barefooter, quite possibly the only true Barefooter remaining in the universe.”

“And hence,” I said in a moment of insight that astounded me, “the only remaining threat to those who still rule in that galaxy.”

Elko nodded and a shiver ran up my spine. For something within me, some life force that's been a part of me for as long as I can remember, my *Jedi self* as I'd come to think of it, flashed brightly for a moment and then faded.

A World Reborn

We'd arrived at the home of Dromaius and Raphus three days earlier. It was deep underground, and at the entrance was a beautiful fountain and pictures of how this world used to be. Further in were their spacious living quarters, and there were about twenty others currently in residence. We'd been told that scattered across the planet were many more descendents of that race, waiting in underground dwellings for the moment when the deadly radiation outside would cease. That big moment was tonight, about an hour after sunset. From this part of the planet the Pleiades cluster would be high in the sky and we'd have a good view of the defusing of the supernova. I still found it incredible that the events we were about to witness had taken place eighteen years ago, when Jason and I were just fourteen.

I can remember only too clearly the time they all went off to Todd's wedding on Eridani. I wanted to go with them, and Jase wanted me to come, but my parents wouldn't let me. They said it was a private family thing for Billy and Julia, but I knew at the time that my father still had misgivings about his son being best friends with an Aboriginal boy and, when he'd been drinking heavily, he left me in no doubt as to how he felt. So I was forced to stay behind, knowing something bad was going to happen, and when word came through of the kidnapping I almost died. In the end, though, it all worked out okay, and I suppose if Jase hadn't gone then the supernova wouldn't have been defused and countless lives would have been lost.

This trip was Mark's first away from Earth and his eyes had been wide with excitement the whole time. Everyone from work had come along, and Todd, Elissi and Norrie had come from Eridani as well so it was just like old times. There were many tales to tell and Norrie showed me a stack of photographs of the final shoreline of their new ocean. The collection of the remaining ice had been completed well ahead of schedule and the water level had stabilised, so their work was now centred mostly on restorative landscaping along the foreshore. I was constantly amazed at how much

they'd accomplished in so short a time, and by Norrie's unfaltering enthusiasm for the project.

Night fell and we had retreated to the safety of the cave well before the cluster rose above the horizon. Remotely-controlled telescopes had been set up on the hilltop above so we could watch the events unfold. A camera was also set up on the opposite side of the subspace fold from here, so we'd be able to watch when the core of the star was ejected out into space over there. There was a feeling of tension in the air, even though we knew what we were about to witness actually happened eighteen years ago.

Everything was set, and we were about half an hour away from the moment when we'd see the defusing begin. The star had become much brighter and the radiation levels outside were extreme. The plant life here had evolved to survive under the constant x-ray bombardment, but I hoped this sudden increase wouldn't cause too much damage.

The countdown reached zero and suddenly there was a brilliant stream of gas squirting out on the other side of the fold, spreading out further and further into space. The star itself still looked much the same on this side although the radiation levels had peaked and were starting to drop. We'd been told the amount of visible light from the star wouldn't change much for many years since that comes mostly from the outer layers, but the hard radiation from the core would all be gone within an hour.

Finally we saw the stream of gases on the other side come to an end and at the same time the radiation fell to negligible levels. The all-clear was given for us to go outside, and we began the long climb up the stairs.

During the times when the cluster was below the horizon, the residents here had been working hard preparing a cleared area alongside the pool in readiness for tonight's party. As we emerged we found food and drinks were already laid out so we dug in. Mark was running around amongst the guests and was completely taken up with the atmosphere of the occasion, but Jason was keeping a close eye on him, making sure he didn't go anywhere near the pool.

The sight of the Pleiades was awesome. The six stars visible to the naked eye from Earth appeared as beacons amongst the hundreds of others, with blue halos around them due to the high levels of dust and gas in the cluster.

At the edge of the clearing furthest from the waterfall a platform had been built, and Dromaius and Raphus stepped up and raised their hands. A hush fell over the crowd.

“We thank you all for being here with us to celebrate the rebirth of our world,” Dromaius said and was almost drowned out by the applause and the cheering. “It has been a very long wait for us, but now we can begin to rebuild and take our place alongside the many civilisations that have grown up in the galaxy around us. We have a lot of hard work ahead of us.”

There was another round of cheering and applause.

“We have with us this evening a very special guest, without whom we’d be watching the annihilation of this world tonight instead of its rebirth. I refer of course to Dr Jason Collins who, although only little more than a boy at the time, figured out how to defuse the rogue star. Jason, could you come up here please, and bring your wife and son with you too.”

Jenny rounded up Mark and followed a reluctant Jason up onto the platform as the crowd went wild with cheering. Jase smiled sheepishly while Mark waved to everyone.

“We are forever in your debt, Jason,” Dromaius said, “and if there’s anything we can ever do for you, just name it.”

“There was a whole team of people involved in the defusing project,” Jase said, “not the least of which were my father and the amazing Peter Thorpe. I propose a toast to everyone.”

“To everyone,” everyone shouted and raised their glasses.

The evening wore on. Mark was becoming sleepy so Jenny suggested we all turn in for the night. Jase did a final round of his friends, which took another half an hour, and then we walked back down the stairs to our accommodation under the hill.

In the morning when we emerged from the cave there were many people hard at work clearing the area near the beach where the village had once been. Some traces of the original buildings had been discovered although there was very little left after the meteorite bombardment a hundred thousand years ago.

It was a clear sunny day and we could see a few sailing craft out on the bay as we walked down to the beach. Across the whole planet there were massive releases of fish, birds and insects taking place, most of which had been ‘manufactured’ from the DNA records that had been faithfully preserved since the radiation from the star first began. The first releases were all herbivores and the plan was to allow them to become established for a few years before other creatures higher up the food chain were restored. It was hoped a stable and diverse biosphere could be re-established within thirty or forty years.

Directly above us there was suddenly a loud squawking as a flock of birds flew past. Now on Earth I’d seen many huge flocks but had never

observed any of the birds collide with each other. I suppose there's always a first time. As we watched, two birds hit and began spiralling towards the ground. One recovered quickly enough to pull out, but the other wasn't so fortunate. There was a soft thud as it hit the sand and then it just lay there motionless. We walked towards it, fearing it was dead, but as we approached it struggled onto its feet and tried to spread its wings. But alas, it seemed one of the wings was broken.

Before anyone could stop him, Mark ran over to the bird, picked it up and held it against his stomach. For a moment it struggled but soon quietened down. He was speaking to it, so softly I couldn't make out the words, and then he gently put it back down and stroked its feathers three times from head to tail. The bird stretched its wings, and now the damaged one looked whole again. After a few more stretching exercises it took to the air and rejoined its flock.

"Well I'll be," I said, "I could have sworn it had a broken wing."

"Me too," Jason said. "Maybe these birds just have double-jointed wings or something."

Mark returned to us but said nothing, and the incident was quickly forgotten. We continued walking along the beach and marvelled at all the rebuilding activity going on around us.

Later in the day dark clouds began building in the south-western sky and soon the sun was obscured. A cool breeze came up, a welcome relief from the heat and humidity, and before long the first raindrops fell. The rain grew heavier, but was so refreshing we made no effort to seek shelter. None of us were wearing much in the way of clothing anyway, so it hardly mattered. Mark was running around like a mad thing trying to catch the drops on his tongue, with occasional shrieks of joy as he succeeded.

The rain continued to fall as night descended and we made our way back to the cavern for our evening meal. Everyone was filled with happiness and joy and it was just so wonderful to be a part of this historic event. The food and drink was plentiful and good, and as the evening drew on, a small group on one side of the room magically produced a collection of musical instruments and began to play. Jenny grabbed Jason and they danced for a bit, and then Mark decided he wanted to join in too. '*What the heck*', I thought, and joined them as well. The resulting pandemonium sent everyone into roars of laughter.

The next morning I took Mark out for a walk through the village while the others were deep in discussions with Dromaius and Raphus. The rain had gone and it was another warm and sunny day. Mark was still as excited

as ever, looking around in all directions and trying to take everything in. We stopped in the centre of the main square and I sat down on a bench while Mark continued to run around. An extremely old man shuffled over and sat down alongside me.

“So it’s true what they say,” he said.

“Tell me what it is they’re saying and I might be able to answer,” I said, having absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

“They say your friend, the one with the dark skin, is carrying Gallad’s blood and the boy here is Gallad’s son.”

I said nothing as Elko had sworn me to secrecy, but I nodded ever so slightly.

“He has a dark road ahead of him then, a very dark road, especially for one so young. And you must be his guide, for only you will know the way.”

“What do you mean?” I asked in astonishment. “I know nothing about anything!”

“When the time comes, you will, and that time will come soon enough.”

Before I could ask him anything more he stood up and shuffled away, and within moments was lost in the crowd. Mark came and sat beside me.

“I heard what that man said,” he whispered, “and I know what lies ahead of me.”

“You do? Who told you?”

“The dolphins,” he said, and then stood and ran off again. I pulled myself up and went off after him, wondering how I ever got myself involved with this crazy family.

* * *

Dolphins. In my last year at university I’d been hanging out with a girl who was studying marine biology. Her name was Mandy and her main interest, apart from me, was in the social behaviour of dolphins. One fine weekend she’d taken me to meet her research subjects near an island off Brisbane. As we sailed out of the Brisbane River and entered the ocean a strangeness came over me, the daylight seemed too bright and the sound of the waves slapping the boat too loud. My stomach cramped and for a while I thought I was going to be seasick, but eventually the nausea passed. As we approached the island a pod of dolphins came out to greet us, swimming alongside the boat and leaping out of the water. I was leaning on the railing when one of them leapt right alongside me. As it rose out of the water it turned its head and looked straight into my eyes, and the next thing I knew I’d toppled over the side and was struggling in the water. Two dolphins came up to me, one on each side, and held me afloat. Then one of them

turned its head towards me, opened its mouth and spoke my name. The next thing I remember is lying on a white sandy beach with Mandy trying to revive me.

In the weeks that followed I had nightmares about dolphins, and whatever had happened while I was blacked out must have spooked Mandy pretty badly as I never saw her again. Occasionally I get an uneasy feeling like I'm about to remember something important about what happened that day, but I can never quite reach that memory.

“Aaron?” said a little voice beside me, shaking me out of my thoughts.

“I know there's something special about me,” Mark said, “something passed down to me from Mum and Dad, and there's something I have to do to right a wrong, some terrible thing that happened a long time ago. I'd always thought I'd be all grown up when the time came, but that's not right, is it? It's going to be really soon now and I'm so scared.”

I held him tightly and waited for his tears to subside.

“The old man said I was to be your guide,” I said softly, “and that makes me glad, even though I don't know what it is I have to do. Yet in a way it's like I do know but I don't know that I know.”

I laughed as I realised how stupid that sounded, and Mark grinned.

“Sometimes I dream that I'm older,” he said, “maybe about seventeen, and I'm leading someone into a dark cave, only I know that as soon as I go in there the world will end and I can never come back out again.”

I shuddered. Eight years ago Peter had been trapped in an alternative time line until a seventeen-year-old version of Mark Collins had led him into a cave. Peter had escaped through a portal at the end of a passageway and that world had ended. It all meant something, it was yet another piece in the jigsaw puzzle, but I still couldn't see the whole picture. I had the feeling that maybe no-one could see the whole picture, that we were each only getting brief, distorted glimpses of it from different angles.

“I think it's about time we found ourselves some answers, Mark,” I said, but no sooner had I spoken than I saw Norrie running towards us.

“Mark, Aaron, I've been looking everywhere for you,” he said with his quaint Eridanian accent.

“I guess you've found us then,” I said.

“They want you both in the Council hall, there's a big discussion going on.”

We followed him across the island to the ancient Council hall. I'd heard it described by Jason before but this was the first time I'd actually seen it,

and I was suitably impressed. The hall itself was excavated out from under a hill, with the entrance through an ornate stone archway set in the midst of a fragrant garden. The ceiling was at least ten metres high with concealed skylights providing a soft illumination, and the side walls featured numerous carvings and statues. Sitting on the dais at the front were Dromaius, Raphus, Elko and Barrad, while along the front row of seats were all the Collins family as well as Peter, Todd and Elissi. All their heads turned as we walked in. Mark ran ahead to where his parents were sitting while I followed Norrie and sat with Todd and Elissi.

“Little is now known of the world our forebears, the original Barefooters, came from,” Dromaius began. “Nor is anything known of the Enemy they were fleeing. We don’t even know if this Enemy still exists, although, given our most recent discovery, that would appear to be quite likely.”

“Several devices have been found on this planet,” Raphus said. “As far as we can tell they consist of various sensory elements and a subspace transmitter, and we believe their purpose was to notify the Enemy of any reoccupation of this world. So far they’ve all been deactivated before they could transmit any messages, but I fear there may be more we haven’t yet found. Our scientists have estimated that these devices were planted approximately ten thousand years ago so it would have been long after all the inhabitants of this world had fled from the radiation here.”

“That would put it at about the same time as Eridani’s twin imploded,” Elissi said. “Do you think there could be any connection?”

“It would seem plausible,” Dromaius said. “The Eridanians were the first indigenous civilisation in this galaxy to develop subspace technology, and that occurred just a few hundred years before the implosion. Perhaps the Enemy caught wind of them and sent a party to see whether any of the Barefooters had in fact survived. Presumably they checked out this planet and found it deserted so they planted their sensors and continued searching. If they were implicated in the destruction of Eridani’s twin, perhaps they believed the implosion would take out Eridani as well, or maybe they were just unaware of Eridani’s existence. It’s all just speculation, but if correct then it’s probably safe to assume they left, believing once again that the Barefooters and their descendents had been wiped out. Certainly we’ve not seen any evidence of Enemy incursions since then.”

“Barrad, if you don’t mind my asking, did you have any involvement in that implosion?” I asked.

“The demon that possessed me was an agent of the Enemy, but I don’t, um, I don’t recall,” he said hesitantly. I felt that spark inside me flare up again, and I brushed the hair away from my eyes and gazed at him intently.

“No, wait, I do remember,” he said. “I was drawn into a dark place with many murmuring sad voices, and was brought before my master. There I was told about the mining operations on Eridani’s twin and given a matter imploder to offer them. I did that, and then sat back at a safe distance and watched the horrific results. I hadn’t known about the subspace tunnel to Eridani, though, so the devastation that occurred in the southern hemisphere of that world was a bonus. Or at least that’s how I felt at the time.” He looked nervously across at Elissi.

“We understand that you were possessed at the time,” she said, “and appreciate your candidness. Please, go on, and tell us more about this dark place you mentioned for I think that’s the connection we’ve all been seeking.”

Barrad sat silently for several minutes, his brow furrowed as he struggled with his repressed memories. The fire within me had dulled again and I could no longer aid him.

“It’s on another level of existence,” he finally said, “like subspace but deeper, and it spans the entire universe whereas subspace is confined to the gravitational well of a galaxy. It’s always dark and there are people, spirits, in there. I believe they’re trapped between life and death, in a sort of perpetual limbo, but I don’t know where they came from, only that it was the work of the Enemy. There’s a portal to this place deep within the demon Astel’s cave, and if one knows the way there’s a path through that realm right to the Enemy himself. But that knowledge passed with Astel’s spirit and I have no recollection of it.”

“I think I’ve been there too,” Peter said, “after I was trapped in that strange time line. There were awful voices all around me and it was dark, always dark. Then Jason’s spirit came and rescued me.”

“It’s, um, this gift I have,” Jason said sheepishly.

“I’ve been there too,” said Jenny, “when I was in a coma after the car accident. My memories of that time are very vague, but from your description it sounds too familiar to be a coincidence. I know it was dark and I can remember the murmuring voices. In the end I was also rescued by Jason.”

“Psychics and mystics have known of that place for eons,” Todd said. “They have many names for it. Some call it purgatory, some call it limbo, some call it Sheol. That place is real.”

“That is the path Mark must take, if he’s to embark on his quest,” Elko said solemnly.

“When he’s much older, yes,” Jenny said.

“No, he must go soon, very soon, if he’s to have any chance of success,” said a voice from the back of the hall. We all turned and there was the ancient man who had spoken to me in the village.

“But he’s only a child,” Jenny pleaded.

“And that’s his advantage. As an adult he will fail. You cannot linger.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Who I am is unimportant. Some call me a sage or a prophet, but to most I’m but a crazy old man. You can hark my words, or you can ignore them to your, and everyone else’s peril.”

Mark stood and we all turned to face him.

“I’ll go,” he said.

The Dolphins of Sheol

It was noon and we were standing in a rough circle at the bottom of the ravine just outside the opening to Astel's cave. There had been a lot of arguing. Jenny and Jase had been adamant Mark couldn't be allowed to go, but in the end they had relented. They, of course, wanted to go with him, but the old man had insisted only Peter and I could be his guides.

"Jason, at the very least, must remain here so he can bring them back out of Sheol when they return," he'd said, but I'd sensed something in his voice, something that made me think he didn't expect us to ever come back.

In the end it was settled. Mark, accompanied by Peter and me, would enter the cave and pass through the portal into Sheol. Peter had been there before and I think that's why he'd been chosen, or maybe it was the other way around. I still had no idea what to do once we reached that dark place, and I kept remembering the dream I'd had a few months earlier which seemed more and more like a premonition.

"You'll find the way," the old man had said, trying to comfort me, but he only scared me more.

"Where do the dolphins fit in?" I asked him, as that more than anything was still puzzling me. As well as my own experience with the creatures, I'd discovered that Peter, Billy and Jase had encountered them at various times as well. I knew there had to be a link, but still I couldn't see it.

"What are dolphins?" he asked.

I tried as best I could to describe them but he just shook his head and sighed.

Mark, Peter and I worked our way around the others, hugging, kissing and shaking hands. When I reached Jason he put his arms around me and rested his head on my shoulder.

"Don't lose him, Aaron, please, just don't lose him," he whispered, and my thoughts turned again to that dream I'd had.

We walked solemnly into the cave, Peter in the lead, then Mark and then me. The floor was cold and slightly damp on my bare soles. Once inside it was very dark, darker than I would have expected given the size of the opening, and Peter switched on the torch Billy had given him from the ship that had brought us from Earth. The brand on it was *Dolphin*, an omen for sure but whether for good or bad I didn't know.

Deep inside there were scraps of ancient armour and assorted pieces of rusty metal and rotting cloth whose purpose was no longer apparent. I'd been worried Astel's spirit might still be lurking in here but I could sense nothing of it. The only feeling I had was of melancholy, of eons long past and forgotten. We slowly made our way further in.

At length we rounded a slight bend and ahead of us was a shimmering light.

"This is it, guys," Peter said. "Once we go through there, there's no turning back."

"I know," Mark said. I patted him on the shoulder and he reached back and took hold of my hand.

We stepped forward and passed through the light, and suddenly we were in total darkness. Around us came the murmuring of many voices and away in the distance was the sound of bagpipes.

"It's kind of cold in here," I said as the temperature seemed to plummet. Like Peter and Mark I was wearing only board shorts, but unlike them I wasn't autothermic so maybe this wasn't such a good idea. *'This is absurd'*, I thought. Here we were, a 60-year-old scientist, a 32-year-old skinny research assistant and a 7-year-old boy, marching into hell to fight for all we knew the devil himself, and our choice of battle dress? Well, just board shorts, in assorted fluoro colours. *'We thought we might have to do a bit of surfing along the way'*, I imagined telling a reporter after the event. I supposed that when we returned we could at least do an advertising campaign for the manufacturers - *the board shorts worn in Hell!*

"It will get very cold for a few moments and then the cold will turn into intense heat," Peter said, snapping me back from my rambling thoughts. "But I think it's just some sort of transitional thing and it soon passes."

He was right. Without me really noticing it, the cold had become heat and I could feel the sweat running down my forehead. A minute or so later, though, the heat had gone and I was comfortable again.

"Hey, that was really weird," Mark said. He sounded like he was in high spirits and that was good.

“Harry, I think the newbie’s back again,” rose a voice out of the murmurings.

“Yeah, I think you’re right, Maud,” came the reply. “Hey newbie, what happened? Did your pretty boyfriend get sick of your whining and throw you back?”

“Just ignore them,” Peter whispered.

“There’s someone else with the newbie this time, isn’t there?” said Maud.

“Yeah, a kid and an elf,” said Harry.

“Hey, I’m an elf!” I said. “There I was, thinking all this time I was a Jedi.”

“Be careful, elf. Your kind aren’t too popular in here, right Maud?”

“Too right, Harry. They’ll eat him alive if they catch him.”

“I don’t think I want to be an elf,” I whispered.

“I think they’re just winding you up,” said Mark.

“Hey kid,” said Harry. “Do you want a chocolate bar?”

“I don’t think that works any more with these modern sophisticated kids,” Maud said.

“Yeah, you’re right. Hey kid, do you want some Pokemon cards?”

“Just ignore them, Mark,” Peter said.

“Yeah, just ignore them, Markie,” Harry and Maud mocked in unison.

“*Begone, wretches!*” Mark cried in a loud and defiant voice that seemed to echo around in the darkness. Suddenly everything was quiet, the murmurings and even the bagpipes had stopped.

“You tell ‘em, kid!” called a voice from the distance.

“Too right, kiddo!” said another voice and this was followed by some clapping and cheering.

Slowly the murmurings started up again, but we heard no more of Harry or Maud. Then, without having noticed them starting up, I realised the bagpipes were playing again.

Out of the darkness came a faint glow moving towards us. Slowly it resolved into three shapes, and then those shapes became ghostly dolphins as they came to a halt beside us.

“We are the shepherds of Sheol. Climb onto our backs and we’ll take you to your destination.”

The three of us each clambered onto a glowing dolphin, and the next thing we knew we were flying through the darkness with the wind in our hair. In my thirty-two years I’d seen some pretty amazing things, but this would have to take the cake!

I had no real sense of how long we'd been flying, but eventually we came to a stop and the dolphins put us down.

"This is as far as we can take you. Walk forward a little further and you'll pass out of the darkness. Go with our blessing, Mark, and we wish you success in your quest."

With that they turned and were soon out of sight. We started walking forward, hoping we wouldn't become disorientated in the darkness. We'd gone about a dozen paces when a shimmering light appeared all around us, and after another step forward we found ourselves in a well-lit room.

On the opposite side of the room was a long counter, above which was a large sign that read, *'Please have all travel documents ready for inspection'*. But there were no document inspectors waiting behind the counter, nor were there any travellers queued up with their documents in hand. It was as if we'd walked into a deserted airport arrival's area, and I suppose in a way that was pretty much what we'd done.

At the right-hand end of the counter was a doorway leading off into a corridor and we quickly decided we should go that way, as the only alternative was to turn around and walk back into Sheol. I half expected the corridor to lead us to the baggage carousels where we'd collect our belongings and then go and hail a taxi to take us to our hotel, but it didn't.

Instead it took us into an unlit room with the far wall made entirely of glass. Through the window we could see a brilliant mosaic of stars and right in the centre, silhouetted against them, was a totally black disc.

"I've been expecting you," said a voice from our left and I turned to see a young woman standing there.

She switched on some subdued lighting and I saw there were a few lounge chairs arranged in one corner of the room. We sat down as she handed us glasses of water. I suddenly realised I was very thirsty, and the water was delicious and cool. *'Just the thing after a tour through hell'*, I thought.

"I'm so pleased you've arrived, Mark," she said. "My name is Maleena and the Dolphins have just awakened me. You see, I'm the last of the Guardians. Do you know the history of our world?"

"No, we really have no idea what's happened here, or what it is we're supposed to do," Peter said.

"Oh dear, that will make it harder then. I suppose I can tell you briefly what happened and we can take it from there.

"The planet we're orbiting is called Meridian. It was once the core world of the galactic republic and its inhabitants were a prosperous and successful

people. It was also the base for the race of Barefooters. Do you know about them?”

“We’ve been told they were the children of genetically modified soldiers and had special powers, very long lives and pretty much maintained the peace until the Enemy came along and spoilt everything,” I said.

“That sums it up pretty well, I guess. Anyway, when the Enemy started wiping out the Barefooters, those remaining fled back here and made this their final stand. By strength of numbers they held the Enemy at bay, but eventually he found a way under their guard. He planted twelve matter imploders around the equator and timed them to go off simultaneously. The resulting supermassive chunks of matter fell rapidly towards the core and, if they’d been allowed to reach there, would have coalesced and formed a large enough chunk to implode the planet. The Barefooters, in desperation to save their world, put a time freeze on the planet to buy them enough time to find a solution, but the Enemy spotted their spacecraft and chased them as they fled the galaxy. I was left here on this spaceport waiting in hope for their return, but they never came back. Later I learnt from our informants that the Enemy’s pursuers had returned and reported all the Barefooters were dead, but the Dolphins told me their race had been preserved in a far-away galaxy and some day a saviour would return. I had them place me in a time freeze until that day, and now you’ve come.”

“Tell me more about the Dolphins,” I said.

“They were the first sentient species and have spread themselves throughout the universe. Practically every planet that supports a diverse biosphere has dolphins swimming in its seas. They’re not builders of things like we are, instead everything they do, they do with their minds. It’s believed they are telepathic, but no-one’s ever had a straight answer from them on that. There are Dolphins inhabiting the dark realm that spans the universe, the place you call Sheol, and they’ve always helped us in times of need.”

“Three of them came to us when we entered Sheol and brought us here,” Mark said.

“Yes, I know. The Enemy deceived them once and they allowed him free passage through Sheol, and that’s how he achieved his stranglehold on the galaxy. But after what happened here they realised they’d been tricked and he no longer has access to that realm. But the Dolphins can’t fight him in the physical realm, indeed fighting is abhorrent to them in any realm, so it falls to us to deal with him.”

“There are lots of people in Sheol,” I said, “all the murmuring voices. Who are they?”

“Mostly they’re the spirits of the people from here. Their bodies are trapped in the time freeze while their souls wander lost in Sheol, unable to either move on to the realm beyond death or return to the physical realm.”

“We have to save them.”

“Yes we must, but when we do, the Enemy will know he’s been thwarted and then you’ll have to defeat him or this world will surely die.”

“That’s what I was sent here to do,” Mark said solemnly.

“Did the Barefooters have any plan for saving this world before they were chased away?” Peter asked.

“Yes they did. They were going to set up twelve subspace portals on the other side of the fold, so that when the time freeze was deactivated the supermassive chunks would all pass through and implode harmlessly in empty space. Everything’s here ready to do it, but the Enemy arrived before they could execute their plan.”

“We should get to work, then,” I said.

“Soon, but first you must eat and then rest a while.”

I suddenly realised how hungry and tired I was, and was happy to go along with her suggestion.

I woke feeling wonderfully refreshed. Maleena brought us another mountain of food, but Mark and Peter were forced to tell her they were unable to eat so soon after their last meal.

“Of course, you carry the autothermia of the Barefooters,” she said. “In you it’s not so strong, Peter, am I right?”

“Yes, that’s right, my autothermia is very mild.”

“But you, Mark,” she said, now looking at him intently. “You’re a full-blooded Barefooter.”

“Yes, I’ve been told I’m the son of Gallad and Marinda, biologically speaking.”

“Gallad himself then is dead?”

“Yes, they’re all dead, all the original Barefooters who came to our galaxy. Many of their descendents still live but their bloodline has become diluted. It’s only through a quirk of fate that I carry this heritage.”

“You’re very brave for one so young.”

“I have no choice,” he said and shrugged his shoulders.

Listening to him speak, I simply couldn’t believe he was but seven years of age. He was by far the most remarkable child I’d ever known, even more remarkable than his father and that’s saying a lot.

“Now you, Aaron,” she said as she turned towards me. “Judging by the amount of food you have piled in front of you, I think I can rightly say you’re not autothermic.”

“No such luck for me,” I said.

“Don’t be too disappointed, elf child.”

“What do you mean? Why has everyone started calling me an elf?”

“Because you’re an elf, silly one,” she said and it was the first time I’d seen her laugh. She was beautiful and I was smitten.

“But what’s an elf?” I asked.

“An elf has a powerful mind. You have strong insight, you see things others can’t, and your voice carries great influence. It’s a wonderful gift, but there are many who are suspicious of elves and despise them. You must be careful.”

“I’d always thought of myself as a Jedi,” I said. “Fictional characters from a great story on our world,” I added when she looked bewildered. “They were the guardians of peace, much like your Barefooters.”

“A noble calling indeed,” she said and smiled again. “Now eat your breakfast like a good little elf and then we can be on our way.”

It took Peter quite some time to figure out the configuration and operation of the subspace portals, but eventually they were all deployed and ready to be activated. Everything was double and triple checked because once the time freeze on the planet was deactivated there’d be no second chances.

“I have another question,” I said to Maleena when I caught her in a quiet moment.

“Always questions,” she said, but with a smile on her face. “You know they say curiosity killed the elf.”

“Don’t you mean cat?”

“Them too. Now what is it you want to know?”

“How come you can speak our language?”

“The Dolphins taught me, of course.”

“Oh, I should have guessed.”

“What’s your plan once the time freeze is deactivated?” Peter asked once everything was ready.

“Well I’m hoping we’ll draw the Enemy here and then defeat him,” she said. “Look, there’s something else I really need to tell you, and should have told you earlier but I kept waiting for the right moment and it never came.”

“Go on,” Peter said.

“The Enemy was Gallad’s father. There now, I’ve said it.”

“So that would make him Mark’s grandfather, sort of,” I said, still trying to come to terms with this latest revelation.

“Yeah, sort of. How’s that make you feel, Mark?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met him, and I’ll always think of Granddad Collins and Granddad Simpson as my real grandfathers. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“But it’s the key to our plans. The Enemy knows Gallad is dead and he was his only remaining child. When he finds out he has a grandson, you’ll draw him like a magnet. You see, we have a way of disposing of the Enemy if we can just get someone close enough to him, but he’s so well guarded none of us could ever have a chance. Mark is our only hope.”

“And what is it you want him to do?” Peter asked.

“He needs to activate a pulse of subspace energy, precisely tuned to a mechanical resonance in the fractal gene the Enemy carries and that gives him his powers. The pulse will destroy that gene in every cell of his body and he’ll become just a normal person. Once that’s done, we can take care of him.”

“Yes, that would probably work,” Peter said. “But Mark also carries that gene, so the pulse would affect him as well.”

“It might be a good thing if I became just a normal kid,” Mark said.

“I was hoping you might say something like that,” Maleena said. “Now Mark, I think this should be your decision. Do you want to give it a try?”

“That’s what I came here for.”

Peter activated the portals and made sure everything was working, then gave Maleena the nod. She took a deep breath and keyed in the code to deactivate the time freeze. For a few moments nothing happened, but then the black disc of the planet suddenly burst into colour, with land, sea and cloud once more reflecting the sunlight that fell on them. About a minute later Peter reported that something very massive had passed through each of the portals and he closed them down. A few moments later our imaging from the other side of the fold showed a bright flash of light as the twelve chunks collided and coalesced at the centre. At the same time all the communications channels to the surface burst into life.

“It’s going to be pandemonium down there for a while,” Maleena said. “You guys might as well go and relax while I take care of all the bureaucracy.”

* * *

About a week later we were escorted down to the planet’s surface for an interview with the Governor.

“We’ve programmed up some real time translators for you to use while you’re here, if you’d like to slip them on,” Maleena said as she handed each of us a headset.

We were met at the door of an ornate old building by an energetic man who introduced himself as the Minister for Science and Technology. His name, as the translator rendered it, was Bruce, and I thought he was never going to stop shaking our hands. He led us through a labyrinth of corridors until we finally came to a huge set of polished wooden doors. He opened one of them and escorted us into the Governor’s chambers.

The Governor, who was introduced to us only as *The Governor*, seated us in front of his huge wooden desk and looked at each of us in turn. Finally he scowled at Bruce.

“Are *these* our rescuers? All I see here are two elves, an old man and a child. I assume, Bruce, they have an army of Barefooters waiting behind for them on the spaceport.”

“There’s no army, your Excellency,” Bruce whimpered, “but the child is a full-blooded Barefooter, descended directly from Gallad and Marinda. The male elf is his guardian while the old man, as you call him, is a subspace scientist of great renown in his home galaxy and also a carrier of the autothermic gene. The female elf is a member of our staff and was formerly an aide to the Barefooters based here, if you recall. I think they’re a formidable team.”

“Harumph!” the Governor said, or at least that’s the noise the translator made. “About as formidable as a kindergarten tiddlywinks team. They look like they’re on their way to the beach, not about to engage the Enemy in mortal combat.”

“We’ve waited hundreds of millennia for the Barefooters to return,” Maleena said. “They have not, save for this brave child who is carrying their blood. Peter and Aaron have fought their own battles with agents of the Enemy still working in their home galaxy, and it’s in their interest too for their mission to succeed. I believe this child, Mark Collins of Earth, is our best and only chance of getting close enough to the Enemy to eliminate him. The Enemy is growing old, even for a Barefooter, and before long will have himself cloned to produce an heir. We must act before that happens or we’ll be enslaved for eternity.”

“Very well then,” the Governor grunted. “You may proceed with your plan. After all, you have ended the time freeze and thus drawn the Enemy to us anyway, so it’s too late to refuse. But I wish it to be recorded that this whole action is ill-conceived and goes against my better judgement. Good day to you all, and good luck.”

Bruce quickly ushered us out of the room before the Governor could change his mind, and took us down another winding corridor to where his biotechnical people were waiting for us.

“Are you an elf too?” I asked Maleena as soon as we were clear of the Governor’s chamber.

“Of course, silly one. Didn’t you realise?”

“No, I guess I’m still new to this elf business. But I’m glad you are.”

She kissed me briskly on the cheek and I felt myself blushing.

“We’ll need to take a blood sample from the boy so we can align the pulse frequency to his fractal gene,” one of their scientists was saying. “It’s indeed fortunate he’s such a close relative to the Enemy, since getting a sample of his blood has proven difficult to say the least.”

Mark winced slightly as his finger was pricked but made no other protests.

“I suggest you take him back to the spaceport while we carry out our tests. After all, we don’t want to accidentally erase the gene from the boy now, do we?”

Bruce escorted us to our shuttle and soon we were back in orbit. The long hours and days of waiting had begun.

The Enemy

“I’ve just received word that the Enemy is on his way here,” Maleena said. “He’s expected to arrive in about three hours.”

I took hold of Mark’s hand and held it tightly.

The scientists had completed their tests and had moulded the subspace pulse generator into one of the studs on his board shorts. To activate it he’d have to press down hard on it for three seconds, and we’d all cautioned him against accidentally triggering it. Since the generator contained no explosive devices or toxic substances, they were fairly confident it would pass undetected through the security scanning he’d be subjected to. We hoped they were right.

I’d learnt that the Enemy’s proper name was Morgoth, a name obviously designed to convey fear and dread to anyone who heard it. But everyone around here just referred to him as The Enemy, as if mentioning him by name might conjure him up. They said he was well over a million years old, but I couldn’t imagine how anyone would want to live that long. I’m sure I’d die of boredom long before then, after all there are only so many worlds to conquer, so many planets to destroy, and then it all starts to become a bit too tedious and repetitive.

Morgoth’s ship emerged from subspace and demanded docking clearance with the spaceport. We were standing with Maleena on the viewing platform overlooking the docking bay when the airlock was secured and the hatch opened. Dozens of uniformed guards marched out and formed an impenetrable perimeter around the entrance.

“He knows you’re here,” Maleena said to Mark. “I’m instructed to take you down to the docking bay now to meet with him. How do you feel?”

“Scared.”

“You’ll be fine,” she said.

“We’ll be right here waiting for you,” I said to him as I hugged him tightly.

“Just remember to make sure you get nice and close to him before triggering the pulse,” Peter whispered.

Maleena took Mark by the hand and led him down the stairs, and we watched through the viewing glass as two of the guards approached them and then escorted him into the ship. Just as he was about to enter the hatch he turned towards us and winked, and at that moment I could have just sat down on the floor and cried my eyes out.

We went back out to the spaceport’s maintenance centre. A subspace receiver had been set up and tuned to the pulse frequency so we’d know straight away the moment he’d triggered the generator. There were teams of armed militia concealed around the docking bay ready to storm the ship the moment that happened, hopefully to rescue him.

Time passed. Firstly minutes, then tens of minutes, and then hours. There was no pulse, nor was there any sign of disturbance around the ship. The circle of guards stood as still as statues. I felt sick to the stomach and wanted to just curl up into a tiny ball and disappear. Maleena came and stood beside me, then gently took hold of my hand. More time passed.

At long last the hatch opened and a man dressed like a Shakespearean actor strode out and stood at the centre of the circle of guards.

“His Imperial Highness, Morgoth the Enlightened, wishes it made known that He has formally adopted His grandson, Mark, as His heir and successor.”

“Praise the Enlightened One,” the guards responded in unison.

“Furthermore, His Highness requests that the three companions of Mark, namely Peter, Aaron, and Maleena, join with them at table in one hour’s time.”

With that he turned and strode back into the ship, the hatch slamming shut behind him.

“What do you make of all that?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Maleena said. “I can only hope it’s some sort of ploy Mark is playing.”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Peter said. “Very bad.”

An hour later we assembled before the guards in the docking bay. The hatch opened and we were led inside the ship where we were immediately scanned with various screening devices. Our translator headsets were removed and scrutinised before being handed back to us again.

We were then led up a flight of stairs and into an immense room with a transparent ceiling that looked out into space. In the centre of the room was

a huge table laid out with a massive variety of foods, and seated at one end on what looked like thrones were Mark and an extremely old man whom I assumed was Morgoth. Our Enemy had tufts of pure white hair sticking out randomly from his otherwise bald scalp and was wearing what appeared to be a Roman toga. I had to pinch myself to stop from giggling. Mark, at least, was still wearing his board shorts and that gave me some cause for hope.

“Your Highnesses, may I present Doctor Peter Thorpe and his elves Aaron and Maleena,” the guard proclaimed. They’d obviously done their homework on Peter’s full title but I was a bit peeved to be ranked as just one of his elves. For a moment I had a vision of myself in a little pointy hat making toys for him and almost giggled again.

“Join us, please,” Morgoth’s voice resonated through the translator. It was clear and full and portrayed no sign of his apparent frailty.

I looked around the room and saw there were numerous men in black tee shirts and trousers moving what appeared to be TV cameras and lights about.

“What’s with the camera crew?” I whispered to Maleena.

“They’re broadcasting this live across the galaxy, so you’d better be on your best behaviour, my beloved elf.”

She brushed the hair away from my eyes but it immediately flopped back down over them again like it always did. She sighed.

“Please, help yourselves to the food,” Mark said as we sat down. I grabbed a few slices of meat I thought would taste like chicken (it did!), along with an assortment of vegetables and fruit. It was actually very good and I refilled my plate several times. For a while I forgot all about overthrowing our host.

Some time later Morgoth tapped his knife against a glass and we all looked up while the cameras and microphones moved in.

“I am growing old,” he said, “and my remaining days in this realm are becoming few in number. With the reported death of my beloved son Gallad so long ago, I was beginning to despair that I would depart with no heir to succeed me. But this very day a child bearing the parentage of Gallad and Marinda has come to me unannounced, and I have proudly declared him to be my grandson and heir. During his training I will continue to rule, but let it be known that as soon as he’s ready I will be handing over full powers to him.”

I was in a state of shock. I simply couldn’t believe Mark had betrayed us and joined with the Enemy.

“In honour of this great day, and after lengthy consultation with my heir, I have some further announcements to make,” Morgoth continued. “Effective immediately, full autonomy is granted to each of the twelve

principal worlds in this galaxy, save only that we shall have ultimate say in resolving any disputes between said worlds. Also effective immediately, all hostilities against the descendents of the Barefooters, including those now residing in the galaxy from which my grandson has come, are ended, and they are hereby granted unconditional free pardon.”

“Aaron and Peter, you are free to return home now,” Mark said softly. “I’d ask only that you convey my grandfather’s proclamation to Elko and the others living on Genesis. He has given me his assurance there’ll be no further aggression against any of your worlds.”

I was stunned, and Jason’s parting words echoed inside my head. “*Don’t lose him, Aaron, please, just don’t lose him*”, he’d said to me, but now I’d gone and done precisely that. I could feel the tears beginning to well up behind my eyes and I covered my face with my hands.

“Don’t be sad, Uncle Aaron,” Mark said. “Tell my parents I have fulfilled my quest and brought peace to both this galaxy and theirs, and tell them I still love them dearly, even though I’ll probably never see them again.”

“There can be no peace when it’s enforced from without,” Peter said unexpectedly. “There’s no black and white distinction between good and evil, and even the most terrible despots began with the best of intentions to do what they believed to be good. Look into your soul, Mark, and make absolutely sure that what you’re doing is right.”

“I am sure, Peter,” he said softly and calmly.

Peter’s words brought back to me memories of another time, when Jason had defeated the Empress but succumbed to the lure of absolute power and assumed the title of Emperor himself. It was Peter who’d saved the day by destroying the orb and ending that time line, now perhaps it was my turn.

“Mark, remember your father and the Empress,” I said, using all my Jedi powers of persuasion. “Don’t let that happen again.”

He looked into my eyes and I could see waves of conflicting emotions flowing through him. Slowly his left hand slid down off the table and came to rest on his lap. I held my breath.

“Grandfather, I can’t,” he whispered, and then all hell broke loose.

Morgoth and Mark collapsed to the floor, both of them unconscious. Morgoth’s skin hardened and cracked, then his whole body decomposed and disintegrated as his million years of age suddenly caught up with him. In a matter of moments there was nothing left of him but dust and a few fragments of bone. Alarms screamed and guards came rushing in, but when they saw what had happened they were so stunned with disbelief they didn’t know what to do. The camera crews were beside themselves, knowing

they'd just broadcast the scoop of the millennium. Peter, Maleena and I just sat there with our mouths open, unable to move.

Mark stirred and opened his eyes. For a few moments he looked totally lost, but then he remembered where he was and stood up with his hands raised and a gleam in his eyes. There was total silence now, even the alarms had stopped, and the cameras and lights were all pointed squarely at him.

“My subjects, behold!” he cried. “My grandfather, Morgoth the Enlightened, has departed this realm and I, Mark the Bewildered, now stand in his place as his rightful heir and successor.”

Mark the Bewildered?

I almost burst out laughing, this was just so marvellous. For I knew the pulse had also destroyed all of Mark's powers as the Last of the Barefooters and this was just one enormous bluff on his part. So far at least it seemed to be working.

The imperial guards already in the room looked around at each other, unsure of what to do next. Then another came rushing in, more decorated than the others and most likely their captain. He quickly glanced around and took in what had transpired, then his eyes fell upon Mark and he raised his weapon towards him. I feared Mark would cower or turn away, and that would have been the end for us all. I concentrated all my Jedi thought power at him, trying to bolster him up, but I didn't know if I got through. For the moment, at least, he held firm though and met the guard's gaze. They stood testing each other for what seemed an eternity.

Then the guard began moving cautiously towards him, still with his weapon raised, and finally stopped with the business end of it just centimetres from Mark's chest. I held my breath, but Mark remained steady and maintained his eye contact with the guard.

Time stood still, then without warning the guard dropped his gaze, knelt and placed his weapon at Mark's feet. He remained kneeling, apparently expecting Mark to do something to complete the ritual. Mark gave me a puzzled look. “*Pick it up and give it back to him,*” I mouthed, and he obeyed. The guard accepted his weapon back, bowed and turned away.

All the other guards then went through the same ritual, and when this had been completed Mark turned back to the TV cameras. He steadied himself and took a deep breath.

“My loyal subjects, hark my words and listen carefully. By the powers that have been lawfully passed to me by my late grandfather, I stand down from my position as Supreme Ruler of the Universe, or whatever, and declare that post null and void for all time to come. The reign of Mark the Bewildered is ended and this galaxy released from my dominion. I have

done what I came here to do, and my only wish now is to return to my home on Earth, if someone will show me the way.”

With that he ran forward and jumped into my lap.

“Did I say all the right words?” he whispered to me. For the first time in my life I was struck speechless, so I just hugged him for all it was worth.

We were escorted from the ship and back into the spaceport by Morgoth’s former guards, and watched in silence as it was released from the dock and sent on its way to a fiery destruction in Meridian’s sun. Mark stood quietly between Peter and me with his head bowed and his hands clasped tightly around ours.

“The Governor has asked us to come down to the surface for a civic reception,” Maleena said later. Mark looked up at me with pleading eyes.

“Maleena, could you thank the Governor for his kind invitation, but tell him Mark needs to rest now and then return to his parents as soon as he can,” I said. She nodded, kissed me on the cheek and strode off to convey our apology. Mark smiled and I patted him on the shoulder.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s get you into your bed.”

“I don’t think Morgoth really meant to be a bad person,” he said as he settled into bed. “He told me all he ever wanted to do was bring peace and stability to the universe, and he regretted so much the rift that had grown between himself and Gallad. I thought if I was his heir I’d be able to set things right and make everybody happy, but that’s not possible, is it?”

“I don’t think it is. Your father discovered that in his confrontation with the Empress, and if absolute power can do that to such a good man as him then I don’t think there’s much hope for the rest of us.”

“I know. When you told me to remember about Dad I realised the same thing would eventually happen to me, and I knew then what I had to do. The old man on Genesis who said you’d be my guide was right.”

“I guess he was after all,” I said, but Mark had already drifted off to sleep.

The four of us were standing in the bustling departure lounge of the spaceport. Across the room on the far side was the shimmering portal into Sheol.

“Do you think, after a million years of absolute dictatorship, this galaxy will be able to cope with self-government?” I asked Maleena.

“It will be difficult at first, but I think they’ll cope. There’ll now be a concerted effort for peace and co-operation, to make sure a dictator like Morgoth can never rise again.”

“So I guess this is it,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I don’t suppose you’d consider coming back to Earth to live with me, would you?”

“Oh Aaron, elf child, I can read your mind like an open book. You’re expecting me to say no, my duty lies here with my people, and then we’ll kiss and go our separate ways, each heartbroken but noble to the bitter end. Then the music will swell and the credits will roll. Am I right?”

I nodded feebly.

“Well you’re wrong, silly one. Of course I’d love to go back and live with you on Earth, or wherever you decide you want to stay. I love you, and to hell with this place.”

We both laughed and then hugged and kissed each other.

“Come on you two,” Mark said. “The Dolphins will die of old age if we wait any longer.”

“Hey kid, want a chocolate bar?” came a cry from across the room.

“That won’t work with these modern sophisticated kids,” a woman’s voice replied. I looked across to a small confectionery store with a fat balding man and a woman wearing far too much makeup behind the counter.

“Harry?” Peter said.

“Hey, it’s the newbie and the elf. Come over here and let me get a good look at you.”

“We saw you on the telecast, kid,” Maud said after we’d walked over to the counter. “You did really great.”

“Yeah, do you think I could have your autograph?” Harry asked as he handed Mark a piece of paper and a pen.

He took them and quickly scribbled something down, then showed it to me before handing them back to Harry. ‘*To Harry and Maud*’, it read. ‘*Good luck and best wishes from Mark the Bewildered*’. Harry read it then folded it and placed it in his pocket.

“Thanks kid. I’ll have it framed and keep it here forever. Here, have a chocolate bar, on the house.”

“Mm, this is really excellent,” Mark said as he munched into his chocolate. “I think maybe I should stay here after all.”

I grabbed him by the hand and dragged him towards the portal. I took one last look around and then we all joined hands and stepped through.

We were surrounded by darkness, but this time there were no murmuring voices and no bagpipes either. I wondered for a moment where the piper had come from and where he was now.

“Look, here they come!” Mark said, and away in the distance I could see four glowing shapes. A few moments later the Dolphins had pulled up alongside us.

“You all did a wonderful job. Now hop aboard and we’ll take you home as quickly as we can.”

It seemed no time at all before they came to a halt and we climbed off their backs.

“Thanks for the ride,” Peter said.

“Wait here and hold each other’s hands tightly so you don’t become separated. Jason’s spirit will be here shortly to guide you the rest of the way.”

We did as we were told and the Dolphins departed, leaving us in total darkness. My nightmare about losing Mark came flooding back to me and I hoped it wasn’t about to come true. I tightened my grip on his hand.

“Ouch!” he cried. “Not so tight Aaron, okay?”

“Sorry,” I said, loosening my grip a little.

Soon we saw a glow in the distance and could hear Jason calling out to us.

“We’re over here, Dad!” Mark yelled and tried to pull away from me. I tightened my grip and pulled him back.

“Wait here and he’ll come to us,” I said sternly.

Jason’s glowing spirit came to us and took hold of our hands. A moment later we were standing in bright sunshine with the real Jason now holding us. Jenny rushed over, grabbed hold of Mark and nearly squeezed him to death.

“Mark the Bewildered indeed!” she said. “Where on Earth did you get that from?”

“I don’t know how they did it, but someone managed to patch that broadcast through to here,” Jason said after we’d returned to the Firstborn’s village. “We almost died when Mark said he was going to stay there with that horrible Morgoth and rule the galaxy, and then when they collapsed we thought some assassin had killed them both. I even thought that maybe the assassin had been you or Peter. Then I couldn’t believe it when Mark stood up, stared down the captain of the guards and made that amazing speech. I was so proud of him I could have burst.”

“So was I, Jase, so was I,” I said.

“Hey everyone, come out here!” Mark was yelling. “Quickly, down to the bay, down to the bay!”

We ran down to the shore and there, a short distance from the beach, a pod of dolphins was frolicking in the waves. Mark ran out into the water to join them and we all followed. They swam around us, rubbing us all over with their noses, and then one came up underneath Mark and he rode it around and around the bay, screaming with delight.

Afterwards I asked Elko if he knew when the dolphins had been released into the ecosystem.

“We haven’t released any dolphins. They’re at the top of the food chain and weren’t scheduled for many years yet. I have no idea where they came from.”

The next morning the dolphins were gone, and the time had come for us also to say farewell to our hosts and depart for home. Before we went, however, Raphus and Dromaius held a special ceremony in the Council hall where Mark, Peter, Maleena and I were presented with gold medallions. It was very touching, and a moment I’ll treasure forever.

Elf Child

It's Mark's eighth birthday, and draped across the front of the Collins' house is a banner that reads '*Happy Birthday Mark the Bewildered*'. Below that in smaller print is '*Supreme Ruler of the Universe or Whatever (retired)*'. I think the joke is starting to wear a bit thin, but Mark doesn't seem to mind. He told me everyone at school now calls him Mark the Bewildered and he expects that the nickname will stick with him forever.

Even though he's no longer autothermic, he continues to go barefoot everywhere and rarely wears a shirt if he can get away with it. I guess he's much like me in that respect.

Speaking of me, I'm still not entirely sure what it means to be an elf. Maleena and I are certainly not elves in the Tolkien sense, and I'm beginning to suspect it's just a word that was chosen in the translation of whatever term is used to describe Maleena's race. Perhaps the Dolphins who did the translation had a sense of humour.

Maleena and I were married four months ago. The most amazing thing is that, in spite of being born galaxies apart, we are biologically compatible and now have a little elfling on the way. I don't know how I ended up carrying the elvish genes, though, but I think I might let that remain a mystery. After all, curiosity did kill the elf.

My father has finally come to terms with his alcoholism and has joined Alcoholics Anonymous. I swore to my mother I'd never take to drink and, apart from that one infamous glass of champagne at Jase's wedding, I've been true to my word. I know I carry my father's weakness and I'll continue to honour my pledge for as long as I live. I am, after all, a Jedi.

Aaron Smith

Part Seven

A Collision of Times

Elfstar

Kevin was woken by the loud clunk as the door to the cell block opened. He listened as the heavy footsteps of the guards marched towards his cell, and tried as best he could to prepare himself. In a way he felt relieved that his long struggle would soon be over, but he knew that for his people only more dark times lay ahead.

His people, the Elves as they were now known, were amongst the oldest in the galaxy, dating back to the earliest migrations from the home world of Meridian. Elfstar, the brightest star in the constellation of the Elf, had been the target of the first interstellar explorations as it could be reached in just a few years even at sublight speed. The fourth planet from the star, Bluehaven, was a warm, wet world with eighty percent of its surface covered by shallow seas, and most of the land mass spread around the equator as numerous small, thickly-forested islands. There were no land animals apart from insects and some small birds, but the seas were teeming with fish and were also the home of the planet's sentient species, the Dolphins. While of great interest to the scientists and philosophers of the time, it had little in the way of mineral wealth and thus remained largely unspoilt.

Once subspace had been discovered, interest in Bluehaven waned further as other more lucrative planets were found and settled. In time the only inhabitants that remained were the monks of the Delphinidae, the dolphin-worshippers, and their followers, who had learnt to communicate with the Dolphins and made it their home.

When the wars erupted across the galaxy many fled to Bluehaven, but soon the monks were forced to close the spaceports and shut down all off-world communications channels, and the planet was again forgotten. For hundreds of years the wars raged, but then the race of Barefooters rose and enforced a peace of sorts. Diplomats were sent from Bluehaven to sit on the Galactic Council on Meridian.

The rule of law enforced by the Barefooters lasted five thousand years. The population worshipped them, and in time they began to think of themselves as gods. Society stagnated and eventually corruption took hold and became endemic. But there came a young Barefooter who was disgusted by all he saw, and one night he and his followers overthrew the ruling elite. His name was Morgoth, and for a while his crusade against corruption seemed to be just the tonic the galaxy needed. He often visited Bluehaven and spent many days in meditation with the Dolphins. From them he learnt many things and was shown the passageways of Sheol they used to travel to all the dolphin-inhabited worlds in the universe.

But the corruption of absolute power he'd fought so hard against eventually devoured Morgoth himself. His beloved son, Gallad, tried as hard as he could to convince his father to relinquish power before it consumed him totally, but failed and became estranged. Tensions grew until, in a final showdown, Morgoth attempted to destroy Meridian, but Gallad and his followers placed the planet in a time freeze and fled the galaxy.

The trouble between Morgoth and Gallad had really begun many years earlier. Gallad had a brother named Martyn who was two years his senior, but Martyn was a soft-spoken gentle boy who preferred poetry, music and philosophy to the military training Morgoth forced upon him. On his sixteenth birthday he was called before his father.

"You are my eldest son and heir," Morgoth said. "You are supposed to be a strong and ruthless warrior, a leader of armies, and yet you spend all of your time with your head buried in books. Bah!" He spat on him.

"I give you a choice," he roared. "Burn your books and take your rightful place by my side, or be forever disendowed and live in exile. What do you say?"

"If that is my choice, then it is exile I choose."

Morgoth's face turned red and he leapt to his feet in rage.

"Begone, for you're no longer my son," he bellowed, and Martyn ran from the palace and boarded the first available transport to Bluehaven. There he was welcomed into the community and soon met and fell in love with Loria, eldest daughter of the Delphinidae high priestess.

Martyn and Loria lived in bliss for a little over a year. Loria fell pregnant and nine months later presented him with a baby daughter, but word of the birth soon reached Morgoth and he came to Bluehaven in a rage, ordering their arrest. The Delphinidae concealed the baby and convinced Morgoth it had died, but Martyn and Loria were captured.

“How dare you mix the blood of a Barefooter with that of an elf,” Morgoth roared. “Have you no sense of the damage that will do to me? Have you?”

“I don’t understand,” Martyn cried. “I have done nothing wrong.”

“You have never understood, and that’s the problem. Now both of you, come with me and perhaps you will learn. And you too, Gallad, for this is as much a lesson for you as it is for your former brother.”

Martyn and Loria were taken to the shore and bound to the rocks at low tide. Morgoth sat and waited as the waters rose around them, with Gallad forced to sit and watch beside him. Slowly, inevitably, the waves began to wash over their heads.

“I will avenge this, father!” Martyn cried with his last breath. “Even if it takes a million years, I will avenge this.”

“At last you show a bit of steel in yourself,” Morgoth said. “Perhaps there’s hope for you yet.”

“Then let them go, father,” Gallad pleaded. “You’ve made your point.”

“No,” Morgoth said, and sat in silence as he watched them die.

Soon after that Morgoth moved his headquarters to Bluehaven, taking over the old Delphinidae temple on the western shore of Dolphin Island. He also seized a large tract of land where he built his prison and execution stadium.

But Martyn and Loria’s daughter survived in secret, and she and her descendants continued to lead the Elven people down through the millennia. The story of Martyn and Loria turned into legend, and it became tradition amongst the leaders to give their eldest daughter a name similar to Loria in the hope she would capture some of her spirit. So it was that Kevin’s daughter, now seven years of age, was named Lorina.

* * *

Kevin blinked as he was escorted from the cell block. The air was cool and fresh on this beautiful morning as the sun rose above the walls of the stadium, the same sun that would shortly end his life. There was already a small crowd of spectators and they hushed as he walked into the arena. Many a time the victim would have to be dragged screaming out to the centre, but Kevin wasn’t about to give the Enemy that pleasure. When he reached the execution platform he stood for a moment with his head bowed, then removed his gown and climbed the seven steps to eternity. The guards secured the shackles on his arms and legs and stepped away.

There was a loud mechanical rumble as the mirrors surrounding the arena rose up and locked into position. A spot of intense light, sunlight

magnified and focused by them, appeared just below the base of the platform. As the sun rose into the sky, the spot of light would move along the platform and in about thirty minutes would reach his feet. Then, over the course of the next hour, it would burn its way up his legs, abdomen, chest and finally his head. Death, although inevitable, usually didn't come for many hours or sometimes even days after the burning, and Morgoth would stay, watching, until the very end.

The minutes passed and the spot of light drew closer to his feet. He could already feel the warmth on his soles. He closed his eyes. His only hope now was that his death would not be in vain, that some day, eventually, his people would be free once more. He smiled as he imagined what it would be like on that day, seeing in his mind's eye the joyous crowds running through the streets in celebration of freedom and life. For just a moment he was certain this day would be soon, very soon. Thus it was he didn't notice straight away that the warmth on the soles of his feet had disappeared.

He looked up and was almost blinded by a flash of reflected sunlight as the mirrors retracted. The guards mounted the platform on either side of him and released the shackles.

"The Enlightened One has been called away unexpectedly," one of them whispered to him. "You're to be kept in storage until he can return."

The door to the cell block slammed shut and he was once more alone. What had happened today was without precedent. From what he knew of Morgoth, nothing, simply nothing, would be allowed to interfere with an execution, particularly one with such important political overtones. The Elves were seen by many as the last bastion of resistance to Morgoth's total domination of the galaxy, and the execution of their leader's husband had great symbolic power. He fell into an uneasy sleep.

In time the guards returned, but instead of taking him back out to the arena, they escorted him to the office of the Director of Justice. The Director beckoned him to sit.

"Behold, our magnificent leader," he said as he switched on the monitor screen, and Kevin watched in amazement.

"I am growing old," Morgoth said, "and my remaining days in this realm are becoming few in number. With the reported death of my beloved son Gallad so long ago, I was beginning to despair that I would depart with no heir to succeed me. But this very day a child bearing the parentage of Gallad and Marinda has come to me unannounced, and I have proudly declared him to be my grandson and heir. During his training I will continue to rule, but let it be known that as soon as he's ready I will be handing over full powers to him."

“In honour of this great day, and after lengthy consultation with my heir, I have some further announcements to make. Effective immediately, full autonomy is granted to each of the twelve principal worlds in this galaxy, save only that we shall have ultimate say in resolving any disputes between said worlds. Also effective immediately, all hostilities against the descendents of the Barefooters, including those now residing in the galaxy from which my grandson has come, are ended, and they are hereby granted unconditional free pardon.”

“Does that mean what I think it does?” Kevin asked, eyes wide in amazement.

“We’ll have to wait for confirmation, but I believe it does. You are, or will soon be, a free man, Kevin.”

His eyes returned to the screen. There was some discussion taking place between this new grandson and those sitting opposite him at Morgoth’s table. The camera panned across and he saw they were an elderly man and two Elves, and then with a shock he realised one of the Elves was the fabled Maleena.

“Mark, remember your father and the Empress,” the other Elf with her was saying. *“Don’t let that happen again.”* He was using the Voice, in public, and in the presence of Morgoth no less! How could this be, he wondered?

“Grandfather, I can’t,” the child sitting beside Morgoth whispered, and then both collapsed to the floor. The camera pulled back and he could see many guards running into the room. Alarms were blaring and everyone was shouting. The camera zoomed in on Morgoth and he couldn’t believe his eyes as he saw his Enemy dissolve away in a cloud of dust.

Then the child stood and raised his arms. Everything and everyone became silent. His heart sank, for he knew this child, Morgoth’s grandson it seemed, would now declare himself Supreme Ruler and usher in yet another era of darkness.

“My subjects, behold!” the child cried. *“My grandfather, Morgoth the Enlightened, has departed this realm and I, Mark the Bewildered, now stand in his place as his rightful heir and successor.”*

Mark the Bewildered? Kevin was certain that’s what he’d said, but he must surely have been mistaken. He looked back at the screen and saw the captain of the guards was now challenging the boy, but he stood firm and

eventually the guard placed his weapon at the boy's feet and offered his fealty. 'So it is done', Kevin thought. 'We now have a new Morgoth'. His heart sank.

"My loyal subjects, hark my words and listen carefully," the boy continued. "By the powers that have been lawfully passed to me by my late grandfather, I stand down from my position as Supreme Ruler of the Universe, or whatever, and declare that post null and void for all time to come. The reign of Mark the Bewildered is ended and this galaxy released from my dominion. I have done what I came here to do, and my only wish now is to return to my home on Earth, if someone will show me the way."

Kevin watched in amazement as the child then ran across the room and leapt into the arms of the male Elf.

The Director switched off the monitor, knelt before him, and said, "I am at your mercy, my lord."

For seven years the galaxy lived in relative peace. New governments were formed and treaties signed. On Bluehaven the Director gladly handed his authority over to the Delphinidae, who in turn reinstated him as Mayor. The old libraries and theatres were reopened and it was indeed a joyous and happy time in which Lorina grew from childhood into adulthood.

But little by little the old disagreements resurfaced. Morgoth's former henchmen, who had scattered and disappeared following his death, now regrouped and formed guerrilla squads. In the latest raid all of the governing council on Meridian had been killed and chaos had taken over there.

Inevitably the guerrillas came to Bluehaven and the Delphinidae, fearing they may suffer the same fate as those on Meridian, fled to their temple. Lorina knelt before the Shrine and prayed to the Dolphins and to Mother Loria for guidance, that she might yet find a way to save her people. Quite unexpectedly her thoughts turned to the boy, a boy named Mark who had rid the galaxy of Morgoth and then vanished. She wondered where he was now.

One Fateful Day

It's the 14th of September 2044, and today my grandfather, Billy Collins, turns seventy. Tomorrow it's Peter Thorpe's turn, and we're all gathered at my great-grandparents' farm for their joint birthday party. Tom and Sarah Collins, now in their mid-nineties, are still doing fine, thanks no doubt to the Emu blood flowing in their veins and their healthy lifestyle on the outskirts of Narrabri. Tom is still regularly leading tours of the Emu cave and other Aboriginal sites in the area, and occasionally poking his head in at the radio telescope to make sure the young whipper-snappers who are now running the place are doing their jobs properly. He doesn't do much actual farming these days, though, preferring to leave that to the hired hands, mostly young men and women from the local Aboriginal communities. Billy and Peter, who once carried the Emu and Dodo spirits that became Dromaius and Raphus, have hardly aged at all.

There are lots of well-wishers gathered here today and the area around the farmhouse is littered with an odd assortment of vehicles. Hiding amongst them and trying to look inconspicuous is an Eridanian ambassadorial shuttle. From the open hatch Ambassador Todd Myers and his wife Elissi from Eridani are emerging, together with Dad's friend Norrie who is now the Eridanian Chief Environmental Scientist. Last year Norrie received Eridani's highest honour for his work over the past twenty years on the restoration of the southern ocean and ecosystems, and we were all invited to the ceremony.

It was my first trip to Eridani. I'd read about the time Dad and my grandparents had gone to Todd's wedding and were subsequently kidnapped, and I was naturally a bit nervous. But we'd been assured there'd be no danger this time.

The ceremony was held outdoors in an amphitheatre on the shore of the southern ocean. A huge crowd was in attendance, and a hush fell over them as the five members of the Governing Council walked out onto the stage,

resplendent in their fine robes of office and of course barefoot. Nobody, but nobody, wears shoes on Eridani.

I'd been studying Eridanian at school. It wasn't a particularly difficult language to learn, but, as I'd discovered when we'd first arrived, there's a world of difference between learning a language in the classroom and being able to converse with the native speakers of that tongue. The Council members spoke slowly and clearly, though, so I managed to follow the proceedings reasonably well.

After some preliminary speeches a huge gong was struck and Norrie walked out onto the stage, flanked by two more robed Eridanians and completely naked. I looked around the crowd, expecting some sort of reaction, but everyone was silent and stony-faced.

"The guest of honour is always presented naked at these ceremonies," Dad whispered in my ear and I nodded.

Each of the Councillors spoke at length about Norrie's life and achievements while he stood perfectly still with his head bowed. It was a bit like that television show where some famous person has their life story told by everyone who ever knew them, and by the time the fifth Councillor stepped forward I was starting to become aware of just how hard my seat was.

Finally all the speeches were made, and yet another robed Eridanian stepped forward with a bundle of cloth in his hands. From the top one of the Councillors lifted a huge gold medallion and hung it around Norrie's neck. A second Councillor then lifted the bundle, which turned out to be a set of robes, and all five proceeded to dress him in them. They stood back once they'd finished, and then for the first time he raised his head and grinned. The crowd went wild with cheering. He responded with a lengthy speech, thanking everyone who had ever worked with him on the southern ocean project.

It was an amazing experience, but I was sure glad when it was over. Afterwards there was a great party and feast, with musicians and singers from all across Eridani. I had my first taste of Eridanian wine, but my recollections of what happened after that are somewhat hazy.

Not long after we returned from Eridani, Granddad and Peter decided it was time they went into semi-retirement and handed the running of the business over to my parents. The company had grown to more than thirty staff and managing it all was pretty much a full time job with little spare time for research. Dad had a couple of very bright physicists working with him at the time who were more than capable of taking over leadership of the research teams, so the transition went pretty smoothly. Unlike Granddad,

Dad's autothermia hasn't diminished with age and he still can't wear a shirt, but since the whole galaxy is aware of his condition this hasn't been much of a problem for him.

Uncle Tim and his wife Susan have also come out to Narrabri for the celebrations. Susan was Mum's best friend at school and had been going out with her brother for about ten years before they finally decided to tie the knot. Susan, who used to be the high priestess of fashion footwear, was finally converted to barefootedness by Tim. I'd hoped they might have given her an Eridanian-style award ceremony when she threw away her shoes, but alas they didn't.

After the wedding Tim let me in on a closely-guarded family secret. It happened the morning after Mum had regained consciousness following her car accident, and Susan and Tim had arrived at the hospital just as Dad and Aaron were leaving.

"Who were they?" Susan eventually asked after she'd recovered from the joy of seeing her best friend alive and well.

"That was Jason Collins and his friend," Mum said. "It was Jason who called me back from the darkness."

"That was Jason?" Susan asked, sounding quite shocked. "But he looked like some stray Aboriginal kid who'd just wandered in from the desert. You'd think he'd at least have had the decency to put a shirt and some shoes on."

"He can't, because of his autothermia," Mum explained. "He said he loves me, and we'll be going together as soon as I'm out of here. It's like a dream come true!"

"You can't be serious. Surely you know what they're like. Those Aborigines, they're all the same, you know. Mark my words, he'll either get you pregnant and shoot through, or take to drink and start bashing you, or probably both. Stay away from him, you hear!"

"But he's not like that at all, and neither are any of his family. They're good people and I love him, and that's all that matters. I never knew you were so prejudiced."

"I'm not," she said, but not very convincingly. "Look, let's not argue now, you're supposed to be convalescing you know. But don't say I didn't warn you. Now tell me about the other one, the dorky-looking one with his hair hanging down over his eyes. What do you think?"

"Yeah, he's nice too. His name's Aaron and he's a Jedi."

"A what?"

“A Jedi, like in Star Wars. He’ll be studying astronomy with us before going off to complete his training.”

“So it’s the Abo and the Loonie,” Susan said, sighing. “Tim, maybe you can talk some sense into your sister.”

“Um, actually having a real live Jedi around the house might be handy,” he said, and Susan hit him.

She did eventually come around once she got to know Dad, and even admitted that her prejudice against Aborigines was pretty stupid, but Tim still keeps stirring her about it whenever he gets the chance. I don’t think her opinion of Aaron has changed much, though. I think she’s even a little afraid of him, and of course he senses this and plays on it whenever he can.

Speaking of Aaron, he, Maleena and their son Christopher are also here for the party. Aaron’s wildest dream came true five years ago when he was selected to represent his country in the cricket tour of England. He scored a century in his maiden test and went on to finish the series with a batting average of 86. He remained in the test squad for two more seasons before age finally caught up with him. Chris, who’s now nine, is also pretty handy with the bat and looks like following in his father’s footsteps.

Now I hate to say it, but I think Chris idolizes me. Outside of school he’s always hanging around with me and my best friend Sean, but that’s okay as he’s a nice kid and really smart for his age. I kind of think of him as my cousin, since I used to call his father Uncle Aaron even though there’s no blood relationship. Anyway, unless Tim and Susan produce any offspring he’s the closest thing to a cousin I’m ever going to have. He caused a bit of a stir last year, though, when he went missing.

Maleena went into his room one morning to call him when he hadn’t arrived at the breakfast table, but he wasn’t there. They searched the house high and low but there was no sign of him. Aaron called Dad and he quickly got all of us around to his place to help in the search. Soon all of Coolum Beach had joined in too.

Granddad, who took on the role of search co-ordinator, equipped everyone with a map, compass and phone and sent us off to scour the countryside. Sean and I were assigned the national park north of the town and we plotted out a route that took us through the inland side first and then back along the coastal side. There were many steep-sided gullies with thick undergrowth and the going was pretty tough. We spread out a little when the vegetation was thickest but tried not to get too far apart in case we became lost ourselves. That would have been rather embarrassing since we were both fairly keen bushwalkers.

We reached the northernmost extreme of our search area at about two o'clock and I called Granddad on the phone. He said there'd been no sign at all of Chris, and everyone was getting very worried. A shuttle was being flown up from Brisbane to do an aerial search and was expected to arrive soon. We found a shady spot under a tree and ate our lunch in silence.

The coastal side of the park was flatter and the going a good deal easier for our return trip even though the undergrowth was generally thicker. Several times we saw the shuttle passing overhead and I called Granddad again at about five o'clock but there was still no news. Sunset was only a bit over an hour away and the thought of Chris spending the night out there alone and possibly injured made me feel sick.

The sun had just set when we came out onto the beach at the edge of town. I was about to call Granddad to let him know we'd completed our search when Sean pointed across to the end of the headland.

"What's that up on the rocks there?" he asked. It was too dim now for me to tell, so we sprinted up the beach to investigate.

As we came nearer my heart sank as I realised it was a person lying face-down on the rocks. I called out Chris's name and ran as fast as I could, with Sean close behind me, but the person didn't move. I could see now it was definitely Chris. He was naked and wet, with seaweed tangled around his legs. I reached down to check for any pulse, convinced now there'd be none, but as soon as my hand touched his neck he lifted his head.

"Chris!"

"Markie," he said softly. "Is that you?"

He turned around a bit more, but looked terribly weak.

"I'm here," I said, now holding him in my arms. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. I'm just cold, and very tired."

I held him close to me, trying to warm him, while Sean was on the phone to pass the news. A few minutes later the shuttle landed on the beach and I carried him slowly towards it.

"What happened to you?"

"The Dolphins took me. They wanted to tell me about you, and what's going to happen soon."

"What do you mean?" I asked, but before he could answer the paramedics from the shuttle had taken him from me and were whisking him off to the hospital.

Afterwards he had no memory of anything that had happened that day. If what he said to me about the dolphins was true and if they had given him some important message to pass on, then they had failed.

Chris's mum Maleena has finally become accustomed to life on Earth after a few confusing years. She says it's been the greatest ten years of her life, except for that one day, and she's constantly amazed at how civilised we are compared to her home world. If that's the case then I'm glad I didn't stay there as Supreme Ruler of the Universe or whatever. I do occasionally think of what it would have been like had my decision gone the other way, but in the end I just shake my head. I don't think I have a ruthless enough nature to be a Supreme Ruler.

So what's become of me, I hear you asking? Well, I'm seventeen now and about to do my high school final examinations. In theory I'm no longer autothermic and yet, while I now have to eat like a normal person, I still feel uncomfortable in a shirt even in cold weather and just the thought of putting shoes on my feet makes my stomach cramp. I also seem to have retained my enhanced immune system and haven't had a moment's illness all my life. In many ways it's as if nothing really changed in me when I triggered that pulse even though DNA tests have confirmed my autothermic genes were completely destroyed. It's weird.

At school my friends still call me the Bewildered One, and sometimes I think they might be right. With all the astrophysicist blood flowing in my veins you'd think I'd be a natural at mathematics and science, but it hasn't worked out that way at all. Maybe that part of my brain was fried when I blew up my autothermic genes, or maybe I was just born to follow a different path. You see, my love is philosophy and that's what I'll be studying next year if I'm accepted into university. Forget about supernovas and quasars, it's the really fundamental questions about consciousness and sentience that intrigue me. The revelation of the true nature of the Dolphins has made this a really exciting field to be entering.

If nothing else I'd like to be able to understand my own nature. I've lived before, in another time line that Peter once described, and as I've grown older I've been finding more and more memories of that other life. Over there I was an autothermic kid in a world where autothermia and subspace were unknown, whereas now it's the exact opposite. Yet it's the same me in both worlds.

In Peter's story of that other time line, on the last day I took him into the desert and guided him to the cave that I believed was the entrance to Elko's home. But as we entered, my world came to an end and Peter passed through the portal into Sheol. I've witnessed those events countless times in my dreams, but every time, at the moment when Peter enters the shimmering light, I always wake up. What happened to me after that, and how I came to be me in this world, is a mystery I'd dearly love to solve. By tomorrow night

I might just have some answers, if I survive that is, for it is tomorrow that my previous existence came to an end.

* * *

All the guests have now arrived and as the sun disappears below the western ridgeline we move inside for the feast Tom and Sarah have prepared. Tom stands and taps his wine glass with a spoon, and everyone turns towards him. He straightens his shirt.

“Seventy years ago this night I’d never have dreamed we’d be having this gathering. There’d been a terrible storm and we were stuck in traffic as I was trying to take Sarah to the hospital. When we finally arrived she was rushed into the delivery theatre, and then almost died during the birth of what we all thought was a stillborn infant. I was numb with shock, unable to comprehend what was happening around me, when suddenly there was an ear-piercing scream from the supposedly dead child. The doctors just about jumped through the roof, but Billy kept right on screaming his little head off.

“My good friend at the time, Michael Thorpe, who’s sadly no longer with us, was also at the hospital that night as his wife was due to give birth too. Their son came along the next morning, thankfully with much less drama than Billy’s arrival, and it is indeed an honour to have Peter Thorpe with us here to share in our celebration of both their births. Billy and Peter first met when they were fourteen and latched onto each other like long lost brothers, but then time shifted and they were separated again until twelve years later Peter’s chance visit to Narrabri reunited them. In that coming together of Emu and Dodo they proceeded to save the planet Eridani and restore the galaxy’s Firstborn to their world on Genesis. Peter further distinguished himself some ten years ago when he escorted my great-grandson on his epic journey to confront and defeat the self-styled Supreme Ruler of the Universe.”

There’s gentle applause and everyone turns to look at me. I blush.

“Getting back to Billy, though,” he continues, “at university he met Todd Myers and then Todd’s sister Julia, and after a few more time cusps finally ended up marrying her. This of course was wonderful because it took the kid off our hands and made it someone else’s responsibility to force him to eat occasionally.”

Everyone laughs and Granddad pokes him in the ribs.

“So with that, would you all please be upstanding and raise your glasses to Billy and Peter.”

Granddad stands and begins speaking in reply, but as soon as he starts I am overwhelmed with a feeling of *dèja vu*. I've heard this speech before, word for word, in that other time line. For a moment I feel a sense of slippage and find myself back there. I glance around the room and everything's the same except Aaron, Maleena and Chris aren't there. Matthew Hardcastle and his wife are also missing, and I remember now that he also died in that time line. I turn back to the front and notice that Granddad and Peter are wearing shoes. At that instant Peter looks up at me and recoils slightly, as if he's seen a ghost.

There's a shimmering and I slip back again. Granddad has finished speaking and everyone is standing and clapping. I join in, but I feel very unsteady on my feet and can feel perspiration on my forehead.

With the end of the speeches we dig into the dessert. Chris, who's sitting opposite me, turns and says, "Markie, what happened to you when Billy was talking?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you sort of went funny and for a little while I could see right through you. You scared me, you did."

Sitting next to him is Aaron and I see that he's brushed his hair aside and is staring at me with those penetrating blue eyes of his. I'm being Jedied.

"Finish your dessert and then we need to talk, away from the others," he whispers to me, and I nod.

"How much do you remember of that other time line?" he asks. We'd slipped out into the kitchen and Chris had tagged along as well.

"Pretty much everything now. I've been reliving it in my dreams just about every night for the last couple of months. When Granddad started his speech, it was exactly the same as he'd said in the other time and I think I might have slipped back there for a few moments."

"Do you know what happens to you tomorrow after Peter goes into the cave?"

"I always wake up at that point. I think the time line just ended there, and then I was born again in this reality."

"You speak of it in the past tense, and yet in a very real way that time line is playing out right now, in parallel with this one."

"For me it has always been a memory of something that happened, well, before I was born I guess."

"Fascinating. Do you know what time that time line ends tomorrow?"

"I think it's early afternoon, but I couldn't say for sure."

“Well I think we should all stick close together. I have an uneasy feeling about this.”

“Me too,” says Chris, who has been listening intently to our conversation.

Finally the partying is over and I climb onto my stretcher. Chris and I are sleeping in a tent out the back of the farmhouse as there are just too many guests here to all fit inside. September is a season of warm days and cold nights in this part of Australia, but even though I’m no longer autothermic I still prefer to sleep without any coverings, even when the temperature gets down around freezing point. Chris, of course, was determined to do the same, but Maleena put a pile of blankets next to his stretcher and I made him promise he’d pull them over himself if he got cold.

“Mark,” he says after I turn off the torch. He didn’t call me Markie, so whatever it is he’s about to say must be pretty serious.

“In that other time line my father died and I was never born,” he whispers.

“Yeah,” I whisper back, but a great sadness washes over me.

“I can feel it pulling on me, like there’s an emptiness over there that wants to be filled. I’m scared I might slip through.”

“I don’t think that will happen. I was there, remember, and that time line is in my past, so I’d already know if you’d suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and you hadn’t.”

“Oh, okay then,” he says and is immediately asleep. I roll over onto my side and start to drift off too. The dream begins again.

It was morning and I was walking down the street to Peter’s house to show him my maps of where I reckoned Elko’s cave was. It was a bright sunny day and already quite hot. I knocked on his door and he eventually called for me to come in. He was clearly suffering from too much partying the night before - I really don’t understand why adults do that to themselves when they should know better. He gave me a strange look as if he was remembering something sad. He’d sometimes said I reminded him of Dad’s friend Aaron who died when he was only a little older than I was now, and perhaps that’s where his thoughts had wandered.

I showed him my maps and told him my theory of Elko’s cave, and I was glad to see he was interested.

“I take it you want to go find it,” he said.

“No, I want us to go find it,” I said, hoping against hope he’d come with me.

To my great surprise he did, and before long we were hurtling along an old dirt road in his car. All around us was barren desert and it made me sad to think that before global warming took hold this was all fertile farmland. It was getting hotter and there was a haziness starting to build up.

Finally we reached the end of the road. There was a dry creek bed in front of us with the rotted remains of a bridge lying scattered around the bottom. We got out of the car and I feared Peter might collapse from the heat. I remembered in his story how my grandfather had once warmed him by holding his hands, and I thought I might be able to cool him down by doing the same thing. It worked!

We walked in silence down the creek bed and ever so slowly the gully deepened around us. We stopped under the shade of a rock ledge for a rest and a bit of water. Peter stuck his feet up on a rock with his toes spread wide apart, trying to catch what little breeze there was.

"I wish Mum and Dad would go barefoot more often," I said. "It would be good for them, I reckon."

"In another world they never wore shoes, but everyone tells me that world only existed inside my damaged mind."

"Well they're wrong. That world was real, more real than this one I reckon."

"You think so?"

"I know so," I said, for deep inside I knew that to be true even though I was unable to say why.

We pressed on and soon reached the entrance to the cave. The haze had thickened and was now almost completely blocking the sun. The temperature had dropped a little but it now felt very stifling.

We entered the cave and I had the strangest feeling, like all my life had just been a play and now I'd said my final lines and walked off the stage. This feeling grew as we moved deeper into the cave. As I glanced behind me I saw the last of the daylight fade to black. The world outside had ended.

We rounded a bend and in front of us was the shimmering entrance to Elko's home. At that moment the light from my torch faded out.

"This world is ending, isn't it," Peter said, as if reading my mind.

"Yes it is," I said. I should have been terrified but I felt strangely calm. "There's no turning back now, you must go through."

"What about you?"

"For me this is journey's end too, for now at least, but I hope I might have another chance at life in some other place, maybe sometime soon." I really didn't know what made me say that, but I hoped it might be true.

He took hold of me and hugged me tightly.

“Are you sure you can’t come through with me?” he asked, but I thought he already knew the answer. He was the interloper in this world and this exit was for him and him alone. He turned and walked towards the doorway.

“Goodbye and good luck,” I said to him, but I didn’t know if he could still hear me. As he stepped through, the shimmering light disappeared and all was now dark. I tried to turn around but realised I could no longer feel the rough sandstone under my feet. Yet I was still completely calm, as if I knew beforehand this would happen and it was all perfectly natural. I thought perhaps I’d died.

Then the slightest puff of cool breeze brushed my face and I realised I could feel something under my feet again, but it wasn’t rock. It was sand, and now I could hear the sound of waves washing upon the shore. I looked up and could see stars starting to appear, multiplying and brightening as I watched. The breeze had become stronger now.

I heard a voice from behind me. “You’re back,” it said and I turned. In the dim light I could just make out the shape of a girl. She was about my age and was wearing no clothing. Neither was I, I realised. She came to me and we embraced. I knew her, and yet I didn’t.

“All is well,” she said. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I said, knowing yet not knowing.

I wake and it’s morning. I stretch out on my back, sucking in the delightful frosty coldness through the pores of my skin while trying to recall as much as I can from the dream. My memories of that other time line had always ended at the moment Peter walked through the doorway, but this time it went further. Who was the girl? I know her and yet I don’t.

Chris stirs and I look across at him. The blankets are covering him and I’m relieved. There’s no autothermia in his family, and I’d hate for him to get a chill and become sick from trying to copy me.

“We’re both still here, Markie,” he says.

“Of course we are. Didn’t I tell you there was nothing to worry about?”

“Yeah, but the Dolphins said...”

“What did the Dolphins say, Chris?” I ask, my anticipation of some great revelation growing.

“Um, I don’t remember now. I’m sorry Markie.” The tears start rolling down his face and he begins sobbing.

“It’s okay, Chris,” I say, now holding him gently. “I’m sure you’ll remember later. Come on, let’s go and get some breakfast.”

The thought of food cheers him up immediately. We fight our way out of the tent and scamper up to the house, where we’re drawn into the kitchen by the smell of bacon and eggs cooking. Aaron, who has already started eating,

looks up at us and smiles as we walk in. I sit down next to him and tell him about my dream.

“It’s like in my subconscious I know who the mysterious girl is, but my conscious mind doesn’t have a clue,” I say with an air of frustration. He nods.

After breakfast has finished and the washing up’s done we all head down to the creek that runs across the bottom end of the farm.

“I used to love coming down here when I was a kid,” Dad says. “We’d all get completely covered in mud and then Granddad would hose us down when we came back up to the house.”

“I remember that,” Aaron says. “It was on your birthday, just before your confrontation with Barrad.”

“I know, and I sure hope I never have to go through anything like that again.”

We reach the creek. There’s plenty of water in it after the good rains a few days ago and Chris and I are the first ones in, closely followed by Aaron and Dad. Mum, Maleena, Susan and Tim then join us as well. Aaron has a tennis ball and we start throwing it around amongst ourselves. I happen to glance at the sky and there’s some high cloud starting to move in from the west. For a moment I shiver.

By the time we decide we’re wet and muddy enough Granddad and Peter have set up the cricket stumps and everyone is ready for the traditional Emus versus Dodos match. Granddad and Peter are the captains of the respective teams and Peter has won the toss. He has first choice for his team and of course chooses Aaron. Granddad then picks Dad and Peter picks Chris. I’m the next one chosen for Granddad’s side, and so on it goes until everyone has been chosen. Tom and Sarah, as always, are the umpires.

Our side is the first to bat and Granddad puts me and Todd in as openers. Aaron is the bowler and Todd slashes his first delivery to the boundary for four runs. He takes a single on the next ball and I take strike. Aaron looks me in the eye and I can feel him tugging on my mind. I fight back and break out of the trance just in time to snick the ball away from the stumps. It trickles down through gully and I take a single. Aaron shrugs and smiles at me.

We survive the rest of his over without adding further to the score, then Chris comes on to bowl. I’m on strike. He floats the ball towards me and I take a wild swing at it, but only succeed in getting an inside edge back onto the stumps. I tuck the bat under my arm and walk from the field with my head down. Chris is going wild.

I pass the bat to Dad and he goes out to take my place. He scores a single off Chris's next delivery and Todd plays defensively for the remainder of the over. We all applaud as Chris tosses the ball to Aaron and walks back to his fielding position.

Dad and Todd survive a further five overs, taking our score to 31 before Todd falls to a slower ball from Aaron. Susan goes in to take his place and scores a quick-fire 17 before she also falls victim to Aaron. In the next over Chris captures Dad's wicket and we're on the brink of a serious batting collapse.

We survive a further twelve overs before we're finally all out for 77. Pretty pathetic really.

The umpires call 'lunch' and we all wander over to the rugs that have been laid out under a big shady gum tree. From his huge picnic basket Tom produces copious quantities of bread rolls and salad, and we all dig in except for Dad and Granddad who are too autothermic to eat so soon after last night's feast. As we eat, the cloud cover gradually thickens and the heat becomes more stifling.

After lunch Peter and Aaron open the batting for the Dodos. Tim bowls the first over and they score 12 runs from it. Norrie bowls the second and is hit for 14. At this rate it won't take long for them to knock off the target. Peter hits Tim's first ball of the third over in my direction and I go running after it, cutting it off just before the boundary. Peter gets back comfortably for his second run but is puffing pretty heavily. He walks back to take strike for the next delivery, but just as Tim is about to start his run-up he turns away and leans over on his bat.

"I think this heat is starting to get to me," he says. He doesn't look too well, all the colour has drained out of his face.

"I think I'd better go and..." he starts to say, but before he can finish he collapses to the ground.

"Peter!" Granddad cries and rushes over to him. Everyone starts crowding around.

"Jase, go and get a glass of water for him," he yells at Dad, and Dad dashes off towards the house.

Chris has taken hold of my hand. He's trembling. Everything seems to be happening in slow motion. Susan and Tim, who have had first aid training, are slowly applying CPR, and Mum is running slowly to the house to call for an ambulance. Now Dad comes running back slowly with a glass of water, but Granddad looks up at him and slowly shakes his head. The glass in Dad's hand tips over and slowly empties onto the ground.

The sounds of everyone become softer and the light takes on a harsher quality. Aaron slowly turns his attention away from Peter and looks over at us, an expression of shock on his face. He dashes slowly towards us calling our names but I can hardly hear him. There's a rushing noise in my ears and before he reaches us the air around us starts to shimmer, like it's liquefying. Chris squeezes my hand tighter. Aaron stops just in front of where we're standing. I can see him calling our names but I can't hear anything now.

The shimmering increases and we seem to be drifting away from Aaron and everyone else. There's a darkness spreading around the edges of the bubble we're in and in a few moments it's completely black. Now all sensation of movement has stopped.

"Markie?" Chris whimpers and I reach down and pick him up, holding him tightly against me.

"I don't know what's happening, but hold tight, okay?"

"Is Peter dead?"

"I think he must be," I say, more to myself than to Chris. If he is then that would explain why that other time line ended today, since it was created by the Eridanian orb interacting with his mind twenty years ago.

"I'm cold," he says, and I realise it's getting very chilly. I hold him even tighter and rub my hand up and down his back trying to warm him. We're both wearing only board shorts that are still wet from the creek, and in spite of my efforts he starts to shiver.

Then almost without noticing it the cold turns into heat. I stand him back down, but in doing that I realise I can't feel any texture under my feet and I have no idea what it is we're standing on.

"I'm hot now," he says.

"I think that means we're in Sheol," I say. "You know, the dark place I told you about that we went through to reach that other galaxy."

"Oh, okay then," he says and sounds a bit less distressed. I guess even the worst nightmares don't seem quite so bad if you can put a name to them. I look around, hoping to see some telltale glow of approaching Dolphins, but everything remains totally black.

"Hello, is anybody else here?" I eventually call when it becomes apparent there'll be no flying dolphins to escort us today. My voice seems to reverberate in the darkness and then all is quiet until I hear a sickly chuckling away in the distance.

"That sounds like Mark the Bewildered," a rough-sounding voice calls out, "and it smells like he has an elf child with him. Give me the elf, Mark, and I'll show you the way out of here."

“No, never!” I yell, and then realise how stupid I’ve been since whatever it is that’s out there can probably home in on my voice.

“I’m going to take the elf anyway and eat it,” the voice says and it’s very close to us now. I pull Chris back towards me but just as I do something cold and slimy brushes against my back.

“Got you!” the voice says right in my ear and I can feel its breath on my neck. Chris screams and breaks away from me. I run off after him into the darkness.

“No Chris, we’ll get separated!”

I hear no reply, only the chuckling from behind me. I start running again, now totally in panic.

“Chris, where are you?” I call repeatedly, but there’s no reply. We’re lost.

In Search of Hope

John Renshaw and his off-sider were heading back to base empty-handed when they received the call. They had been dispatched following a report of an accident on the Berrygil Road, but when they arrived on the scene it turned out to be just a minor bingle with the only injuries being a bit of damaged pride. The tow-truck operators, who were already on the scene, had everything under control so they had climbed back into the ambulance and turned towards town.

“We’ve had a call from someone at the Collins’ farm and I reckon you’d be pretty close to there,” the dispatcher said.

“I’ll be going past the gate in about a minute,” John said. “What’s the problem?”

“An elderly man has collapsed and it doesn’t sound too good.”

“Oh no, not old Tom. He’d have to be pushing pretty close to a hundred by now I guess, so I suppose it’s to be expected.”

“No, it’s not Tom, it’s someone else, someone named Thorpe.”

John scratched his head but couldn’t think of anyone by that name who lived locally. The farm gate was just up ahead so he slowed and drove through to the house where he was met by a woman in a bikini.

“They’re right down the back,” she said. “Please hurry, I think it’s a heart attack.”

“Jump in,” John said, and as soon as she was on board he took off down in the direction she’d indicated.

“We’d been playing cricket,” she said. “It was my father-in-law’s birthday yesterday, and the whole family’s up here. Anyway, Peter, that’s Billy’s friend who also turned seventy today, he was batting and going along pretty well when suddenly he turned pale and collapsed. We have a couple of first-aiders in the family who are working on him but I think, I think...”

She started sobbing before she could finish the sentence, and John patted her on the arm. He could see the group of people standing around the patient

now and pulled up alongside them, then jumped out and grabbed the Heartalyser.

“Could you all stand back a bit now,” he said as he quickly hooked the patient up to the machine. The response was flat-line so he keyed in a stage one restart and turned aside while the machine did its thing. Meanwhile his offsider was strapping the ventilator mask to the patient’s face.

“How long ago did it happen?” he asked the grey-haired Aboriginal man who was standing closest. It suddenly clicked that this was Tom’s boy Billy. Funny, he didn’t look anywhere near seventy, and neither did the patient for that matter.

“Only a few minutes ago,” Billy said. “He was as good as gold and then bang, down he went.”

There was a long sad-sounding beep from the machine and John turned back. It was a negative result, so he set it for stage two.

“What are his chances?” Billy asked nervously.

“The old Heartalyser has about an eighty to ninety percent success rate if we can reach them in the first five minutes or so, and the work your first-aiders were doing will have improved his chances too.”

There was another beep and John turned back to the machine. There’d been some response this time, but still no regular heartbeat. He started stage three and said a quick prayer.

Tom Collins came up and stood beside his son. The worry on his face seemed to age him a lot more than his ninety-something years in the sun had done. John nodded to him but said nothing.

The machine beeped again, and this time it had a more cheerful sound to it. John checked the readout and it was looking good with a weak but steady pulse. He immediately stepped up the ventilator rate, and very soon the patient began breathing again. He could hear the collective sigh of relief from all those who were gathered around him.

“It’s looking good, but he’s not out of the woods yet. I’ll get him stabilised and then we’ll take him to the hospital.”

The ambulance departed with Peter on board, and Jason turned to see Aaron standing some distance away and staring into space. He sprinted over to him.

“They’re gone,” Aaron said with a dreaminess in his voice that scared the hell out of Jason.

“Yes, the ambulance just left,” he said.

“No, they’re gone, the boys,” Aaron said. Suddenly Jason understood. He looked around but couldn’t see Mark or Chris anywhere.

“Where did they go?”

“They were swallowed by the air,” Aaron replied, still sounding half-asleep.

“You’re not making any sense, Aaron,” Jason said and without thinking grabbed his friend by the hands. Their minds connected and he saw through Aaron’s eyes the shimmering light that had formed around the boys and their disappearance into thin air, and he cried out. Aaron pulled his hands away and shook his head wildly as if trying to clear it.

“It started happening at the same time as Peter collapsed,” he said, now sounding more like his normal self. “Mark and Chris both had forebodings that something was going to happen at the moment that other time line ended, but I didn’t take them seriously enough. I thought as long as we were all together everything would be okay.”

“It’s not your fault, Aaron, you couldn’t possibly have known,” Jason said, putting his arm around his friend’s shoulder. “Anyway, I doubt there’d have been anything we could have done to have stopped it. What we need to figure out is what became of them and how to get them back.”

“Get them back? But they may not even exist any more. Two time lines have just merged to make one, Jase, and in one of those Chris was never born. Mark lived in both, but he experienced them sequentially and for all we know might now be being born in yet a third version of the last two decades.”

“Don’t give up hope just yet,” Jason said as his mind raced to find a loophole in Aaron’s theory. “Dad knows a lot more about time lines than both of us put together. Let’s see what he has to say.”

By now Jenny and Maleena had come over to them. Jason took a deep breath and told them what had happened, but he said nothing to them about Aaron’s theory. They took the news better than he was expecting.

“Hopefully Dad will have some ideas on where we should start looking,” he said.

“But Billy’s gone in the ambulance with Peter to keep an eye on him,” Jenny said. Jason hit his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“This isn’t happening,” he said.

“We should look in the most obvious place first,” Todd said after Jason and Aaron had filled him in, “particularly as we can get there easily enough in my shuttle.”

“Of course, Eden!” Jason exclaimed and slapped himself on the forehead again. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“I don’t know, Jase, but what are we waiting for?” Aaron said, and he grabbed his friend by the arm and started pulling him towards Todd’s shuttle.

They sprinted up the hill to where the shuttle was parked and piled in through the hatch.

“This ship’s too big to do a subspace jump at ground level,” Todd said once everyone was strapped in. “We’ll need to go up to, let me see, about fifteen thousand metres. Hold on to your seats.”

The shuttle lurched skywards, its realspace engines labouring at full throttle. Once the craft reached the required altitude Todd held it steady and then executed a jump through subspace to the other side of the fold. Below them the fertile farmland of Earth was replaced by the much drier landscape of Eden, and he began the descent.

He pulled the craft up at about one hundred metres and began spiralling out in an expanding search pattern. Everyone was peering at the ground below looking for any trace of Mark or Chris. There was nothing.

“I’m taking us down to the exact spot they disappeared from on Earth,” he finally said. “We can scout around on foot and see if there’s anything at all to find here.”

They exited from the shuttle in single file and formed a rough circle around the epicentre of the boys’ disappearance. Jason, who had been taught the art of Aboriginal tracking by his grandfather, immediately spotted something and told everyone to remain still. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled towards the centre of the circle, trying to disturb the sandy soil as little as possible.

“There are footprints here,” he said. “Two sets of bare feet, one large and one small. They were here!”

“Do the prints go anywhere?” Aaron asked.

“Wait a second,” Jason said as he carefully worked his way around the prints. “There’s a bit of scuffing, particularly with Chris’s prints, that suggests they were shuffling around a bit, but no, the prints don’t go anywhere. It’s as if they appeared here, scuffed their feet for a bit, then disappeared again.”

“What does it mean?” Jenny asked.

“Is there a camera in the shuttle, Todd?” Jason said, ignoring her question.

“Coming right up,” Todd said and in a few moments handed one to him. Jason took about a dozen shots of the prints from every conceivable angle and then told everyone to get back on board.

“Take us back to Earth, Todd,” he said. “I want to photograph the boys’ footprints back there before anyone disturbs them.”

“There you see,” Jason said, pointing to the three dimensional collages the computer had generated from the photographs. “If you ignore the additional prints from the Earth photos that were made before the event started, it’s a perfect match.”

“So what you’re saying is,” Jenny said, “they were simultaneously standing on both Earth and Eden.”

“For a short while, yes. Long enough at least for them to shuffle their feet a little.”

“And,” he continued, now with a broad grin spreading across his face, “there’s only one thing known that causes this effect, this Duplicity Across Subspace as it’s called.”

Aaron’s face lit up as the answer came to him.

“A portal into Sheol,” he said.

“Give the man a prize,” Jason said. “A portal into Sheol always exists on both sides of the subspace fold. Peter proved it mathematically a couple of years ago. Anyone passing through into Sheol will, for a short while, be standing on both sides of the fold simultaneously.”

“Brilliant deduction, honey,” Jenny said. “So where do we go from here?”

Jason was spared the need to answer her question, for at that moment Norrie came running towards them from the house.

“Billy just called from the hospital,” he said, still trying to catch his breath. “Peter has regained consciousness and the doctors say he’s going to be fine.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Jason said.

“What are you all doing down here?” Norrie asked.

They looked at each other, and then Elissi stepped forward and spoke rapidly to him in Eridanian, filling him in on what had happened to the boys.

“Come back to the house,” he said. “You must tell the others.”

“For God’s sake don’t breathe a word of this to Peter,” Tom said, directing his gaze specifically at Aaron as he spoke. Everyone looked at Aaron and he blushed.

“I won’t say a word,” he squeaked.

They were all gathered around a table at the *Tropical Retreat* restaurant. Billy had joined them after being assured by the doctors that Peter was unlikely to slip away during the night. Tom had requested a table well away from other customers and Phillip, who had taken over the *Retreat* when Margaret and her husband retired some years ago, obliged.

“This is all tied in with the end of that strange time line Peter was caught up in twenty years ago,” Billy said.

“So what do we know about that time line?” Jason asked. “What were the differences between it and this one?”

“You and Billy weren’t autothermic,” Tom said.

“But Mark was,” Jason said.

“Yes, and I still don’t understand how that could have been,” Billy said. For a moment Maleena grimaced, but only Aaron noticed.

“I got drunk and topped myself,” Aaron said rather sheepishly.

“And so Chris was never born,” Maleena added.

“Mark never went to challenge Morgoth,” Jason said.

“And so Morgoth never died,” Aaron deduced.

“And that, dear friends, is surely the crux of all this,” Tom concluded. Maleena grimaced again.

Aaron turned to his wife. “Maleena, is there something you’re not telling us?”

She looked around at everyone and finally sighed.

“I suppose it had to come out eventually, but I don’t know how it fits in with any of this. Aaron’s mother is an Elf. She confided in me just after the wedding.”

Everyone looked at her expectantly, wanting her to say more.

“She was sent here from Bluehaven when she was eighteen years old. She was a Delphinidae priestess, and this was her calling.”

“What on Earth is a Delph-whatever-it-is?” Tom asked.

“They’re not on Earth, they’re on Bluehaven,” Maleena said, taking Tom’s question literally. “Bluehaven is the Elves, and my, home world.”

“What exactly are Elves?” Julia asked.

“Elves are the common name for the Delphinidae, the dolphin worshippers.”

“You worship dolphins?”

“Perhaps worship isn’t the right word. We follow the teachings of the Dolphins.”

Aaron suddenly turned pale and Jason turned to him with a look of alarm on his face.

“What is it, Aaron?”

“Do you remember back at university when I was dating Mandy?” he asked and Jason nodded. “She was studying dolphins as part of her marine biology course and took me out in a boat to see them. The Dolphins lured me into the water and spoke to me, but I blacked out and almost drowned. Mandy was totally spooked out and I never saw her again.”

“You’re an Elf, Aaron, and the Dolphins saw this in you and tried to talk to you,” Maleena said. “I guess it freaked you out.”

“It sure did.”

“The people of my galaxy all originally came from a world called Meridian,” Maleena explained. “That’s the world you, Peter and Mark came to and where we first met. In the night sky of Meridian is a constellation of stars called the Elf, probably because if you have a good enough imagination it looks a bit like an elf. The brightest star in that constellation, indeed the brightest star in the whole sky, is called Elfstar and is only half a light year from Meridian. It was the first star the early space explorers visited and there they found the planet they called Bluehaven. Dolphins were the sentient species on that world and the Delphinidae settled there to learn from them.

“The Elves were always a thorn in Morgoth’s side, for although he had his own government installed on Bluehaven, the Delphinidae monks were always the spiritual leaders of our people. They say the High Priestess is a direct descendent, mother to daughter, from the one who first spoke with the Dolphins.

“Now according to legend, in the early days of Morgoth’s rule Loria, the daughter of the High Priestess, fell in love with Morgoth’s son.”

“Gallad?” Jason asked.

“No, Gallad was his second son. The eldest was Martyn and he was exiled to Bluehaven because he didn’t fit with Morgoth’s expectations of him. Anyway, Martyn and Loria produced a daughter who carried both the powers of the Delphinidae and the powers of the Barefooters. Morgoth immediately realised the threat this posed to him and had them both executed, but their daughter was hidden by the monks and survived, with all her new strengths, to continue the line.

“Now here’s the punch line. Legend has it that Martyn, with his dying breath, swore to take revenge on Morgoth even if it took a million years.”

“You think Martyn’s spirit used Mark to fulfil his curse on Morgoth,” Aaron said. There was silence and everyone looked at Maleena.

“Yes, I do,” she finally said. “The Dolphins foretold it, and so it has come to pass.”

“And Chris?” Aaron asked.

“Chris is Mark’s guardian, just as you were Jason’s. That was your mother’s mission. There, I’ve said it.”

There was silence for a while as everyone digested what she’d said.

“But Morgoth was toppled ten years ago,” Tom finally said, “so what’s all the fuss now?”

“It’s that other time line,” Billy said. “Morgoth still lived in that because Mark never went to destroy him. Today was crunch day, when the two time lines merged and one of them had to take precedence. If Morgoth’s followers in this time line were aware of the existence of the other one, I’m sure they’d have done everything they could to ensure it was the one that took over.”

“So they failed then,” Jason said.

Maleena turned as white as a ghost.

“No, they succeeded, almost, and that’s why Peter’s heart stopped. But something happened, something that’s keeping this time line, and us, alive.”

“I think Mark is that something,” Billy said. “He is single-natured, he lived through that other time line before being born into this one. This time line can’t end unless he dies, and he would have died like Peter almost did had he not slipped through into Sheol at the moment of transition.”

“It was Chris who saved him,” Aaron said. “He opened the portal. Remember the day he went missing last year? He told Mark the Dolphins had taken him. They must have warned him of what was to happen and told him what to do.”

“So where are they now?” asked Jenny.

“I believe they’ve gone back to my galaxy to stop those who are holding that other time line open,” Maleena said. “That is Mark’s destiny.”

“His destiny,” Jason whispered, and squeezed Jenny’s hand.

“Come with me, all of you,” a deep booming voice spoke out of the darkness. “Mark is going to need all the help he can get.”

The owner of the voice came into the light and it was Elko.

“But what about Peter?” Billy asked.

“He’s in good hands,” Elko said. “Don’t fret about him.”

Bluehaven

“Chris, where are you? Please, answer me Chris...”

I’ve been running for hours now it seems, calling and calling, but I can’t find him. I’m exhausted, both physically and mentally, and I want to go home. I sit down on the ground, or whatever it is that passes for ground in this God-forsaken place. It has no texture and no warmth or coolness, it just is.

At least I seem to have outrun the ogre. I’ve heard nothing but my own breathing and pounding heart for ages now. I put my hands over my face and realise I’m sobbing. Well, so be it, a seventeen-year-old boy can sob all he likes when he’s the only one left in the whole universe.

A memory comes back to me of something I read in Peter’s journal, of his description of Sheol as being a far worse hell than the biblical fire and brimstone. When I read it, it was just words, but now I think I can fully understand the depth of his despair. I’d convinced him that when he walked through the shimmering light at the end of that cave he’d come in the front door of Elko’s mansion, but instead he found himself here. And now he’s dead.

Did my bringing him to the cave in that time line cause his death in this one? It’s a horrible thought, and I really don’t think it’s true, but I can’t make it go away. I try to convince myself it was really the other way around, that his death over here caused the end of that time line over there, but that doesn’t really ring true either. I’m confused, I’m lost and I’m...

...I’m not going to get out of here if I just sit around feeling sorry for myself. I stand up, wipe my eyes and start walking. I have no idea which way to go, but as long as I don’t start walking in circles I’m bound to end up somewhere, so what the heck.

I’ve regained my composure, but I still can’t shake those two images from my mind, of Peter walking through the portal in the cave and Peter

collapsing at the cricket game. *Overlapping images of overlapping moments in time.* I try to think of happier times, but most of those involved Chris and that depresses me even further. Again I call his name but there's no answer.

Thus it is that I don't immediately realise the ground has changed. It feels like sand under my feet now. There's a slight puff of breeze on my face and it has a salty smell. I look up and there's starlight, and as the world brightens a little I can see that I'm standing on a beach. Before me the waves are lapping gently on the shore and I walk towards them, taking in deep breaths of the clean sea air.

I let the water wash over my feet and the coolness of it lifts my spirits enormously. I hadn't realised just how much of a dampening effect the nothingness of Sheol's floor had been having on me. On an impulse I pull my shorts off and go running naked into the sea, diving under first one wave and then the next. I feel like I'm in heaven.

I swim out to where my feet can no longer touch the bottom, then back into the shore and out again. The stiffness in my legs from all my running through Sheol, which I didn't even realise was there, is dissolving away. I roll over onto my back and just float along, looking at the brilliant stars above. That's when I realise the constellations I can see are nothing like anything I know on Earth, and a shiver runs through me. I quickly swim back to shore, find my shorts and pull them on again. The realisation that I'm still alone hits me like a rock and my spirits sink. I sit down on the sand and let the salt water from my hair run down into my eyes. It saves me the trouble of crying.

I suddenly get the feeling I'm being watched. I lift my head and turn around, and there's a barefoot girl standing behind me. I startle her and she steps back, gasping just a little. I smile and she relaxes.

"I'm sorry I startled you," I say. She looks puzzled for a moment but then smiles.

"I'm sorry I snuck up on you," she says slowly, as if she's just getting the feeling for the words that are coming from her mouth. English isn't her first language, I realise, but she has no accent. Just like Maleena. *'Maleena and Chris. What's become of Chris?'*

"Your friend is safe," she says as if reading my mind. "He's with the Dolphins."

I have no reason to doubt her and I smile again.

"My name is Lorina," she says.

"I'm Mark."

“I know,” she says and smiles again. She takes a step forward and I take a step forward and then she reaches out and I take hold of her hands. She kisses me on the nose and I giggle.

“Come with me,” she says, releasing one hand and pulling me gently along with the other. “It’s late, and you’ll need to rest before dawn.”

I walk along the sand beside her, still holding her hand. I let my mind go blank and just bask in her loveliness.

We leave the beach and walk towards a huge stone building.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“We’re on the planet Bluehaven, orbiting Elfstar. The building you can see, which is where I’m taking you, is the temple of the Delphinidae.”

“Uh huh,” I say, absolutely none the wiser.

“See that very bright star up there?” she says, pointing out over the sea.

“Yes.”

“Orbiting that star is the planet Meridian, and you should know where that is.”

“It’s a place I’d rather forget. Okay then, if the star we’re orbiting is called Elfstar, could I guess that you’re an Elf?”

“I’m a Delphinidae, but most folk call us Elves.”

“So this must be the home world of the Elves, sorry Delphinidae.”

“Yes it is.”

“Then Maleena must have originally come from here.”

“She did, a long time ago. She was there when Meridian was frozen in time, and the Dolphins froze her too, until your coming woke her.”

“Yes, I remember now her telling me that.”

We’ve reached the gate of the temple. A man guarding the gate, dressed in black so that I hardly see him, looks us over and then nods to Lorina as he pulls it open for us.

“We used to leave the gate open,” she says, “but not any more. After you defeated Morgoth we had nine wonderful years of freedom, but now the guerrillas, Morgoth’s former henchmen, have returned and made us prisoners on our own world.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But you’re here to free us again.”

“I am?” I ask, sounding incredulous. “Me?”

“Of course,” she says, not at all concerned I might not be the knight in shining armour she thinks I am.

We enter the building and walk down a long passageway illuminated by soft lights. She pauses, then opens a door on our left and leads me into a room. It is furnished with a simple but comfortable-looking bed.

“You can sleep here tonight,” she says. “The bathroom is just down the corridor on your right.”

She kisses me on the nose again, causing another giggle, and then leaves the room. I stand in the doorway staring at the empty space she has just vacated. I sigh.

I visit the bathroom, then remove my shorts and stretch out on the bed. I’m soon sound asleep.

I wake with a start as someone is shaking me by the shoulder. There’s sunlight streaming in through the room’s high windows and by the look of it, it must be at least mid morning. I roll over and to my surprise see Chris standing before me with a broad grin on his face.

“You can’t imagine what a relief it is to see you here,” I say while reaching out and ruffling his hair. “What happened to you?”

“I ran away from the monster and then I heard the Dolphins calling me, like they were inside my head. I went to them and they brought me here. I kept calling out for you to follow me but I guess you couldn’t hear me.”

“No, I couldn’t. What time is it?”

“They don’t have clocks here, but I reckon about nine o’clock. Everyone is waiting for you.”

I stand and look around the room for my board shorts, but I can’t see them.

“Lorina took your shorts. She said they needed cleaning.”

At that moment she walks into the room holding my freshly-cleaned shorts. They look like new.

“You look even nicer with nothing on,” she says while trying to suppress a giggle. Chris bursts out laughing and I blush.

“Sorry,” she says while handing me the shorts, but I can tell she isn’t. I quickly pull them on.

In the corner of the room is a hand basin and mirror. I splash some water on my face and under my armpits. There’s a cutthroat razor on the side of the basin and I look at it for a moment, imagining myself peeling my face off, and then decide that maybe I should let my bit of stubble grow for another day or two. My stomach rumbles and I suddenly realise I’m ravenous. I remember now I didn’t have any dinner last night.

“I suppose I’ve missed breakfast,” I say.

“Yes, but I thought as a Barefooter you wouldn’t want to eat anything.”

“Don’t you know?” I ask, now realising there’s a terrible misunderstanding happening here.

“Morgoth died because I set off a subspace pulse that destroyed his Barefooter genes,” I say, and she nods. “That pulse destroyed my Barefooter genes as well. I’m just a normal kid now.”

A look of abject misery comes over her face and I reach for her, taking her hands.

“But how are you going to free us then?”

“I don’t know,” I say and then add, without thinking, “but I won’t let that stop me from trying.”

She kisses me on the nose again and then pulls me towards the door.

“I must take you to my parents now.”

Lorina’s father is a tall, slender man who looks to be about the same age as my Dad. He’s wearing light-green coloured trousers and a darker green shirt. Her mother is of similar height and build, and is wearing a long white gown. Both are barefoot.

“Mark, this is my mother Loretta and my father Kevin.”

“It’s an honour at last to meet you,” Kevin says.

“Do you know that ten years ago you saved my husband’s life?” Loretta says. “He was minutes away from being burned alive on Morgoth’s execution platform when Morgoth went off to meet you. The execution was postponed, but of course he never returned to complete it.”

Kevin kneels before me. I suddenly realise that had I not come to confront Morgoth, or even if I’d been just a few minutes late, then this man would be dead. I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach and I’m no longer hungry.

“I am at your service, my lord,” he says.

I raise my hands. “Wait, I think there’s been a terrible mistake here.”

Lorina goes to her father’s side and speaks rapidly in his ear. His expression turns to a frown as he stands.

“Is this true?”

“Yes, I lost my Barefooter genes in my confrontation with Morgoth, and I no longer have those powers.”

“Then all hope is lost,” he says and starts to turn away. I look across at Lorina, hoping for some inspiration, but she looks down at her feet.

Meanwhile Kevin continues to speak as he paces up and down. “I really don’t know what we can do with you, you’re too scrawny to be of much use in combat, but perhaps you can... Oh for Loria’s sake, boy, can’t you take your eyes off my daughter for one moment and at least show me the courtesy of looking at me when I’m speaking to you? Is that why you came

here, boy, to have it off with my daughter like your grandfather tried to do ten years ago?"

I feel like I've been kicked in the stomach. I have been accused of many things in my life, but never lechery. My head drops and my shoulders droop. I want to vanish, I want to go home. Lorina starts to come towards me but her mother holds her back.

"I'm sorry Mark," Kevin says, now in a much softer tone of voice. "I have hurt you, unjustly it would seem."

He comes towards me but I flinch away. I hate him and I hate Lorina and I, and I... and I don't know what else. My eyes feel full of tears trying to burst out and I brush at them angrily.

"Why did you come here, Mark?" he asks. I raise my head and look him squarely in the eyes.

"I didn't *come* here, I was brought here against my will. Yesterday afternoon I was happily playing cricket with my family on Earth and then suddenly I'm in Sheol, being chased by ogres and God knows what else. Then I get spat out onto your beach and, well, here I am. Now if you can show me the way home I'll trouble you no more, good sir."

"Enough!" he says, and for a moment I'm sure he's going to whip out a sword and slice off my head, but instead he smiles. "Barefooter genes or not, you certainly have spirit, young man."

"That's it!" Chris says and everyone turns towards him.

"If your enemy people don't know that Markie isn't the big brave superhero who can turn them to stone with his gaze or whatever, then, you know, maybe he can fool them into thinking he is."

"I see what you're saying, Chris," Kevin says, stroking his chin.

"No, bad idea, very bad," I say but no-one is listening to me.

"The trouble is, Mark, you don't look mean," Lorina says. We've gone out into the courtyard while Kevin and Loretta consult with their advisors or whatever. "Now your grandfather, you knew he was mean and nasty just by looking at him."

"You sure did, but please don't call him my grandfather. It's true I'm genetically a descendent of Gallad and Marinda, but my real grandfathers are William Simpson and Billy Collins back somewhere on Earth."

"I'm sorry, Mark," she says and kisses me on the nose. I giggle again. I must try to stop doing that, as it is clearly a weakness I have.

"Maybe we can dress you up to look mean," she says. "Heavy armour, big boots, a spiky hat even."

“No, if I were a real Barefooter I’d overheat in anything like that. Especially the boots. I’m not putting boots on, not for anyone. Never have, never will. No, to be convincing I’ll have to dress just as I am now.”

“You’re right of course. Now maybe if we shave all your hair off...”

“Who’s leading these guerrillas?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“They say it’s some shaman, one of Morgoth’s closest aides. He calls himself Farley, and he has set up his headquarters in the Old Temple.”

“I thought this was the Old Temple,” I say, looking up at the grand old stonework surrounding me.

“No, this is the New Temple. The Old Temple is on the other side of the island, on the cliffs overlooking the sea. Come, I want to show you something that might help inspire you.”

Before I can answer she takes me by the hand and leads me towards an archway.

“Can I come too?” Chris asks.

“Of course,” she says, and Chris scurries along after us.

We walk down a flight of stairs and through a low passageway. The ancient stone under my feet is delightfully cold. We emerge into a large chamber lit with a bluish light from high stained glass windows. On the far wall, silhouetted against the light, is a statue of two dolphins on either side of a woman. As we approach overhead spotlights come on, illuminating it fully. I look more closely at the young woman rendered in stone before me and an uneasy feeling runs through me. She looks oddly familiar, but I don’t know who it is she reminds me of. She’s beautiful, similar in looks to Lorina but not the same. Her face is more rounded, more regal.

“This is Mother Loria,” Lorina whispers.

“She looks familiar,” I say and then it hits me. She’s the girl in the dream I had two nights ago. She met me on a beach after that other time line had ended and sent me on my way to being born in this reality. My legs turn to rubber.

“She died at the hands of Morgoth, a long time ago,” Lorina says, unaware of my discomfort. “She fell in love with Martyn, Morgoth’s first son, and when he found out he chained them to the rocks and they were drowned by the tide. According to legend, Martyn’s last words were...”

“*I will avenge this, father, even if it takes a million years, I will avenge this,*” I whisper, without even being consciously aware I’m doing it. I feel like I’m detached from my body and my rubbery legs can barely keep me upright.

“You’ve heard the story then.”

“No, I haven’t,” I manage to say. “Those words just came to me, but from where I have no idea.”

“It’s kind of spooky,” Chris says, “Martyn saying those words and then you turning up a million years later and knocking off Morgoth.”

“Do you think it’s really possible I could be your Martyn reincarnated, or that Martyn’s spirit is taking out its revenge through me?”

She doesn’t answer. Instead she kneels before the statue and prays softly in her native tongue. The words mean nothing to me, but even so a chill runs up my spine. I don’t like this place and want more than anything to be back outside in the sunshine.

When we emerge from the shrine Kevin is waiting for us.

“Something big is happening at the Old Temple,” he says. “Guerrillas from across the galaxy have been arriving there all morning, and there are rumours they’ll be launching an all-out attack on us tonight. If there’s anything you have, Mark, something perhaps buried deep within you that wasn’t destroyed, now would be a good time to find it.”

The Siege of the Delphinidae

Throughout the afternoon villagers from the surrounding area have been arriving in a steady trickle through the gates of the temple, carrying whatever weapons they possess. The Delphinidae have been working hard preparing the fortifications and Chris and I have been more than happy to lend a helping hand, mostly carrying and holding things. No-one stopped for lunch however and now, as the sun is beginning to set, my empty stomach is rumbling louder than ever.

A runner approaches the gate and is quickly admitted and taken to the shrine where Kevin and Loretta have set up their command post. Word soon spreads that many hundreds of heavily armed guerrillas have left the Old Temple and are headed this way. I look around and, while my only knowledge of military operations has come from watching television, it's pretty obvious we have way too few defenders to repel that sort of attack. If the Delphinidae have a secret weapon then it's a very well kept secret. That thought causes me to shiver as I realise I was supposed to be their secret weapon, and I curse my impotence.

Night falls and the gates are barred. All exterior lighting is turned off and the temple becomes a dark and foreboding place. There's a flash of light and for a moment I fear the attack has begun, but it is followed a few seconds later by rolling thunder and I realise it's a storm coming in from the sea. A few minutes later the rain begins, a few big fat drops to start with but quickly building into a downpour. The flashes of lightning become more frequent and the roar of thunder is almost continuous.

Eventually Lorina finds us and leads us to a large hall. There's a smell of food coming from inside and my stomach roars louder than the thunder.

"You must be starving, poor thing," she says. "I forgot you haven't eaten at all since you left your home world. I'm afraid under the circumstances we can't offer you very much, but follow me."

We reach the front of the hall and are each presented with a piece of bread and a bowl of what smells like stewed fish. We take our food and sit quietly on the floor in the corner. Whatever it is that's in the stew, it tastes divine and my bowl is soon empty.

After our meal she leads us down into the shrine where we are briefed by her parents. My stomach cramps when they reveal what my role is to be.

“Here they come,” Kevin says. “Are you ready?”

We are standing on the parapet atop the western wall of the temple, and in the lightning flashes we catch glimpses of a band of armoured warriors marching towards us. The rain has all but stopped now but we're completely drenched. All the Elves flanking me are wearing heavy armour, boots and spiky hats but I'm in just my trusty board shorts, cleaned and pressed by Lorina's Laundry. I have a translator headset on which is linked into huge loudspeakers aimed at the approaching troops.

“As ready as I'll ever be,” I say, but I'm not. I'm terrified, if the truth be known.

The lightning flashes again and the warriors are now grouping at the base of the wall. Kevin gives me the thumbs up and signals the sound engineer to patch me through.

“I AM MARK, RIGHTFUL HEIR OF MORGOTH,” my voice booms out across the landscape in a language I cannot understand. “WHO COMES HERE?”

Bright spotlights come on from the back of the assault force and quickly settle on me. I take a deep breath, fully expecting it to be my last. But instead a great murmuring arises from the mob, and whenever the translator can pick out something coherent it renders it as *‘Mark the Bewildered’*.

“WHO LEADS HERE?” I say, after further prompting from Kevin.

“I do,” comes a voice from amongst the mob. Spotlights from the temple come on and pick out a tall, heavily-built man who is walking forward to the front of his forces.

“I am Farley, Shaman of the Imperial Council, my lord,” he says and performs a very theatrical bow. I'm not sure whether he's mocking me or not.

“WHAT BUSINESS BRINGS YOU HERE, FARLEY?”

“Your appearance has put me at something of a loss. I felt your presence here last night and assumed you were being held captive by the Elves, but it's clear you are not. If it is your will, my lord, allow me to enter, so we may confer in private.”

I look at Kevin and he shrugs his shoulders.

“VERY WELL THEN, COME TO THE GATE IN ONE HOUR FROM NOW.”

“Can we trust him?” I ask. We have returned to the shrine and I’m standing before Kevin and Loretta. On each side of me and holding my hands are Lorina and Chris. I’m still trembling a little in the aftershock of my performance on the parapet.

“No, of course not,” Kevin says, “but you should hear what he has to say. If there’s any hope we may resolve all of this peacefully then we must at least try.”

“If he truly does believe you to be his lord,” Loretta says, “then he may not like what you have to tell him.”

“And if he doesn’t?” I ask naively.

“He’ll most likely kill you,” Kevin says. I gulp.

“Come, I’ll take you to the anteroom where you’ll be meeting with him,” Loretta says and leads me to a door at the side of the chamber.

“I want to stay with Mark,” Chris pleads.

“And so do I,” Lorina says.

Loretta looks at them both for what seems an age and they stand as still as statues, transfixed by her gaze.

“Very well, I believe you both have a role to play in this, but what that role may be remains unclear.”

“Yippee!” Chris says and then, realising where he is, holds his hand over his mouth and blushes.

I’m seated behind a huge wooden desk with Chris on my right and Lorina on my left. The door opens and Farley is escorted into the room by two armoured Elves. I stand and he bows to me.

I reach down for my translator headset but he raises his hand and says, “No need for that, my lord, for I am fluent in your language.”

“Be seated,” I say, quite bewildered by this revelation. He sits in front of me.

“These are my aides, Christopher son of Aaron and Lorina daughter of Loretta,” I say, following the Elvish etiquette. He nods his head to them and they respond with a similar gesture.

“We have regained control of the galaxy in readiness for your return, my lord,” he says. This was the last thing I expected him to say and for a moment I am at a loss.

“Ten years ago I relinquished my position as Supreme Ruler, and wish that to remain so,” I eventually say.

“But that’s not the wish of your most loyal subjects, my lord. This galaxy needs a firm leader, one who is just and fair like your grandfather was.”

I almost choke, but Chris and Lorina each squeeze my hands tightly and I manage, just, to retain my composure.

“Don’t be too hasty to condemn your grandfather, Mark. He was a great ruler in many ways and he was mostly fair and just, at least to those who didn’t try to cross him. You should be proud to follow in his footsteps.”

I try to look impassive and I think I succeed.

“Consider my request, and then come to us at dawn tomorrow in the Old Temple and take your rightful place as leader.”

He stands, bows deeply and prepares to leave the room.

“We will crush you if you don’t,” he says in a hushed, cruel voice and strides out. The guards scurry off after him.

“If he is being honest,” Kevin says, “then this is too good an opportunity to pass up. With Mark enthroned as Supreme Ruler of the Universe, or whatever the proper title is, and Lorina as his wife, the Delphinidae will be restored to their rightful glory.”

“My wife?” I say, as if that’s the only part of his statement I’ve heard. Lorina kisses me on the nose. I try not to giggle but I can’t help myself.

“If he is being honest, that is,” Loretta says. “For all we know Mark might well be walking into a deadly trap.”

“I can protect him,” Chris says, thrusting out his chest in a comical gesture of strength that causes me to giggle again. He glares at me and I can feel the same mind-bending force his father is renowned for. I raise my hands in mock surrender and he smiles.

“Don’t underestimate your young friend,” Loretta says to me. “The Dolphins chose him to accompany you for very good reasons.”

“The hour is growing late. Come join us for supper and then you may retire to your room.”

We are fed copious quantities of cakes and herbal tea, and I can feel my girth expanding. I’m suddenly very tired and begin to yawn uncontrollably. Loretta notices and asks Lorina to take us to our respective rooms, so we wish everyone a good night and take our leave.

The first stop is Chris’s room. Lorina takes his shorts from him (for cleaning in that famous Lorina’s Laundry no doubt) and tucks him into bed.

“You did great, Markie,” he says.

“So did you,” I say. “Good night and sweet dreams.”

Lorina and I stand watch over him in silence, holding each others’ hands, until he’s sleeping.

“He’s a very brave little boy,” she whispers to me as she closes his door behind us.

“Just like his father, only I wish he’d stop calling me Markie.”

Now it’s her turn to giggle. She pulls me along and takes me into another room. As soon as she pushes open the door a waft of steam drifts out. Inside there’s a large hot spa built into the floor and surrounded by jars of herbal cleansing oils. She gently removes my board shorts and takes off her gown, then leads me into the water.

“I’ll scrub your back if you scrub mine,” she says.

“Where did you learn that line from?” I ask, laughing.

“From the Dolphins, of course.”

The bath was absolutely luxurious. I wrap a towel around my waist and Lorina does likewise, then she picks up her gown and my shorts and leads me to my room.

“Good night, then,” she says, standing at the threshold. I kiss her on the nose and she giggles, and that sets me off as well.

“We have a big day ahead of us and you must rest now,” she says as she pulls the door closed between us. I sigh and then climb onto my bed, still basking in her loveliness.

Once again I am facing the same dilemma I faced ten years ago. If I do what everyone wants and become Supreme Ruler of the Universe or whatever, then I have a chance to bring peace and stability to this galaxy. As long as I’m never called upon to use my Barefooter powers, no-one need ever know I lost those powers, at least not until I start growing old. And yet a warning is sounding in my mind, the one about power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely. Could I really become another Morgoth? I wish Mum and Dad were here to help me decide what I should do.

I toss and turn for a long while, but finally drift off to sleep.

It seems I’ve been asleep for only minutes when Chris is shaking me awake. Lorina is standing with him and holding out my freshly laundered shorts for me. I look up at the window but it’s still dark outside.

“Dawn is about an hour away,” she says. “We can have a quick breakfast and then be on our way.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, still half-asleep. Then I remember.

“To the Old Temple, of course,” she says and I nod grimly.

I pull my board shorts on and she leads us to the same room where we had supper last night. There’s fruit, bread, grain and juice and I help myself

to a copious amount of each. I suddenly have a horrible thought and almost choke on a mouthful.

“What happens when they see me eating three meals a day? They’ll know then I’m not a real Barefooter.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she says. “I suppose you’ll just have to get used to eating less often, and I could smuggle food to you when we’re alone I guess.”

I nod but I’m far from happy. There are probably a million other things that will prove straight away I’m not what I’m claiming to be. What we are doing is stupid, but I can think of no other way out. If I don’t show up at the Old Temple this morning Farley will attack and wipe everyone out, and if I do go I’m sure to wind up dead along with Chris and Lorina. Chris looks at me with his father’s eyes again.

“We’ll make it okay, Markie,” he says and I feel strangely comforted.

First light finds us walking through the forest, escorted by two armoured Elvish guards. The ground is very wet after last night’s storms but the sky’s now completely clear. The air is cool and invigorating and I feel a whole lot better. We walk in silence and soon reach the top of the hill. In front of us is a wide expanse of farmland and in the distance a dark, spooky-looking building with many towers that I assume is our destination.

One of the guards blows a single sustained note on his horn and the other cries something in a voice that’s far too loud to have come from one mouth.

“What did he say?” I ask Lorina.

“He’s announcing our arrival.”

The path we’re following gradually broadens into a wide thoroughfare, and as we near the temple there are people gathered on either side of the road watching us pass. As I glance about some bow while others avert their eyes. It would seem not everybody wants a new Supreme Ruler. I try to look innocuous, which isn’t too difficult as I basically am.

We arrive at the gate to the temple and Farley is waiting to greet us.

“You have chosen wisely, I see,” he says.

“What other choice did I have?”

“Well, there’s one other. Come, let me show you around.”

He leads us in and our guards try to follow but they’re stopped.

“You may wait for your charges here,” he says. They look as if they’re about to protest but then think better of it.

This temple is indeed a great deal older than the Delphinidae’s one and in many places the stonework is in need of repair. I hope it doesn’t all fall in on top of us. Farley leads us down a long corridor and into a brightly lit room, in the centre of which is a table covered with all kinds of food.

“I’d be most remiss if I didn’t offer you refreshments after your long journey,” he says.

My mouth starts to water and I’m about to follow the lead of Chris and Lorina by digging in when I remember I’m supposed to be an autothermic Barefooter. I reach for the water instead, and sip slowly from my glass.

When Chris and Lorina have eaten their fill, which in the case of Chris is an enormous amount, Farley leads us out across a weed-infested courtyard and up a broad flight of steps at the far end. We pass through a huge set of ornate doors and find ourselves in what can only be described as a palatial throne room. Everywhere I look there’s gold and gems of all colours, and at the far end of the room is a huge throne.

“Come,” he says, seeing me staring at it, “and try it on for size.”

I step up onto the dais and ease myself onto the throne. The seat is well padded and when I lean back the fabric feels silky-smooth on my skin. My feet are dangling over the end so Farley pulls out a footrest for me. Its surface feels like soft wool and is ever so slightly warm on my soles. I close my eyes, and in my imagination I see people being brought before me to be judged and either rewarded with gold or punished with death. I shake my head and open my eyes wide with shock. I quickly step down and rejoin Chris and Lorina.

“What happened up there, Markie?” Chris whispers.

“I’ll tell you later,” I whisper back.

“Come, I have something else to show you,” Farley says and guides us through another door.

We are in a dimly lit room surrounded by a myriad of electronic devices. In the centre is a circular blue ring about three metres high, and through it is a blackness so black it seems to be drawing me into it. I suddenly feel very scared and the hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise.

“You can feel it, can’t you,” Farley says, now with that roughness and cruelty creeping back into his voice.

“This is a portal into another time line, one you’re no doubt very familiar with, Mark, for you were the one responsible for ending it. Well almost ending it, I should say, for with the aid of this device we’re holding it open, suspended a moment from extinction. You lived in that time line too, of course, but you never came to Meridian and you therefore never unseated your grandfather. You’ll be pleased to know, then, that at this particular moment you see frozen here, he is alive and well, oblivious to his imminent fate. You’re also alive in there, dear Lorina, but none too well I fear, for after the death of your disgraced father you were taken into Morgoth’s harem and have been, how shall I put it, well used over the last ten years.

“This is the other choice I spoke of earlier, Mark. By flicking this switch I can turn off the portal and end that time line, and your grandfather, forever.

“Or,” he continues, now pulling a knife from his belt, “I can kill you here and that time line will become the dominant one, of course ending the life of young Christopher too since he was never born over there.

“And don’t think I can’t kill you because of your Barefooter powers,” he snarls. “I know those genes were destroyed when you set off the pulse that killed Morgoth, and I know you bleed just like everyone else now.”

I take a step back and bump into a console.

“But like I said, you have a choice, Mark,” he says as he lowers the knife. His voice is now all sweetness and light. “You say the word and I’ll throw this switch and place you on that throne back there, your little secret safe with me. You can marry your girlfriend here and fulfil her father’s wildest dreams, and your little friend can either stay as your loyal companion or return to his home on Earth.”

Everything is silent, the only sound is the pounding of my heart.

“Mark, how do you choose?”

A Race Against Time

Raphus and Dromaius were waiting for them when Todd's shuttle landed on Genesis.

"You were quite right, Billy," Dromaius said as they stepped out. "There's a space dock precisely where you said it would be, complete with a fully operational intergalactic ship. It would have to be close to a million years old, but with the nearest star over twenty light years away it's been sitting at almost absolute zero the whole time and has been almost perfectly preserved."

"What's more," Raphus said, "we even found a complete set of instruction manuals."

Their hopes of launching a rescue mission for Mark and Chris had initially been dashed when Elko was told the Dolphins couldn't guide any more than three people through Sheol at a time. With a round trip time of more than twelve hours for them, it was pretty much out of the question. Anyway, they really wanted to get there on a ship that had a bit of firepower to back it up, or be able to obtain such a ship when they arrived, but that was also out of the question.

The idea had come to Billy shortly after they'd arrived at Elko's home. When Jason had explained about the Duplicity Across Subspace principle that had led him to conclude the boys had disappeared into Sheol, something in the back of his mind had started ringing alarm bells. It took him a full hour to realise what it meant, a sure sign he was getting old, but when he finally caught hold of it he knew straight away he'd struck pay dirt.

"Aaron," he'd said as the idea started to take form, "when you went through the portal into Sheol at the back of Astel's cave on Genesis, did you notice any problems with air pressure?"

"No, there was a coldness and then a hotness once we'd passed through, but Peter reported the same thing when he went through the cave here."

"Good. So you couldn't have been half standing in vacuum as you passed through."

“Not without noticing it, I’m sure.”

“Todd,” Billy then said, “what’s on the other side of the fold from Genesis?”

“I know that one without having to look it up. Absolutely nothing, there’s zilch for twenty light years in any direction, and only a handful of stars within a hundred light years. That part of the galaxy’s pretty empty.”

“That’s what I thought. So why doesn’t the principle of Duplicity Across Subspace apply to that portal?”

“But it must,” Jason objected. “Peter proved it.”

“So we have a paradox,” Billy said. “Any thoughts, anyone?”

A look of amazing satisfaction appeared on Elko’s face a few seconds later, and Jason thought for a moment he was about to start dancing a jig.

“That explains it! In the history books, Gallad had been unaware that the enemy had established their base camp on Genesis until he stumbled across them in that canyon. Yet elsewhere in the journals it says one of the first things they did was set up an early warning system to detect any craft that may be approaching the planet. I’ve often wondered how Torg got in there without being detected, and now I think I’ve solved the riddle.”

Everyone turned towards him in anticipation.

“They must have assembled a space dock on the other side of the fold, and set up a permanent portal between that and the cave. That way they could move any amount of troops and equipment in and out without risk of detection. Whether the portal extended into Sheol from the very beginning or whether it was an afterthought doesn’t really matter. But given the defeat that Torg and Astel suffered, and given the portal is still operational, I’d say that space dock is probably still sitting out there as good as the day it was built.”

“Do you think there’d still be any ships there?” Jason asked.

“Well, the records say all of Torg’s men fled soon after the death of Astel, and they were afraid of Astel’s spirit which was said to be haunting the canyon. So I’d say there’s a pretty good chance they would have stayed well clear of Astel’s own ship and left it there untouched.”

“Do you reckon we could fly that thing if it’s really out there?” Billy asked.

Billy started to walk towards the cave behind the waterfall but Dromaius pulled him up.

“We don’t live up there any more. As soon as everyone left after your last adventure we started building our new house on the surface. We decided we’d spent far too long cowering underground and needed to come out in the open and truly make a fresh start.”

He led them back towards the village that had grown up along the beachfront and eventually they reached an enormous house surrounded by many pools and trees of all description.

“It looks like one of those five star holiday resorts they’re always advertising,” Aaron said and everyone murmured in agreement.

Dromaius and Raphus guided them to their respective rooms to freshen up after their long trip and an hour later they gathered in the dining room for dinner.

Jason was growing restless. He was becoming increasingly concerned that every hour spent sitting here was another hour closer to disaster for his and Aaron’s sons, and a tiny voice inside his head was telling him time was running short. Finally he plucked up the courage to ask Raphus how the preparation of the ship was progressing.

“It’s going very well,” he said. “Our technicians expect it should all be ready to go by tomorrow night.”

“What? But Mark and Chris are out there, facing who knows what dangers.”

“I know, and you can rest assured we’re all working as hard as we can to have you underway.”

“Elko said the Dolphins could take up to three people across through Sheol,” Jason said, now forcing himself to remain calm.

“That’s possible, yes. If you really think time is that short, I can make enquiries on your behalf.”

“I’d be most grateful, yes, if you could,” he said and then went back to join the others at the dinner table.

They were just finishing their desserts when Raphus came up behind him.

“The Dolphins have agreed to take three of you across tonight. If you can choose two others to accompany you, then you can leave immediately.”

“Thank you, thank you so much,” Jason said.

As discreetly as possible he pulled Jenny, Aaron and Maleena aside.

“According to Raphus, the ship won’t be ready to go until tomorrow night, and I fear by then it will be too late to help the boys. The Dolphins have agreed to take three of us through Sheol tonight, though, so the only question is, which three should it be?”

“The three of you should go,” Jenny said immediately, cutting off any debate before it could begin. “Maleena knows the territory, Aaron is an Elf and you, honey, have pretty much a full dose of those Barefooter genes in you.”

Jason thought about arguing but then decided what Jenny had said was basically true. Instead he thanked her and promised he'd have their son back safe and sound by the time she arrived on the ship.

"Now you be careful, all of you," she said and hugged each of them in turn.

The three passed through the shimmering portal at the back of Astel's cave. The sudden darkness was so complete that for a moment Jason thought he had lost his sight.

"I'd forgotten how dark it was in here," Aaron said. "You'd have thought the Dolphins would have installed some lighting by now."

"I can feel a sort of coldness here," Jason said. "Can any of you feel it?"

"It's bloody freezing," Aaron said, "but in a second or two it will turn hot and then settle down again. I don't know why but that always seems to happen when you come into this place."

Right on cue the cold turned to heat and soon that dissipated leaving a general feeling of nothingness.

"Here come the Dolphins," Maleena said and they could all see the three tiny glowing dots approaching them.

"We'll take you as quickly as we can," the voice of the Dolphins spoke inside their heads. *"The situation on Bluehaven is fast deteriorating and we fear time is short."*

Jason thanked them for their concern and they were quickly underway. Apart from the wind in their faces there was no other sensation of movement and they had little idea of how fast or for how long they were travelling. Eventually, though, the wind died and the Dolphins set them down.

"Take a few steps forward and you will emerge on the beach close to the Delphinidae temple on Bluehaven. You'll find it is mid morning there. Good luck, and bring them back safely."

After thanking them they joined hands and stepped forward. There was a brief shimmering and a moment later they were standing about halfway up a beach on a bright sunny day.

"Which way?" Aaron asked.

"The temple's close to the beach, or at least it was the last time I was here, but that was a long time ago," Maleena said. "Up this way I think. There used to be an older temple on the other side of the island, but that became Morgoth's stronghold and I don't think we want to go anywhere near there."

She led them along the beach and up through the dunes. Soon they could see the towers of the temple and increased their pace. They followed the pathway leading to the gate where they were met by four heavily armoured

guards. Maleena spoke to them in Elvish and after some discussion they were allowed to enter.

“They said the temple came under siege last night, but that Mark negotiated a truce with the leader of the guerrillas and they’d all withdrawn back to the Old Temple on the other side of the island,” Maleena said as they made their way into the building. “We must seek an audience with the High Priestess.”

That was easier said than done, but Maleena eventually talked their way into the shrine where Loretta and Kevin were in deep conversation with their advisors.

“Please excuse our intrusion, My Lady,” Maleena said as Loretta looked up at them. “I’m Maleena, Chris’s mother, and my companions are Aaron, my husband, and Jason, the father of Mark.”

“Welcome, all of you,” Loretta said and Kevin rose to greet them as well. “Your boys have been of wonderful service to us. You should be very proud of them.”

“Where are they now?” Jason asked, pleased that everyone was actually speaking English.

“They left at dawn this morning for an audience with Farley, the leader of the imperials. Mark has agreed to take up his grandfather’s throne with our daughter at his side. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Jason could hardly believe what he was hearing and Aaron had turned quite pale.

“Surely you must know he no longer carries the Barefooter genes?” Jason said.

“Oh yes, he told us that as soon as he arrived, but he’s strong of spirit and I’m sure the loss of those powers won’t place him at too much of a disadvantage.”

Jason shook his head in dismay. “We must go after them and stop this madness.”

“We cannot allow that,” Kevin said.

“The hell you can’t!”

Without warning he dashed out of the room. Aaron and Maleena went to follow but the Elvish guards held them back while others ran off in pursuit.

Jason, although now in his forties, was nonetheless very fit and had the advantage both of a head start and of being barefoot. He’d noticed the Elvish guards were all wearing heavy boots and was pretty certain that would slow them down somewhat. So far, at least, he seemed to be right, as when he glanced back over his shoulder he could see no sign of his pursuers.

There was a fairly obvious track leading up over the ridgeline that ran the length of the island. If what he recalled from Maleena's description was correct, from north to south the island would have been at least five hundred kilometres long, but he was right at its northernmost tip and from the eastern side to the west coast was only at most five or six kilometres. He soon reached the top of the ridge and saw ahead of him the rich farmland and the menacing shape of the Old Temple in the distance. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, perhaps aware that he was standing in exactly the same spot as his son had paused a few hours earlier.

The western descent from the ridge was rather steep in places and he was frustrated at having to keep slowing down, but he also knew very well that he wouldn't be of much help to Mark if he fell and broke his leg. Finally the ground levelled out and the track widened into a well-defined road. He ran like there was no tomorrow, and thought that might very well be the case if he failed.

As he drew nearer to the temple the road became busier with the daily bustle of village life, but no-one paid him any heed even though with his dark skin and flowing black hair he was in sharp contrast to the generally light-skinned and blonde-headed locals. Mostly, when they saw him coming, they'd move to the side of the road to let him pass and he was very appreciative of that. He thought the road-users back home could learn a thing or two from these people and that brought a smile to his face.

Finally he reached the gate, almost exhausted from his run, but to his dismay he saw it was heavily guarded. Trying not to be noticed, he worked his way around and along the fence, looking for another way in. Eventually he found a broken fence post and, pushing it aside with all his might, squeezed through. He turned around to make sure nobody had been watching him, but standing not five metres away was a small girl with her eyes fixed firmly upon him. He held his finger up to his lips in the universal sign for secrecy and to his great relief she nodded and turned away.

The temple walls were black and with the side he was on now in shadow, his dark skin and black board shorts rendered him almost invisible. Stealthily he crept along the wall back towards the gate and, when he was sure none of the guards were looking his way, he took a deep breath and dashed inside the building.

He ran through a short dark passageway and emerged into a large courtyard that was overgrown with weeds. He quickly looked around but there was no-one in sight. Along the furthest wall, which he guessed was about a hundred metres from where he was standing, there was a broad flight of steps leading up to a landing and then behind that a huge ornate doorway. As he looked at it he began to feel something dark and terrible

tugging on his mind, and knew this was where he had to go. He sprinted across through the weeds, his legs now almost giving out on him, and mounted the steps. At the top he looked around to make sure no-one was watching and then snuck inside. The spacious room he'd entered was filled with gold and gems and at the far end was a huge throne.

"Morgoth's," he muttered.

To the right of the throne was an open door leading to an anteroom and he could hear voices coming from within. He crept towards it, looking around every few seconds in case any guards should arrive.

When he reached the doorway he saw with dismay a vicious-looking man holding a knife at Mark's throat.

"But like I said, you have a choice, Mark," the man said as he lowered the knife. "You say the word and I'll throw this switch and place you on that throne back there, your little secret safe with me. You can marry your girlfriend here and fulfil her father's wildest dreams, and your little friend can either stay as your loyal companion or return to his home on Earth."

They were silent for a few moments and no-one had seen him yet. On the other side of the man with the knife were Chris and a tall Elf girl he presumed was the one Mark was supposed to be marrying. Behind them stood a blue ring and within that a darkness so black he couldn't look at it. He knew this was what he'd sensed as he'd entered the courtyard, and he shivered.

"Mark, how do you choose?" the man finally said, and then Chris saw Jason and cried out.

Martyn and Loria

“Uncle Jason!” Chris cries and I look up in amazement to see my father standing in the doorway.

“Who the hell are you?” Farley says.

“I am Mark’s father,” Dad says softly. “Release him please, and I’ll do you no harm.”

“Huh, father indeed,” Farley sneers. “You’re even punier than he is. Begone, before I summon the guards.”

“My son may have lost his Barefooter genes,” Dad says, now walking forward and seeming to grow in stature, “but I have not. Release him NOW!”

I see a glint of reflected light out the corner of my eye and then a moment later there’s a dull thud as Farley’s knife embeds itself in Dad’s chest. I watch in horror as a small stream of blood flows down and begins to pool on the floor. Dad stops walking, a look of puzzlement on his face. Then the most amazing thing happens.

The knife begins to quiver, at first from side to side but then outwards as well, and in a few moments it drops to the floor with a clunk. The wound in his chest seals over without even a trace of a scar. He kicks the knife away with his foot and then begins to walk forward again.

“Like I said, I am a full-blooded Barefooter,” he says, even though that’s not quite true. He’s a half-blood, but that’s good enough for me.

Farley lets go of me and takes a step back, almost falling into the portal behind us, but he must have caught a glimpse of it at the last moment for he does a delicate little sidestep to avoid it. For an instant he is off balance and that’s when Chris strikes. He throws himself at him, knocking him backwards. Farley’s arms flail in almost comic fashion and then he tumbles back and into the portal. At the moment his head passes through his whole body turns black and then seems to partially liquefy. There’s a horrible

slurping sound I'm sure will haunt my dreams in the weeks and months ahead as he is drawn into the portal and disappears.

I turn and watch in horror as Chris, who is still off balance, begins to fall towards the portal as well. Instinctively he reaches out in front of him and just manages to find the edge of the ring with his fingertips. It's not enough, though, for his momentum is still pushing him inexorably towards the blackness. It almost seems as if the portal is drawing him in and I shudder as I remember him saying a few nights ago that he feared the other time line was trying to snare him.

As he's about to touch the surface Lorina reaches out and grabs him, pulling him back with all her might. Time stands still as he balances on the edge of the precipice, but then ever so slowly they both start to tumble back and land together on the floor, out of harm's way. I breathe again.

Dad starts coming towards me but I put my hand out to stop him. I turn around and reach for the switch controlling the portal, pushing it to the off position. The black disc immediately becomes transparent and through the ring I can see Farley sprawled across the floor of this very room in that other time line. Behind him is Morgoth with a look of shock on his face. Realising his peril, Morgoth leaps forward towards his side of the portal and dives through. Just as he emerges on our side, the image of that other time line starts to become grainy, and the graininess spreads along his body from his feet to the top of his head. He looks up at me with an expression of utter contempt.

"*Martyn*," he whispers, and then with a howl of despair he turns to dust and disappears.

"It's over," Lorina says.

"Not yet," I say as I first begin to feel it through the soles of my feet, a growing rumble from deep within the ground.

"It's a quake," Dad yells. "Quick, everyone outside!"

We run through the throne room and out into the courtyard. I take one last look at that throne on the way past and a shiver passes through me. The ground is now shaking quite noticeably and we stagger forward like drunks. Dad leads us to the very centre of the courtyard and then I turn and look back. The tower above the imperial chamber is swaying back and forth and as I watch there's a grinding sound of stone against stone and it slowly topples onto the adjoining roof. That sets off a chain reaction and wall by wall, room by room, the entire temple collapses around us. Dad throws us to the ground and spread-eagles himself over the top of us, trying to protect us as best he can.

The ground beneath my chest continues to shake, and all around us rock and debris is raining down. The dust and Dad's weight combine to make it

difficult for me to breathe. Just when I begin to think the quake is going to go on forever the shaking stops dead, as if someone has just pressed the OFF button. For a few seconds more the rocks continue to rain down but then they too stop and everything is eerily quiet.

Dad slowly gets to his feet and helps us up. We are covered in dust from head to toe and all around us are huge stones embedded in the ground. Remarkably, and almost impossibly, we're completely unscathed. There's a dull thud as some last remaining part of the structure topples over and then all is quiet again.

"Is it over now?" Chris whimpers, but before I can answer I hear the roar of a spacecraft and look up to see a large ship descending towards the ground. It lands cautiously on the rubble next to us and the hatch springs open. I try to brace myself for yet another assault by the imperial storm troopers or whatever, but I'm just too tired. Then my eyes almost pop out of my head as I realise the person coming down the steps is my mother. I run and wrap my arms around her.

"You're safe," she cries, "oh thank God you're safe. When we saw the building collapsing we thought we were too late."

My eyes become heavy with tears and I start crying uncontrollably. I try to wipe them away but Dad pats me on the shoulder and says to let it all out, and I do.

* * *

As we return to the New Temple my thoughts drift back over the events of the last two days and ultimately land on a cricket field in Narrabri. I wipe my eyes, blow my nose and take a deep breath.

"What's happening about Peter?" I ask with a tremble in my voice. "I mean with the funeral and all that."

Dad looks at me very seriously, then ruffles my hair.

"I don't think you need worry about that for a good many years yet," he says.

For a moment I don't understand. Are they leaving him in cold storage? Can't be, no that's ridiculous, so there can be only one other explanation.

"He's alive?" I ask, sounding incredulous.

"We were extremely lucky," Mum says. "There was an ambulance going practically right past the gate when I called them and they managed to revive him. He's doing fine now, trust me."

She kisses me, not on the nose but on my forehead. I giggle anyway, more with relief than any ticklishness I might have on that part of my anatomy.

“That’s so good of you to be thinking of him anyway, Mark,” she says and hugs me tightly.

Lorina and I leave the others at the temple and walk down to the beach together. We stand in silence on the sand for a while, staring out to sea, then as one we remove our clothing and run into the water. We swim out a short way and two dolphins surface alongside us. They entice us onto their backs and carry us around and around the bay, pulling us below the surface for a while and then leaping out of the water. We’re both screaming with delight.

Eventually they tire and bring us back to the shore. We climb off and they look up at us with their deep penetrating eyes, passing on a wordless blessing.

“We have indeed been blessed,” Lorina says as we walk out onto the sand, and I nod in agreement. We stretch out on the beach and allow the last rays of the sun and the warm breeze to dry us.

The light wavers for a moment, and now I’m Martyn and Lorina is Loria.

“At last we are avenged,” Loria says.

“Yes, my father is truly gone now,” Martyn says. “Thank you Mark, for we are forever in your debt.”

I blink and now I’m Mark again and Lorina is herself.

“Did you,” I begin to say but before I can finish she answers that yes, she did.

“In some fundamental way, they are us and we are they. I think we owe it to them to live our lives in love and happiness, to make up for what they were denied.”

“Yes, we do,” I whisper.

As the sun drops behind the dunes we dress and walk hand in hand back towards the temple.

When we arrive we are confronted with a huge banquet in the courtyard. There are people everywhere, including, as Lorina points out, many off-world dignitaries. We’re both given goblets of wine and then go off in search of our parents.

Finally everyone is seated and Loretta, Kevin, Lorina, Chris and I are placed on the high table at the front. A large gong is struck and Loretta rises. I slip my translator back on, reminding myself that I must ask Lorina to give me an Elvish language study guide to take home with me before I leave.

“Would you all please be upstanding as a token of respect for our distinguished guest, Mark the Bewildered, Honoured Patron of the Galaxy,”

she announces and I blush. I am relieved too, for I feel much more comfortable with that title than Supreme Ruler of the Universe or whatever.

“Ten years ago Mark came to Meridian where, as an extremely brave little seven year old boy, he confronted and defeated Morgoth, his genetic grandfather. When he returned to his home he believed he was leaving us to enjoy a new era of freedom and peace, but sadly we’ve not lived up to that expectation. Now he has returned once more in our time of need and saved us from ourselves. We are all deeply in his debt.”

She indicates that it’s my turn to reply, so I stand.

“I thank you for the honour you have bestowed upon me,” I say, hoping all the right words will come to me. “But it is I who am honoured and humbled to have served with such fine people as yourselves. I recall now the words of my mentor, Peter Thorpe, who when I was here ten years ago said that peace cannot be enforced from without but only embraced from within, and the events of the last two days have driven that point home to me. I hope this can also be a lesson for you as well, as you begin again your own struggle to embrace peace. I wish you every success.”

There’s wild cheering and applause so I guess I’ve said the right words after all, or maybe it’s simply because I’ve been brief. There’s much food to be eaten after the speeches.

Kevin stands and raises his hands for silence.

“You have indeed taught us that lesson, Mark,” he says. “When you arrived here a few days ago I wanted you to be Mark the Bewildered, Supreme Ruler of the Galaxy and Last of the Barefooters, and I was incensed when you revealed to us that you’d lost all your powers in your confrontation with Morgoth. For that I apologise and beg your forgiveness. Thanks to you, your father and your brave young friend here, our world, and indeed our galaxy, has been saved from yet another tyranny and can now, I hope, look forward to a long and sustained peace. Would you please all be upstanding once more and drink a toast to Mark, Jason and Chris.”

“To Mark, Jason and Chris,” the crowd says as one, although the translator has some difficulty with all the voices speaking at once.

“Enough already,” someone yells from the back. “Let’s eat.”

It takes me a moment to realise the words were spoken in English and that the voice belongs to Aaron. I should have known.

Our departure from Bluehaven the next morning is bitter-sweet. Loretta and Kevin have presented us with many gifts and I have promised them all, especially Lorina, that I’ll return as often as I can. As we part she kisses me

on the nose and my giggling adds a little merriment to what is an otherwise very sad moment for me.

Our farewells complete, we board the ship and begin our long journey home.

Christmas

It's Christmas time and we've all journeyed out to Narrabri again for the celebrations. Peter has fully recovered with no trace of heart damage and the doctors have said if he doesn't live to be at least a hundred they'll be very much surprised. He has spent the last few months pouring over the intergalactic ship we brought back with us, and is still annoyed that Granddad and the others didn't take him with them on the flight to Bluehaven.

I had the shock of my life a week ago when I answered a knock on the door and found Lorina standing there grinning at me. Her parents had given her permission to come and live on Earth for a few years so she can study our culture and way of life, and she'll be attending the same courses as me at the university next year. I was over the moon and totally lost for words, so she kissed me on the nose and made me giggle.

"There's now a new Governing Council installed on Meridian," she said later on, "and they are all much younger than their predecessors and know what it's like to have tasted freedom for a short while only to have it snatched away again. They are determined not to allow history to repeat itself. The remaining guerrillas have surrendered themselves and sworn allegiance to the new government, and I think we might really have a lasting peace this time."

I hope she's right. I've had enough of being Supreme Ruler of the Universe or whatever to last two lifetimes.

After Christmas lunch has settled down we resume that ill-fated cricket match. Peter takes strike and whacks Tim's first delivery way over the boundary for six runs. Chris and I go running off into the scrub to find the ball. It only takes Peter and Aaron another five overs to surpass our paltry 77 runs and the Dodos are declared winners. I walk over to Lorina who has

been sitting on the sideline, totally bewildered by this strange game that we play.

“Shall we go and get muddy?” I ask.

She stands and we walk hand in hand down to the creek, our own barefoot times just beginning.

Mark Collins

Part Eight

Barefoot Roots

After the Game

Aaron raised his bat in salute as he scored the winning run for the Dodos, then removed the headband he'd worn during the game and let his hair flop back down over his eyes, making him look both silly and mysterious. '*Silly and mysterious*', that pretty much summed up Aaron, I mused.

The media had given him a hard time over his hair when he was first selected to tour England. The British press in particular had a field day, calling him *Mophead Smith* and later just *Moppy*, but all that changed when he almost single-handedly won the Ashes back for Australia. By the time the domestic season rolled around that summer most of the cricket-crazy kids, and quite a few grown-up kids as well, were wearing their hair hanging down over their eyes and the press had nothing but praise for good old *Moppy*.

I walked over and congratulated him on his victory, and he blushed.

"I guess I got a bit carried away with the bat back in my hands. I should have skyed one to Jase or Mark and given the others a bit of a hit."

"Well we all enjoyed watching the legendary Moppy back in action, and I didn't see too many sad faces on either side."

"Thanks Tom," he said and patted me on the back. At that moment Chris came running up and leapt into his father's arms, and he carried him over to Maleena.

Meanwhile Mark and Lorina had wandered off in the direction of the creek and before long we could hear the sound of splashing and laughter drifting up to us.

"Remember when we were like that?" Sarah whispered in my ear and I nodded.

"A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then."

"Yes, it sure has, but I wouldn't trade those years for anything."

“No, nor would I,” I said as I looked around at our gathering of family and friends. Billy and Julia, Jason and Jennifer, Todd and Elissi, Susan and Tim, Aaron and Maleena, and now Mark and Lorina. And of course Peter, Norrie and young Chris as well. Yes, we’d certainly been blessed with wonderful people around us, and I held Sarah close to me as we kissed.

Billy and Peter came walking up to me. Peter had a very serious expression on his face while Billy was grinning from ear to ear. They stopped just in front of me and Billy nudged him forward.

“Tom,” he said awkwardly, “I was wondering if I could ask you something.”

“Fire away.”

“It’s just, um, I was going through my father’s things and I came across his old diary, from back when he was at university. It tells quite a story, but it leaves a whole lot of unanswered questions and I thought, well, I thought that maybe you could help fill in some of the gaps.”

I stared into space for some time, thinking back to those heady days when Michael Thorpe and I were students together. A lot happened then which had a huge bearing on the events that followed and shaped all our lives.

“I’ll tell you what. After dinner tonight I’ll tell you all a story, about my childhood up until the time I met your father, and then you can read what Michael had to say. Back then we were both sworn to secrecy, but I guess now the time has really come to tell you everything.”

“Wow, that would be great, Tom,” Peter said, smiling.

Mark and Lorina returned from the creek, both covered in mud of course. I hosed them down and they then ran around with the others playing a strange variation of touch football. As I watched them I tried to organise my childhood memories into some sort of coherent story and soon became lost in those thoughts. I wondered if anyone else from those times was still alive, apart from Sarah and me. Rachel and Michael were both gone now, as was another friend I’d had. Was he really a friend? I was still unsure, even after all these years.

We had an early dinner as they were all keen to hear my tale. Afterwards we adjourned to the living room and everyone sat round in a circle.

“Would anyone like a beer?” I asked, trying to forestall the moment when I had to begin.

Billy put his hand up but looked around, saw he was the only one and sheepishly lowered it again. Without saying anything, Aaron and Maleena

dashed out to the kitchen and returned with a stack of grape juice bottles and one can of beer. Aaron opened the can and passed it to me.

“Take a sip and then you can start,” he said. I did, then straightened my shirt and began.

Emu Child

I was born in 1948. My parents had been friends since childhood and would have married several years earlier if World War 2 had not intervened, but Dad enlisted in the army as soon as he was old enough and was captured by the Japanese in New Guinea. He and twenty other prisoners of war eventually escaped and he led them through the jungles to safety. For this deed he was awarded a medal for heroism and, upon returning to Australia, was granted a Housing Commission home in Narrabri. He and Mum were duly married and then I came along.

Both of my grandfathers were tribal Elders of the Emu people. When I was five years old they took me out into the bush for two weeks to begin my instruction in the ways of our people. They, and the other Elders, took a great deal of interest in me because my paternal grandfather had made a rather astonishing observation. Since time immemorial our people have carried what they called the Emu spirit, but he'd noticed that over the last few generations this spirit was becoming more pronounced in certain families and less in others. In each generation there were fewer but more powerful carriers of the spirit, and in me he saw a continuation of that trend.

On my tenth birthday my parents took me to a corroboree at the Emu cave. My father had an old truck he used for work and we could have driven, but instead we walked the whole way, in all a three day hike and done barefoot of course. As soon as we were away from so-called civilisation we removed our clothing and painted our bodies in the traditional manner of our people.

The corroboree was fantastic and all of us children had a great time with the dancing, but afterwards I was ushered into the cave and brought before the council of Elders. One by one they laid their hands upon me, and then my grandfathers told me to go outside and ask my parents to come in. I did as I was told and then joined the other children who were playing in the pool outside the cave.

After a while a very old man whom I'd never seen before came up to me and drew me away from the others. He was tall and straight in spite of his great age and spoke with a deep and powerful voice. He took hold of my hands and told me to close my eyes. I felt something, like I was slipping sideways I suppose, and the sounds of the other children disappeared. He then told me to open my eyes, and I looked around.

The thick forest we'd been standing in was gone and in its place was low scrub. The cave and the pool were still there but all the people had gone. The water level in the pool was also a lot lower, I noticed.

"Where are we?" I whispered.

"We're on a different world. Do you know about planets and stars?"

I'd developed a keen interest in all the new discoveries that had been happening in astronomy and said that yes, I knew Earth was a planet that orbited a star we called the sun, and that it was just one of millions and millions in the galaxy.

"Very good," he said with a smile on his face. "That will make it much easier for me to explain. This planet we're now standing on is on the opposite side of the galaxy to Earth. It's Earth's twin, but there are no people here. We, the Emu people, are the only ones who know of its existence, and there are few now who are able to cross between worlds. But the old powers are coming back in some families, and in particular your family, Tommy, and I can sense that power very strongly in you. You must come to me whenever you can and I'll teach you in the ways of the Emu spirit, for there's a great destiny approaching soon for our people."

I was very scared and yet at the same time very excited. I looked around and took in all that I could see. The ground was a brilliant red in colour and the sky the deepest blue I'd ever seen. The sun was just setting even though, back on Earth, it was still early afternoon. That more than anything made me realise I was indeed standing on another planet.

"We must return now," he said softly. "Give me your hands."

I closed my eyes and again felt that odd slippage. The sounds of the children splashing in the pool returned and when I opened my eyes we were back on Earth.

"Will I be able to travel like that?" I asked.

"Not yet, but when you're older you will," he said and then led me back to the others.

Except for a few brief encounters I never saw the old man again, at least not until the night Barrad called on us and he introduced himself as Elko. For the evening after we arrived back home we had a visitor, a Mr Halliday,

one of Dad's army friends from New Guinea. He talked to my parents for hours while I played in my room, then Mum called me to come out.

"Mr Halliday runs a business in Brisbane," she said to me, "and he wants your father to work for him. Would you like to go and live there?"

"Wow, that would be great!" I said, imagining we'd be living in a big house next to the sea.

"I'm glad you like the idea, Tommy," Dad said. "Mr Halliday wants me to be the new foreman at his factory and he's offering me twice as much money as I'm earning here."

He then stood up, shook Mr Halliday's hand and told him it was a deal. Two months later we packed all our belongings onto the back of Dad's truck and began the long journey to Brisbane.

Our new home was at Mount Gravatt in the southern suburbs of Brisbane and, much to my disappointment, was nowhere near the sea. The house was nice though, much nicer than where we were living in Narrabri, and it backed onto the forest leading to the top of Mount Gravatt itself. I was duly enrolled at the local primary school. I was the only Aboriginal boy there and had to put up with a bit of name-calling occasionally, but soon built up a small circle of good friends and was pretty happy. My friends and I had lots of fun running barefoot up through the forest out the back, seeing who could find the quickest way to the top of the mountain. Yes, they were definitely the happiest years of my childhood.

Two years later I finished primary school and moved up to high school. Unlike the primary school, the high school had shoes as part of its uniform and Mum bought me a pair. Hard, black and ominous-looking they were. Throughout my life I'd been spared the need to wear such things and it was with a great deal of trepidation that I squeezed my feet into them. They hurt every bit as much as I thought they would and I protested loudly but to no avail. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, I was inflicted with another part of the regulation uniform, the school tie. I didn't know which I hated more, and as my time at high school progressed I tried as often as I could to avoid wearing either of them. That caused a degree of friction between myself and the headmistress, an old battle-axe named Mrs Griffin, and on more occasions than I care to remember I was escorted to her office to explain why I was unshod or untied. Finally, and after a long talk with my parents who convinced her it was part of my Aboriginal heritage, I was given permission to dispense with both. That of course made me deliriously happy and the envy of all my friends, but it also marked me as a target for the school bullies.

I was in my third year of high school when a new student was brought into the class. He was a refugee from Latvia, the teacher said, and immediately asked if anyone knew where that was. No-one did, of course. The new student talked with a strange accent and his name, the way he said it, sounded like Andoo Shin. We immediately started calling him Andrew Schilling and he seemed to like that version better than the original. Being the new boy and a foreign refugee made him also a target for the bullies and so, seeking strength in numbers, he and I quickly became friends.

He was a tall skinny boy with very pale skin and had to wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants all year round to protect him from the sun. I felt sorry for him, particularly during the summer holidays when I never wore anything but a pair of shorts. He was also very interested in stars and planets and in the exams at the end of the year we both came equal top in science.

I'd just turned sixteen when Dad said he wanted to talk to me about Andrew.

"What country did Andrew say he came from?" he asked, and I said Latvia.

"That's strange then. Now I know you and Andrew are good friends and the last thing I want to do is come between you, anyway there's bound to be a logical explanation, I'm sure."

"What is it, Dad?"

"Well, there's a new man at work who's also a Latvian refugee, but his accent is nothing like Andrew's was. When I told him about Andrew he looked very puzzled but then said he'd like to meet with the boy. I've asked him to come around on Saturday, since Andrew usually spends most of his weekends around here. Is that okay, Tommy?"

I said it was, but I was still a bit worried about this mysterious man from Latvia. I told Andrew about him as soon as I got to school and for just a moment he turned even paler than he normally was. But then he said he looked forward to meeting with him and would be around at my place first thing on Saturday morning. I gave the matter no further thought.

The next day we were in our geography class when the headmistress came into the room.

"Thomas Collins," she roared and I gulped. "Come back to my office with me."

She strode ahead of me in silence and I was wondering what I'd done to offend her. I hoped she wasn't going to tell me she'd changed her mind about the shoes and tie, but surely not after all this time. When we finally

reached her office she stopped before opening the door and spoke to me very softly.

“I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you, Thomas,” she said and I looked down at my feet. “Your father was involved in an accident at work and I’m afraid that, well, I’m afraid he was killed.”

She opened the door and my mother, who was standing on the other side, dashed out and took hold of me. It took several seconds for what Mrs Griffin had said to sink in, but then I felt the tears start welling up inside my eyes. I buried my head against Mum’s shoulder and cried. Mrs Griffin ushered us both back into her office and then stepped out and closed the door behind her.

We went back to Narrabri for the funeral, and the tribal Elders held a special ceremony for Dad at the Emu cave. I don’t remember much about it, though, as I was still in shock. It was simply unbelievable that my father could be dead and I’d never see him again. I knew it had to be a mistake and that when we returned to Brisbane he’d be there waiting for us. But he wasn’t. It was Andrew who helped me most through my grieving, and in the weeks ahead he took me under his wing and protected and comforted me.

The bullies saw this as a perfect opportunity to strike. We were alone in the locker room when they came upon us. There were four of them, all big and strong, against two skinny weaklings. One of them grabbed me while the others got stuck into Andrew. He put up quite a fight and for a while was holding his own, but they were too strong and started getting the better of him. I struggled with the one who was holding me and managed to break free. I ran to Andrew and grabbed hold of him, the only thought going through my mind being to save him.

At the moment we touched I felt a slippage and then suddenly we were out in the open. Andrew was lying on the ground and I’d fallen over the top of him. I stood up and looked around. We were in open bushland and there was no sign of the school or anything else. For a moment I was completely confused but then I remembered about the other planet the old man had taken me to.

“What happened?” Andrew asked, his eyes wide open as he looked around. “Where are we?”

“I think we’re on another planet on the other side of the galaxy,” I said in a matter-of-fact voice that surprised me. “Earth’s twin, I think.”

“Earth’s twin?” he asked, a look of shock on his face. “Earth has a twin too?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” he said, now shaking his head. “How did we get here?”

I told him everything the old man had said to me and he was keenly interested, asking heaps of questions about the Emu people and everything. I did my best to answer.

“Did those boys hurt you much?” I finally asked him, now taking a good look at him.

“No, I’m okay,” he said. It was then I noticed a greenish stain on the front of his shirt.

“What’s that?” I asked. “Let me have a look under your shirt.”

I reached over to unbutton it but he pushed me away, a look of fear on his face.

“It’s just ink. I had an accident with a pen this morning.”

“All right then,” I said, extending my arms in surrender. “If you say you’re okay then you’re okay.”

“Can you get us back to Earth?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah,” I said without thinking. “Take hold of my hands and close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes and, well, thought travelling thoughts and we slipped back to Earth. It never occurred to me until after we were back that I might not have been able to do it and that we might have been stuck on that planet forever. I had nightmares about that for several weeks after. We never had any more trouble from the bullies though.

During the remaining years of high school I flipped over to the other planet with Andrew several times and we explored some of that world. The lay of the land was exactly the same as Earth down to a scale of a few metres, and of course I couldn’t help noticing the shorter day over there. But each time I was a little afraid I might not be able to get us back, and after about the third or fourth trip I wanted to stop. On the few occasions he later asked I managed to come up with some excuse or another, though I never told him about my fear.

High school eventually came to an end and both Andrew and I received good enough marks in the final examinations to be admitted into the science faculty at Brisbane University. Andrew received a teacher’s scholarship and hoped to become a science teacher while I was awarded an Aboriginal educational assistance scholarship sponsored by AusScience.

On my first day at university I noticed there was an Aboriginal girl in our class and a few days later we finally came face to face.

“Hi, I’m Tom,” I said sheepishly.

“I’m Sarah,” she said. She was barefoot, as was I, and I took an instant liking to her.

“Are you from around here?” she asked as we walked along to our next class.

“I was born in Narrabri in north-western New South Wales, but I’ve been living in Brisbane since I was ten.”

“That’s funny, I’ve been told I was also born near Narrabri, but I was taken away from my parents when I was very little and adopted out.”

“That’s awful. Do you know who your real parents were?”

“I have no idea. They told me they were dead, but I’m not sure. I don’t even know their names.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, feeling terrible about what had happened to her.

“No, it’s okay, my family here have been very good to me, and I really can’t complain. It would just be nice to know, well, who they were and if they’re still alive, that’s all. Oh, here comes my step-brother now.”

A tall boy in blue denim shorts, a white tee shirt and bare feet was running towards us.

“This is Tom,” she said to him as he pulled up next to us.

“Nice to meet you Tom,” he said as he shook my hand. “I’m Mike, Michael Thorpe.”

Michael Thorpe's Diary

I sat down and drank the rest of my beer. Peter stood and adopted his familiar keynote-speaker-at-the-conference posture, then opened his father's diary, cleared his throat and began reading.

Sunday 5th Feb. 1967

It's nine o'clock and all the visitors have gone home. Tomorrow Sarah and I start university, and to mark the occasion we had something of a family get-together this afternoon. After dinner Grandpa Thorpe presented me with this diary with strict instructions to make it a record of my life's experiences to pass down to my children and grandchildren, and so I begin. It's a very ornate book at any rate, with a beautiful drawing of the dodo, our unofficial family emblem, on the front, and I hope I can do it justice.

Sarah just walked in and suggested I should start by saying something about our family. It sounds like a good idea, so here goes. I'm Mike, well Michael James Thorpe if you want my full title, and Sarah, well she's just Sarah Thorpe but wasn't always so. I'll get to that in a minute, but firstly I should make mention of my father, Patrick Ian Thorpe, my mother, Joan Elizabeth Thorpe (maiden name Erickson) and our cat, Henry. Henry is the master of our household and the rest of us his humble servants, at least in his eyes.

I was born on the 14th of October in 1948, which makes me now eighteen years of age, and I've lived all my life in our family home in Brighton, a beachside suburb about twenty miles north of Brisbane. I attended Brighton Public School and then, up until a few months ago, was a student at Sandgate High School. Sarah and I both did well enough to gain entry into the Science Faculty at Brisbane University, me on an AusScience scholarship and Sarah on an Aboriginal Students' Assistance Scheme scholarship.

Yes that's right, Sarah is Aboriginal, and was brought into our family when I was five years old. Mum had suffered complications during my birth

and was unable to have any more children so my parents put their names down on the Aboriginal Children Relocation and Assimilation list of potential foster parents. Under this scheme Aboriginal children were taken from their natural parents and adopted out to white families who had been suitably vetted and approved. I'm not so sure this was really such a good idea and I think the practice has now ceased, but at least in Sarah's case she seems to have been pretty happy with our lot. She sometimes talks about maybe trying to track down her natural parents, though, and I think it would be good for her if she could find them again.

So anyway, that's us in a nutshell I guess. We're pretty much a typical middle class Australian family living in middle class suburbia, and hoping to go on and do great things in our chosen professions. My interest is astronomy and Sarah's is archaeology, but in first year at least we'll be in all the same classes. Tomorrow it all begins.

“You were one of the Stolen Generation then?” Julia asked Sarah.

“Yeah, but I was one of the lucky ones and was placed with a good family. A lot of others weren't so fortunate. I guess the government of the day thought they were doing the right thing, but as is so often the case history has proven otherwise.”

“Still it must have been pretty traumatic for you. Did you ever find out who your real parents were?”

“I think Peter's getting to that shortly.”

Monday 6th Feb. 1967

My first day at university is over! My head's still spinning, I must say. The lecture theatres are so big, much bigger than I expected. This morning we had lectures in chemistry, physics and mathematics and in the afternoon an introductory physics tutorial session. All the lecturers have Doctor in front of their name and our physics lecturer is even kind of famous. What I mean is I've seen his name mentioned occasionally in some of the astronomy magazines I read.

The other students are something of a mixed mob. Most were dressed in blue jeans, yellow tee shirts and either thongs or those revolting desert boots that seem to be all the rage at present. There were a few who were more formally dressed in proper trousers, long sleeved shirts and ties, while there were a similar number, probably all the surf-heads like me, in more casual attire, namely shorts, tee shirt and bare feet. Sarah and I have always gone barefoot everywhere, even though at high school we were really supposed to wear shoes. None of the teachers cared too much about it though so it was pretty cool.

Sarah and I sat with the group of half a dozen other Sandgate kids who are also doing Science, but I guess eventually we'll all go our separate ways as we make new friends. I actually saw Sarah chatting with the only other girl in our Physics class. She said her name is Rachel and promised to introduce me to her tomorrow.

Thursday 9th Feb. 1967

Sarah introduced me to Rachel on Tuesday and I've been getting to know her a bit over the last couple of days. She's also interested in astronomy which is really great. She's tall, skinny, with shoulder-length brown hair and deadly blue eyes. When I look into them I feel I'm almost being transported away to another dimension.

Sarah has also met someone interesting. There's an Aboriginal boy in our class and when I came out of our maths lecture she was chatting to him. She introduced us, and his name is Tom Collins. He said he originally came from Narrabri in New South Wales, which is where Sarah thinks her people may have lived, but his family moved to Mount Gravatt some years ago. He seems a pleasant enough fellow and is also one of our barefoot crowd.

Friday 16th Mar. 1967

I've been very remiss at keeping this diary going, but I have a pretty good excuse. Rachel and I are now going steady, as are Sarah and Tom, and we've become pretty much a foursome. We've been spending a lot of time going to the movies or just hanging out on the beach and it's been wonderful. Our studies are also going along pretty well and we've had a few very productive brainstorming sessions when various assignments have been due.

Tom has a friend though, who seems to have rubbed me up the wrong way. Sarah doesn't think much of him either. His name's Andrew and he was Tom's best friend at high school apparently. He's a tall boy with short blonde hair and an extremely pale complexion. He always wears a heavy long sleeved shirt, jeans and hiking boots, even in this hot and humid weather we're having now. Tom told me his skin doesn't tan and he has to keep himself protected from the sun, and I suppose I should feel sorry for him in that regard. But there's something about him, something really creepy, and for the life of me I just can't quite put a finger on it. He just makes me feel, I don't know, a little scared perhaps.

Tom told me he was a refugee from Latvia and that he used to have quite a thick accent, but it's all gone now. He calls himself Schilling but his name is really Sheen or something. Doesn't sound very Latvian to me, but what would I know?

Anyway, I'm sure I'm just being silly and that Andrew and I will end up becoming the best of friends. We'll probably dig this diary out in ten years time and kill ourselves laughing.

Monday 21st July 1969

Today we've been watching history in the making. Tom and I were invited into the AusScience head office to watch the live television coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing, and just before 1pm we saw Neil Armstrong take his first step on the lunar surface. The pictures were received on Earth by our very own AusScience radio telescopes at Honeysuckle Creek near Canberra and Parkes in western NSW, and then relayed to the rest of the world. Amazing stuff!

I kept wondering what it would be like to be one of the astronauts, and whether in my lifetime space travel will ever become as routine as air travel is now. I doubt it somehow, unless there's some radical new method discovered for travelling through space, as the energy requirements are just too huge and the travel times for anywhere much further than the moon too great. Wouldn't it be wonderful, though, to just roll your own personal spacecraft out of the garage and go zipping off around the galaxy! Rachel reckons I'm too much of a dreamer, and she's probably right.

Wednesday 24th Dec. 1969

It's Christmas Eve, and I was hunting around in my room for something when I found this diary. Honestly, I'd forgotten all about it. Anyway, I have some fantastic news to write about so it's just as well I found it.

Rachel and I are engaged! A group of us from the university had a barbecue at Tom's place last week. When I got her away from the others for a few moments I popped the question and she said yes! Of course within seconds everyone else knew and we spent the rest of the afternoon out celebrating. We won't be getting married until we have our honours degrees finished, and that's still another two years away. I don't know if I can wait that long, though, I really don't. I'm trying to imagine what it will be like buying a house of our own and having kids. It all seems rather fantastic right now.

Thursday 25th Dec. 1969

Merry Christmas! Sarah just phoned and said Tom proposed to her last night, and she accepted. Maybe we'll be able to have a joint wedding. Wouldn't that be grand!

The four of us are going on a bit of a driving holiday up north, and we're leaving first thing on Saturday. I'm really looking forward to it except for

one thing. Tom's invited Andrew along as well. Can you believe it? I hope for Sarah's sake he doesn't spend the whole time hanging out with his mate and leaving her high and dry.

Our grandparents have just arrived so I'll have to put this away for the moment.

Saturday 10th Jan. 1970

Just got back from our holiday up north. Can you believe it, it rained practically the whole time. Most days Tom and Andrew went off together, leaving Sarah with Rachel and me. She's thinking of giving his engagement ring back to him, but I've been telling her to wait until things have calmed down. I really don't know what's got into him, and I've a good mind to tell him just what I think of his behaviour.

Hang on, someone's knocking on the door and it sounds like Tom. Sarah's answering it so I'd better go and make sure they don't come to blows.

Back again. When Sarah opened the door Tom was standing there holding a huge bunch of flowers, and then he got down on one knee and apologised for spending so much time with Andrew. She went all gushy and accepted his apology, and we all went and sat outside in the back yard.

He told us that Andrew's mother back in Latvia is dying and he has to go to be with her. He said he might not be able to come back to Australia, so Tom really wanted to show him a good time on our holiday. Perhaps I've been a bit hasty in my judgement of him after all.

Friday 12th June 1970

Tom has talked Sarah into going to Narrabri during the winter vacation to try to find her natural parents, and Rachel and I will be tagging along. I think Sarah's taking a big gamble, as we may not find anything, or they may be dead, or they might turn out to be, I don't know, not very nice people. But I think if I were in her position I'd probably be doing the same thing.

Tom received a letter from Andrew last week. It had a Latvian stamp on it and in the letter he said his mother was out of immediate danger but was still very ill and confined to a hospital bed. He said he'd probably be staying there until at least the end of the year. It made me feel really guilty for judging him so harshly, and I told Tom as much. He laughed and said not to worry about it.

Saturday 27th June 1970

What an incredible day we've had! We left Brisbane yesterday afternoon to begin our drive to Narrabri. We stopped overnight in Goondiwindi on the

border of Queensland and New South Wales, and finally reached Narrabri at around lunch time. Tom's mother had given us a short list of people she thought might be able to help us in our quest for Sarah's parents and during the course of the afternoon we called in on most of them.

They all remembered Tom and his mother but unfortunately none of them knew anything that might be of help to Sarah. I'd noticed a nice-looking restaurant on the riverbank during our travels and suggested we have dinner there, and everyone seemed agreeable enough although by now we were all very much subdued.

We'd just finished our meal and had ordered coffee when a young Aboriginal man walked up to our table. He introduced himself as Jimmy, the son of one of the people we'd visited earlier in the day. He looked closely at Sarah and then a smile spread across his face.

"You probably don't remember me, but I sure remember you, little Sarah Williams. I used to help out on the milk run when I was a boy, and your parents' place was on our route. You were often playing outside on the front verandah when I brought the milk bottles in, and you seemed to be a very happy and chirpy little girl. Then you weren't there any more and when I asked I was told you'd been taken away, and that I shouldn't say anything to anyone unless I wanted to be taken away as well."

Sarah asked him if he knew what had become of her parents.

"Your father died not long after you disappeared. He'd been arrested over something that happened at the hotel in town, but my father said your dad had nothing to do with it and had just been made a scapegoat. Then I heard some weeks later he was dead. I don't know how he died but I have my suspicions."

"I see," Sarah said. "What about my mother?"

"The death of your father hit her pretty hard and she moved out of her home not long afterwards. I guess she went to live with relatives or something, I really don't know. I just remember there being someone else living in that house after a while. Then a couple of days ago I was visiting a friend in the hospital here and who do I see in one of the beds but Mrs Williams. I tried to speak to her but the nurse told me she was very ill and couldn't talk. Look, the visiting hours will be just starting so I can take you there now if you like."

We followed him to the hospital and he led us through the wards to a bed where a sickly middle-aged woman was lying, apparently asleep. The nurse said she'd been admitted a week ago suffering from severe pneumonia and was lucky to be alive. Sarah walked over and stood beside the bed, looking down on her face. A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Mum?” she whispered, and the woman opened her eyes and looked at her.

“Sarah?” she asked in a hoarse whisper. “Are you really Sarah?”

“Oh Mum, it’s me, yes it’s really me,” Sarah cried and kissed her. The woman smiled but then started coughing. Sarah looked very concerned but it gradually subsided.

Sarah told her all about our family and how she was now attending university, while her mother just listened with a look of amazement in her eyes. She introduced me, Tom and Rachel to her and then all too soon the nurse came and told us it was time to leave. We promised to come back again tomorrow.

Sunday 5th July 1970

We’ve just arrived home in Brisbane. Mrs Williams is well on the way to recovery and was discharged from hospital on Thursday. Jimmy and his family have promised to call in on her each day until she’s fully recovered. Sarah’s already started writing a letter to her telling of our journey back home even though it was remarkably unremarkable.

There’s now less than six months to go till we finish our honours year and Rachel’s already starting to plan our wedding. We’re going to see the minister at our church next Saturday to book a date, probably in early December.

Sarah and Tom are now talking about having their wedding in Narrabri and are also looking at a date in either late November or early December.

Saturday 11th July 1970

Well the date for the wedding is set. Rachel and I will become husband and wife on the 5th of December. I still really can’t imagine being a married man, let alone becoming a father any time soon. Right now Rachel is trying to work out the guest list and last time I looked she was well past fifty and still going strong.

Tom said he and Sarah were going to try to have their wedding on the following Saturday, the 12th. I suggested to Rachel that we could kill two birds with the one stone and go to Narrabri for our honeymoon. At first she wasn’t too keen but Tom told her about all the wonderful bushwalking around Mt Kaputar and she’s starting to warm a little to the idea. Time will tell I guess.

Tom and I have to go into the AusScience offices next week for an interview about our future prospects. If we manage to get first class honours they’ll sponsor us through our postgraduate studies, otherwise we’ll be

offered Research Assistant postings. So far our honours work is going pretty well and our joint thesis on pulsars is coming along nicely.

Friday 6th Nov. 1970

Tom received a letter from Andrew today. He said his mother has now fully recovered and he'll be returning to Australia after Christmas. He apologised for being unable to attend our weddings and wished us all every happiness. He enclosed a black-and-white photograph of himself with his mother. In the background were mountains and a lake, and it sure looked like a very beautiful part of the world. There was one thing odd, though, and when I pointed it out to Tom he also agreed it was most peculiar and couldn't offer any reasonable explanation. Just above the mountains the moon was visible, except it looked way too big. With a magnifying glass I could even make out some faint surface details, and it really looked nothing at all like our moon. Weird. I must ask Andrew about it when he gets back.

Only four weeks to go until our wedding and all the preparations are well in hand, thanks largely to Rachel. She's the organised one between us, I hate to say. We all have our final examinations starting next week, so it's probably just as well all the preparations have been done well in advance. Time to do some serious studying, methinks.

Sunday 13th Dec. 1970

Rachel and I are back home again after our honeymoon which culminated yesterday with Tom and Sarah's wedding. After the church service Tom's relatives put on a traditional corroboree and we were invited to join them. It was one of the most amazing and moving experiences I've ever had, and if the opportunity ever arose to become an honorary Aboriginal I think I'd jump at the chance.

Our own wedding last weekend was wonderful as well, of course, and we had a great time exploring the national parks around Narrabri during our honeymoon. I think I now understand something of what Tom loves about that part of Australia. It's just so beautiful and peaceful.

There's actually an AusScience facility out there, on the outskirts of Narrabri. Rachel and I went there to do the tourist thing, but when they found out I was an astronomy student on an AusScience scholarship (Rachel told them!) they gave us the red carpet treatment and showed us right through their research department. Wouldn't it be great if Tom and I both received postings out there!

Time to think about starting our Christmas shopping, so I'd better put this diary aside for now.

Monday 1st Feb. 1971

Tom and I have just started our doctoral research. My topic is the dynamics of galaxy formation while Tom is doing his thesis on pulsars, carrying on from what we did as undergraduates. Should be heaps of fun.

Andrew returned to Australia a couple of weeks ago and will be doing his honours Science year this year. When I pointed out the strange-looking moon in the photo he sent us he agreed it did look odd, but said the lake and the mountains often caused atmospheric distortions and that was most likely the explanation. He's probably right, but even so it does look very strange.

Monday 17th Dec. 1973

Tom and I have both concluded the research phase of our work and will be doing the writing up of our theses next year. To celebrate we all went up the coast to a little town called Coolum Beach for the weekend. The weather was perfect and there was a huge pod of dolphins gathered there along the beach. We spent all Saturday afternoon swimming with them and then that night Rachel and I found a secluded spot on the sand and made love. I suspect Tom and Sarah did something similar.

On Sunday morning the dolphins had all gone, but we hired a small yacht for a few hours' sailing before heading back home. We all agreed it had been one of the most enjoyable weekends any of us could remember.

Monday 14th Jan. 1974

Rachel called me this afternoon and said she and Sarah would like Tom and me to join them for dinner. I asked her what the occasion was but she wouldn't say.

Right through the meal both were very chirpy and I knew they had some special surprise waiting for us. I thought that maybe they'd won something in one of those silly competitions they were always entering.

It wasn't until we'd finished dessert that Sarah glanced at Rachel who nodded and giggled.

"We have something to tell you," Sarah said.

"Go on then," Tom said. "We've been dying to hear it all evening."

"Well, Rachel and I are both expecting."

"Expecting what?" I asked before I realised what she meant, then my jaw dropped almost down onto my chest.

"We're pregnant, silly," Rachel said and giggled again.

"You two are as thick as thieves," Tom chuckled. "How long have you known?"

"We've both suspected something for the last week or so, and this morning we saw the doctor and he confirmed it," Sarah said.

The rest of the evening was a hazy blur and even now I'm still over the moon. Me, a father. Who would have believed it?

Saturday 14th Sep. 1974

The day dawned warm and sunny but before long ominous black clouds began building in the south-west and the sound of distant thunder could be heard. September is usually one of the drier months in Brisbane but today was proving to be the exception to the rule. By lunch time the rain was bucketing down and the thunder and lightning almost continuous.

Shortly after lunch Rachel starting having contractions. I wanted to take her straight to the hospital but she convinced me to wait. Sure enough, they stopped again and I said a silent prayer. I really didn't want to be trying to drive in this weather.

At about four o'clock they started again, and this time she said she thought it was the real thing. I helped her into the car and drove off in the direction of the hospital. The rain had eased a little but the traffic was still very heavy. I kept glancing across at her but she said she was doing fine.

By the time we arrived the contractions had stopped again, but the nurse said she'd admit her as the birth was probably only a few hours away. I escorted her to her room.

Once she was settled in I decided to wander down to the cafeteria for some coffee, but as I stepped out the door I was almost bowled over by Tom.

"Mike, thank God you're here! They've just taken Sarah into the theatre. There's some sort of complication and they think it will be a difficult birth."

"I'll come with you," I said as we walked quickly down the corridor. "Rachel's just been admitted but they say ours won't be arriving for a while yet."

We entered the theatre just as Sarah was in the final stages of giving birth.

"Push Sarah," the doctor was saying, "that's good, now again, just one more time. Sarah?"

"Oh my God," one of the nurses said. "She's stopped breathing! Get the ventilator onto her."

"There's no pulse either," the doctor said as he pulled Sarah's gown away and began applying CPR. "Quickly, I need a defibrillator in here!"

The nurse turned towards the door, saw us, and ushered us out of the room.

"Don't worry, she's going to be fine," she said and then dashed off down the corridor, returning a moment later pushing a trolley with what I presumed was a defibrillator on it.

There was a high-pitched whine as the device began charging and then we heard the thump as a bolt of electricity was delivered into Sarah's chest. Tom shuddered and I turned towards him. He looked ashen and I feared he might be about to faint. I placed my hand on his shoulder.

Even though seventy years had passed, reliving those moments was a frightening experience. I reached over and my hand found Sarah's. I drew her close to me. She was trembling.

For a moment there was a deathly silence, but then came a beep, followed by two more in quick succession. Before long they settled down into a steady pulse.

"Breathe Sarah," I heard the doctor say from the other side of the door. "That's it, good girl. Nice and steady now."

"I can see the baby," another doctor said. "Here it comes, good, good..."

I expected to hear the crying of their newborn child at any moment but instead there was only silence. The door swung open and one of the doctors stood there with a sad expression on his face.

"Your wife's going to be fine," he said softly to Tom, "but I'm afraid the infant is..."

Before he could finish the sentence there came a deafening scream from behind him, and he jumped so high he hit his head on the doorframe. The screaming continued and we all dashed into the theatre. Amidst the chaos that surrounded him, a tiny baby boy was lying there crying his little head off. Tom wrapped his arms around me and then he started crying too.

Sarah hugged me as I wiped the tears from my cheek that had unexpectedly begun to flow. I looked up and everyone had their eyes on us. I smiled.

I told Rachel the good news, but of course I said nothing of the trauma that had preceded the birth. We both wandered down the corridor to Sarah's room. She was sitting up in bed and in her arms was their little boy, now sleeping peacefully.

"Have you decided on a name yet?" I asked Tom.

"How about Billy?" he said, glancing at Sarah.

"Billy the Kid? Sure, why not?"

"So that's why you're always calling me The Kid," Billy said to me.

"Sure, Billy the Kid. Didn't you ever get it?"

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“I’ll get you for that Dad, mark my words. Oh, sorry Peter, please go on.”

Sunday 15th Sept. 1974

I’d invited Tom to come back to our place for the night and he agreed willingly enough. I lay tossing and turning for hours, wondering how Rachel’s birth would go and hoping, praying, it wouldn’t be as traumatic as Sarah’s. I’d just fallen asleep when I was jarred awake again by the ringing of the phone.

When I answered it a woman told me Rachel was about to give birth and I should hurry down to the hospital if I didn’t want to miss it. I looked at the clock and it was four-thirty.

I threw on a sufficient amount of clothing to make myself presentable and then, with Tom at my side, drove back to the hospital. The rain had all cleared away and the air was cool and crisp.

We arrived at the theatre just as my child was coming into the world. Moments later the room was filled with the joyous sound of the baby’s crying.

“It’s a boy!” the doctor said cheerfully. “Congratulations.”

I looked across at Rachel and she smiled. “It was easy, piece of cake.”

“What will you call him?” Tom asked when we were back in the ward.

“We’ve decided on Peter,” I said.

“Billy and Peter,” he said thoughtfully. “I’m sure those two boys will be the best of friends.”

I’ve no doubt about that. Even now, as I write these lines, I can feel a sense of destiny for them.

Thursday 7th Nov. 1974

Tom and I both submitted our theses today. It will take a few months for them to be examined and then, all being well, we’ll have our PhDs conferred on us sometime next year. We’ll both be starting work at the AusScience offices here in Brisbane next Monday, working initially as research assistants until we’ve had enough experience to be given projects of our own.

Sometimes I wonder if Tom and I will someday make a great discovery that will turn the world of astronomy on its head. My secret dream is we’ll discover a way of travelling much faster than the speed of light, so we can

get out there and really explore the universe. Of course I know it will never happen.

Friday 20th Dec. 1974

Even now I still can't believe what's happened this week. It all began a couple of weeks back when Tom and Sarah decided we should go out to Narrabri for the weekend to show her mother and Tom's relations the babies. Rachel and I thought it was a great idea, and Andrew said he'd like to come as well. So last Friday afternoon we all left work early and headed off in convoy, Rachel, me and Peter in our car and Tom, Sarah, Andrew and Billy in theirs. We stopped overnight in Goondiwindi and arrived at Narrabri just before lunch on Saturday.

Jimmy, the former milk boy, offered to take us to lunch and was telling us how much everyone was looking forward to our visit, but I couldn't help noticing that he kept glancing at Andrew and that whenever he did a worried expression came over his face. He didn't say anything though, so I really have no idea what it was all about. Probably it was just Andrew's knack for creating really lousy first impressions.

After lunch we headed off to see Sarah's mother while Andrew said he wanted to catch up with an old friend from university who was now working at the radio telescope. Mrs Williams was waiting for us at the front gate and, like all grandmothers, went totally bananas as soon as she saw the babies.

Once we were all settled down inside the house she made us tea and then I pulled out the photo album I'd brought with me with all the baby photos in it. The album itself was actually a gift from Rachel and she'd picked it out for me because it had a picture of a dodo on the front. Mrs Williams stared at it for what seemed an age, then she looked up at me, then across at Rachel and finally at Peter. A puzzled expression crossed her face.

"Is there a story behind this dodo picture?" she asked me.

"There is, as a matter of fact. According to our family legend, it was one of my ancestors who brought that famous dodo specimen to London where it was studied intensely and then stuffed and placed in the museum after it died. Ever since then the Thorpes have adopted the dodo as our unofficial emblem."

"I see. Look, there's someone I think you should meet. Let me call Jimmy because he knows how to contact him." With that she stood and walked out to the kitchen where she put the call through.

"Jimmy said he'd try to reach him and then get back to me later," she said when she'd returned. I asked her to elaborate a bit more because now I

was totally confused, but she declined and instead offered us more tea and cake.

Billy and Peter were due for their nap so we took them into the bedroom and then spent the rest of the afternoon chatting with her. It was about half past four when the phone rang, and when she came back to us she said her friend would like to meet with us tomorrow morning if that was okay. We all said that would be fine.

We left soon after that and rejoined Andrew at the motel where we had dinner and then went off to visit Tom's uncle and his family.

The next morning Tom told Andrew we were going back to Mrs Williams' place to meet with some Aboriginal elder, and he almost freaked right out. He stammered something about his friend from the telescope wanting him to play a few holes of golf (I never knew he played, actually) and then ran out the door. We all looked at each other in stunned silence until Sarah suggested we make a move.

Mrs Williams invited us into her living room, and there waiting for us was a tall Aboriginal man with pure white hair and the blackest skin I've ever seen. Tom obviously knew him, for he rushed over and the two of them embraced.

"We meet again at last, young Tommy," the old man said. "Now who do we have here?"

Tom introduced him to Sarah and he said Mrs Williams had told him all about her long-lost daughter. Then, with Sarah's permission, he reached into the basinet and gently picked up Billy. He placed his hand on the boy's forehead for a moment and smiled.

"This one's just bursting with pure Emu spirit," he said proudly. "Don't you agree, Janet?"

"Most surely, but that's only to be expected given who the parents are. It's the other one I'm concerned about."

He looked up at Rachel. She nodded, so he picked up Peter and placed his hand on the boy's forehead.

"But this can't be!" he exclaimed, a look of both shock and puzzlement spreading across his face.

"That's what I thought too," Mrs Williams said. "Now Michael, tell him the story about your dodo."

I did, and when I'd finished I was sure he was going to faint. He sat down heavily on a chair and just stared into space for several minutes. Then he spoke, softly and very deeply.

"I really don't know how to begin. A long time ago, many thousands of years at least, there were, um, two great spirits I suppose you could call them. One came here to what's now called Narrabri and merged into our

tribe, the Emu people. Of the other very little is known, only that he went to the island of Mauritius and became known as the Dodo spirit. When the Europeans came to that island he left with them and passed out of all knowledge, just as his totem bird, the dodo, became extinct.

“But here in this baby boy I sense that spirit. Now according to our legend, some day the Emu and Dodo spirits will be reunited and that reunion will bring great wonder and joy to the world. I think that, perhaps, these two boys might be the fulfilment of that prophesy.”

“But surely that’s just mythology and old wives’ tales,” I said. “You can’t really be serious.”

“But I am serious, deadly serious, for I know there are people on this world right now, agents of an ancient enemy, who would stop at nothing to prevent that reunion from taking place. Now if you’ll excuse me for just a little while, I must go and seek some guidance.”

With that he stood and left the room. Mrs Williams went out to the kitchen and made a pot of tea. We glanced around at each other in silence, while Billy and Peter looked at each other and giggled.

“Is there really any truth to what he was saying?” I asked. “It all sounds crazy to me.”

“It’s true enough,” Tom said. “I first met that man when I was ten years old. He was going to teach me in the ways of the Emu spirit but soon after that we moved to Brisbane and I never saw him again until just now. You probably won’t believe me, but he once took me to another planet, Earth’s twin on the other side of the galaxy. I’ve flipped myself over there a few times too, and taken Andrew with me, but not recently as I’m afraid I might not be able to get back again.”

“You’re all crazy,” I said, but then I looked at their faces, even Rachel’s, and saw they all believed what the old man had said. I shook my head and sighed.

About an hour later he returned with Jimmy, who looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“Tommy, tell me about your friend Andrew,” the old man said sternly. Tom told him how he’d been friends with Andrew since high school, and how he’d come from Latvia and went back there to look after his sick mother a few years ago.

“That his mother was ill I’ve no doubt,” the old man said, “but if she’s who I think she is he wasn’t visiting her in Latvia.”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked, now looking very worried. I suddenly thought of that photo with the strange moon in it and a shiver went up my spine.

"I can't say anything more without placing all of you in extreme danger. I've no doubt Andrew knows full well that young Billy is carrying the Emu spirit, his mere presence is confirmation enough of that, but I sincerely hope he has not yet noticed anything unusual about Peter. His Dodo spirit is well-hidden, as it always has been, but even so they are both in danger if they remain together.

"Tom, when you return to work next week you'll be receiving a transfer to the radio telescope here in Narrabri. They're in need of a new astronomer-in-residence and I'm sure you'll fit in nicely, particularly as you and your wife both have family here.

"Now Michael, you're to remain in Brisbane, and must under no circumstances even think about coming to visit Tom."

"But he's my best friend," I protested, "and Sarah's my sister, for God's sake!"

"I know, but nonetheless you must do as I say, for the safety of your children. I can't stress too much that your families must remain apart, for now at least. A time will come, I'm sure, when Billy and Peter will find each other and the reunion I spoke of will take place, but that must wait until they are strong enough to protect themselves."

"You're mad!" I said, now standing. "Come on, let's get out of here." I started walking to the door but Tom pulled me back.

"Michael, tell me, where's Andrew now?" the old man asked.

"He's playing golf with a friend of his."

"There's only one golf course in Narrabri, Michael, and I know for a fact it's closed this weekend while they're returfing the greens."

"What are you getting at?" Tom asked. Now it was his turn to become indignant.

"I think Andrew may have been sent here by his parents to watch over you, Tommy, and to keep them informed of what the Emu spirit was doing. Jimmy recognised him yesterday when you had lunch together, and I think Andrew realised that and has made himself scarce. But it may well be he is quite genuinely your friend, Tommy, and I don't believe he himself poses any threat to you. The best advice I can give you is to just act normally with him, but be on your guard."

Tom looked up at Mrs Williams and she nodded solemnly. The old man came over to us and placed one hand on Tom's shoulder and the other on mine.

"It's for the best," he whispered, and then turned and walked out of the house.

Neither Mrs Williams nor Jimmy would say a word more on the subject and soon we took our leave. We returned to the motel to find Andrew

waiting for us, then packed our belongings into our cars and checked out. We arrived back in Brisbane on Monday and returned to work the next day. Tom was called straight into the manager's office and when he came back out an hour later he said nothing but handed me the letter detailing his transfer to Narrabri, effective immediately.

I took the rest of the day off and helped them pack all their belongings into the removal van that AusScience had provided, and they departed early the next morning. I don't expect I'll ever see him, Sarah or Billy again.

Friday 21st Dec. 1984

Much time has gone by. Peter is ten years old now and, much to Rachel's consternation, goes barefoot at every opportunity he can. Just like his father! So, what is it that causes me to take up my pen and write once more in this dusty old book?

This morning my supervisor, Phillip Mornay, came up to me and told me the Director of Astrophysics wanted to speak to me. He escorted me to the lifts and as we rode to the top floor he told me a little about our new boss.

"There's been quite a shake-up in the upper management of AusScience, as I'm sure you know. The new Director in our division was appointed personally by the Minister and has been quick to stamp his presence on the place. Much to the good, as far as I can see."

I asked him what the Director wanted to see me about but he couldn't, or wouldn't say. We emerged from the lift and the Director's secretary waved us through. Phil knocked on the door and a voice from inside called us in.

Before me stood an immaculately dressed middle-aged man, probably in his mid fifties, and he beckoned me to sit down. He then nodded to Phil who turned and walked from the room, leaving me alone to face the music or whatever.

"I'm pleased to meet with you at last, Michael," he said. "I'm Frank Halliday. I understand you were close friends with Tom Collins during your time at university, and in fact his wife is your adopted sister." It was the last thing I was expecting him to say, and I sat stunned for a moment before nodding in agreement.

"Excellent," he said. "Now you may have heard of a project in the USA called SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. They're hoping to use as many radio telescopes as they can to scan the skies for anything that may indicate the presence of intelligent life out there, and for the moment they're flush with US government funds. AusScience has been invited to participate and I'm pushing to have Tom head up our team, with operations based at Narrabri.

“Unfortunately the Board are fighting me on several fronts on this matter. First off, they think SETI is an utter waste of time and money, but really when it all boils down, that’s all our Board thinks about, time and money. They’re not scientists like you and me, Michael, they’re bean counters through and through. Think about it, Michael. What would happen if we did discover an irrefutable broadcast from another civilisation? The ramifications would be enormous, wouldn’t they? I try explaining this to the Board, but they have closed minds. I’ll wear them down, though, I can assure you of that.

“Secondly, there are some on the Board who, well to put it bluntly, are extremely prejudiced against Tom because of his Aboriginality. There’s one in particular, a Mr Douglas, who’s quite vocal on the subject, and a lot of the old fuddy-duddies are agreeing with him. Again this is a battle I am determined to win, for personal reasons if nothing else, and here’s where I need your help.”

“Certainly,” I said.

“I want you to write a recommendation for Tom. It doesn’t have to be long, just two or three pages would be plenty, but I’ll need it by Monday. Do you think you could do that for me?”

“I’d be delighted to.”

“I knew I could count on you. You may not know it, but the Board are quite impressed with your work and you’ll be pretty close to the top of the list when the next round of promotions come up. Your recommendation will carry a great deal of weight. I must warn you, though, that Douglas will almost certainly contact you and try to bully you into withdrawing your submission. I want you to ignore anything he says. Anything at all. You understand?”

I said I did, and then he stood up, shook my hand and escorted me to the door.

“Just drop your recommendation in to my secretary on Monday morning and leave the rest to me,” he said as I departed.

I started writing something this evening but it’s much harder than I thought it would be. I could write heaps about Tom’s academic achievements but they’d certainly know all that already. I think I should concentrate more on his character and his enthusiasm for science and astronomy. Maybe Rachel can help me with this.

Monday 24th Dec. 1984

With much help from Rachel, I finished my recommendation and handed it to Mr Halliday’s secretary this morning. About an hour later the man himself called, telling me how excellent it was and thanking me profusely.

He said the Board would be discussing the appointment in late January and he'd let me know the outcome.

Just after lunch I received another phone call, this time from Mr Douglas. He all but yelled at me, telling me I was a fool who was putting his future career in extreme jeopardy by siding with Halliday. He went on about how all Aborigines were lazy good-for-nothings and the whole idea of SETI was a complete and utter waste of time and money, and how anyone with half an ounce of brains could see that. He demanded I withdraw my recommendation, and even went so far as to tell me I should write to the Board opposing Tom's appointment. In the end I calmly thanked him for his advice and hung up, but his extreme animosity towards Tom left me quite shaken and in no mood for the Christmas Eve celebrations Rachel had been preparing.

Tuesday 22nd Jan. 1985

Mr Halliday called this morning. He said Mr Douglas had resigned from the Board during a very heated debate, and following that the recommendation for Tom's appointment as head of SETI had been approved unanimously. He thanked me for supporting him and told me if I ever needed anything just to call him.

When I told Rachel the good news she suggested that maybe we could go and pay Tom and Sarah a surprise visit this weekend. I said it was a great idea, and in fact I'd been having similar thoughts myself. We decided to head off straight after work on Friday night. I'm really excited now.

Saturday 26th Jan. 1985

Ever heard the saying about the best-laid plans of mice and men? Well last night we were all packed and ready to go, but our damned car refused to start. This morning I got the local mechanic to come around, but no amount of urging and swearing from him could bring it back to life. Finally it was pronounced dead and towed away as scrap metal. Its replacement has set us back quite a bit and I have to see to Peter's schooling and all that, so by the time all was done any thoughts of going to see Tom were but a distant memory.

It almost seemed a warning against it, and I remembered again the words of that peculiar old man in Narrabri. Far in the back of my mind though, I still dream of the day when we'll all come together again.

Never mind, our new car is much nicer than the old one was, so I guess something good has come out of it all.

Wednesday 20th Nov. 1985

I took the family to the agricultural show today. It was a lovely outing. Peter of course made sure he didn't have any shoes with him and also forgot to bring a shirt. Rachel just sighed. At one point I thought I spotted an Aboriginal boy who was also barefoot and shirtless. Peter said he saw him too, but later, after we'd returned home, he'd say nothing about him. In fact he appears to be unaccountably shaken and I can't get a thing out of him. I hope he's not coming down with something, after all these years of perfect health.

I can't help wondering now if maybe, just maybe, that boy was Billy.

Monday 24th Feb. 1986

I was jarred out of my complacency last night. I dreamt I'd been given a transfer to Narrabri and naturally I was thrilled, however before I could tell anyone I was ushered into Mr Halliday's office.

"Michael," he said with a solemn face, "I know that, for very many years, you and Tom Collins have been friends, and I also know that, for, uh, let's say security reasons, you've had to remain apart. It saddens me to have to tell you that last night Tom was tragically killed in a motor vehicle accident. You're to be his replacement."

"No! No!" I cried and woke up screaming. Rachel asked if I'd had a nightmare, but just as I was about to answer Peter let out a fierce scream of his own.

We rushed into his room to see what was the matter. He said he'd had a bad dream but wouldn't say what it was about. He seemed pretty shaken though, and we both had to sit with him for over an hour before he finally went back to sleep.

This morning, realizing I had to restore my peace of mind, I went to work determined to find out the truth. When I reached the office I put in a call to Narrabri.

"AusScience," said the woman who answered the phone.

"Uh, uh, yes. Is Tom Collins there please?" I asked with a wavering voice.

"Just a moment, sir."

There were some clicks on the line and then, "SETI department, Tom Collins speaking. May I help you?"

I was so shaken I hung up without speaking. I'd wanted to say something, but my promise kept me from doing so. Did I do the right thing? Should I have spoken to him? I don't know. I'll not say anything to Rachel about it, though, just let it be.

Thursday 1st Dec. 1988

Today my long-awaited promotion finally came through. I'm now a Senior Astrophysicist, and the extra money will certainly come in handy. The downside is my new posting is in Sydney so we'll be moving house in a few weeks.

Peter's quite upset about the move, more so than I would have expected. He doesn't want to leave his friends, and when Rachel told him he'd soon make lots of new ones that made him even worse. I'm sure he'll get over it soon enough, though. Kids of his age never like change.

Saturday 31st Dec. 1988

It's New Year's Eve and our last day in Brisbane. Most of our belongings went off in the removalist's van this morning and, apart from some mattresses for us to sleep on tonight, the house is virtually empty. Peter has gone with his friends to watch the fireworks display on the Brisbane River, but they were all pretty subdued. Rachel and I have decided to let him be and deal with the move in his own way, and I think he appreciates that.

I've seen my new office in Sydney and it's great. The computing facilities they have down there are the best in the country, and the desktop PCs are all the latest 12MHz 286s complete with floating point coprocessors. I can hardly wait to try out my software on them – it will really fly!

Rachel is just putting the last of the boxes in the car and this diary has to go in with them, so I'll finish up here. The next entry you see will be from Sydney.

Peter closed the diary.

“That’s where it ends,” he said. “I think it must have been mislaid when we were unpacking in Sydney, as I found it at the bottom of an old box filled with Dad’s university notes which I’m sure he never looked at afterwards.”

“You’re probably right,” I said.

He went and sat down next to Billy who smiled warmly and patted him on the shoulder. I opened another beer.

A Chance Meeting

“Do you know what became of Andrew Schilling?” Jason asked.

I stared into space for a little while, letting those memories wash back over me.

“He completed his studies and went off teaching science somewhere. I don’t know where, but in this time line it wasn’t Narrabri. Then later on he found his way into the administrative side of AusScience and eventually became Director. That was at about the time Billy made his little ship, and Andrew came up from Canberra to try to stop us.

“After that, I don’t know. I guess he returned to Eridani because that was where Todd saw him again. He finally confronted us at the shield generator and then Billy and Peter flipped him into space and he died.”

I looked skyward again, wondering if I should tell of those final moments, and in the end decided I would.

“Andrew was still alive when I brought him on board the shuttle. He was in a bad way, but still alive and conscious. He spoke to me.”

“Tommy,” he gasped. “You have always been my friend, Tommy. Always. Duty and friendship, forever tearing me apart. But I’m glad you’re here, Tommy, here at my death.”

He coughed up a pool of green blood and his eyes glazed over. I thought he was gone then but he wasn’t, not quite.

“Your father, Tommy, I didn’t kill him. Believe me, Tommy, it wasn’t me. Wasn’t me. It was...”

And then he died.

“Did you ever find out who did kill your father?” Julia asked.

“No,” I said, even though that was a lie. Aaron looked at me, sensing the untruth, but said nothing.

“Anyone for coffee?” Sarah asked, breaking the silence that followed. Everyone’s hand went up and I walked with her to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

“You do know, don’t you,” she said as she hugged me, “but you don’t have to tell me. No point stirring up old ghosts.”

“No, there’s not.”

Perhaps some day I will tell, but not now. Like Sarah said, no point stirring up old ghosts. I helped her prepare the cups and then we waited for the kettle to boil, holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes like love-struck teenagers.

“How come you never let on that you were Dad’s adopted sister?” Peter asked Sarah as we were sipping our coffee.

“Tom and I were afraid to say anything to you about our family connection when you first came to Narrabri. We were still concerned about Andrew Schilling and his associates lurking about and finding out that you were Dodo. We thought if this was to be the coming-together of those spirits that Elko had prophesied then we should just let them find each other and do what they had to do without any outside influence.”

“Looking back, I can’t help thinking that Sarah’s adoption by your father’s family was at least to some degree influenced by the Emu and Dodo spirits seeking each other,” I said.

“Yes, and I believe the Thorpes were amongst the first free settlers to migrate to Australia after the colony was founded,” Peter said. “That was probably Dodo trying to find Emu.”

“I dare say you’re right. What an amazing chain of events they went through to bring themselves back together.”

“I suppose I should now start calling you Aunt Sarah and Uncle Tom,” he said with a grin on his face.

“But of course, Peter, that would be lovely,” Sarah said, hugging him and kissing him on the cheek.

“It’s seventy years too late, but welcome to the family,” I said and patted him on the back.

“There’s one final twist in the tale,” Sarah said after we’d finished supper, and everyone looked towards her.

“The high school Billy went to, and Peter too in that other time line, well the man who set that up, the retired wealthy businessman as Peter described him, was Frank Halliday.”

“Yes, I remember that now,” I said. “We were wondering how Billy could possibly manage in high school if he couldn’t wear a shirt or shoes

and then Frank turned up one night and proposed setting up a special school. There was also another guy with him, a fat jolly man.”

“Not Mr Fitzwilliam?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, that’s him. He was responsible for the recruitment of staff. Let me see, that would have been soon after Billy turned eleven.”

“Yes, it was about the same time he went off with your friend Brian Wilkinson to the show in Brisbane,” Sarah said.

“I don’t remember anything about a show,” Billy said, but then a puzzled expression came over his face. “Or maybe I do, oh I don’t know, I can’t quite seem to get at that memory.”

“Brian was exhibiting his prize bulls,” I said. “You went in the truck with him and his son, what was his name?”

“Trevor it was, I’m sure now. I think it’s all starting to come back to me.”

“There was something in Dad’s diary about me going to an agricultural show in Brisbane and getting freaked out, but I don’t remember it either,” Peter said. “Do you think it’s possible we could have met each other there?”

“Yes, I think perhaps we did,” Billy said and then paused for a few moments as he tried to remember.

“It seemed to take forever to get there in that truck with the smelly bulls in the back and me wedged on the front seat between Mr Wilkinson and Trevor. Then when we finally arrived there were huge crowds of people everywhere and I was scared. Remember at the time I was only a little kid and I’d never been to the city before.”

He stared into space for a few more moments and then began his tale.

It was the second day of the show. Mr Wilkinson was busy tending to his bulls and asked Trevor to take me around the sideshows. He was a couple of years older than me and I had trouble keeping up with him, also the crowds of people were scaring me. A few times I lost sight of him for a moment and then had to push my way through in panic until I caught up with him again.

We rounded a corner past a very loud man running one of those shooting galleries and Trevor was getting ahead of me again. Then I happened to see a barefoot boy with no shirt on walking past in the opposite direction. As he neared he looked up at me and our eyes met. For a just a moment his pace slowed and he stared at me, but then he looked away and disappeared into the crowd. I turned around again but by now Trevor had also disappeared. I pushed my way forward in the direction he’d been going but just then a great surge of people came the other way and I was forced backwards. By the time I got clear I could see no trace of him anywhere. I pushed my way

forward, running whenever I could and all the while calling out his name, but he was gone and I was lost.

I came to a junction in the road and couldn't decide whether to turn left or right. There seemed to be equal amounts of people in both directions. Finally on impulse I took the right hand fork but was almost immediately crushed by another surge. By now I was totally freaking out and there were tears running freely down my face. I pushed my way forward again only to feel a horrible squishiness under my left foot. I'd stepped in someone's dropped food and my foot was covered with some sticky orange stuff. With each step it stuck to the ground, and the thought of someone actually eating that stuff just about made me sick. I forced my way to the side of the road and tried to wipe it off on the grass, but with only limited success.

I tried to call Trevor's name again but all that came out was a feeble sobbing sound. The wave of misery broke over me and I just stood there crying my eyes out. Then a hand fell on my shoulder and I jumped around. It was the barefoot boy I'd seen earlier.

"Are you lost?" he asked with a soft gentle voice.

I couldn't answer as I was still crying, but I managed to nod.

"Come with me," he said, taking hold of my hand. "My father's not far away and he'll help you find your people."

I looked up at him and he smiled at me. It was such a pure and gentle smile I couldn't help but smile back at him. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose.

"I'm Peter," he said as he guided me along. He walked slowly and kept hold of my hand so we wouldn't become separated.

"I'm Billy," I said.

"Whereabouts are you from?"

"Narrabri, in New South Wales. I'm here with Mr Wilkinson, a friend of my dad. He has some bulls in the competition here."

"Do you live on a farm?" he asked, his eyes opening wide in amazement.

"No, we actually live in town. My dad works at the radio telescope there."

"Wow! My dad's an astronomer too, but he works in the AusScience offices here in Brisbane."

"Cool," I said, now so totally engrossed in my new friend I'd forgotten all about being lost.

He stopped walking and looked around, his smile slowly turning into a look of mild concern.

"My dad was around here somewhere but I can't see him any more. If you like I'll buy you an ice cream while we wait for him."

"Gee, thanks," I said, and then he looked down at my feet.

“What’s that on your foot?”

“I don’t know. It’s something yucky I stepped in.”

“I hope I don’t step in any of it, it looks revolting. There’s a tap just over there, go and wash it off while I get the ice creams.”

I must have looked scared again, for he reached up and put his hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll be just over there, see?” he said, pointing to the ice cream stall across the road. “I won’t let you out of my sight, I promise.”

I nodded and tried to smile, then walked over to the tap. When I turned around I saw he was watching me, and he smiled and waved. I bent down and washed the stuff off my foot. Fortunately whatever it was, it dissolved in water. By the time I’d finished he had returned and handed me an enormous ice cream cone. My eyes must have just about popped out of my head for he looked at me and started laughing, and that started me laughing too.

“Dig in,” he said and we both sat down on the grass and buried our faces in the confectionery.

The ice cream was the best I’d ever tasted, or maybe it just seemed like that at the time. Once we’d finished he stood up and looked around for his father again, but he was nowhere in sight. At that same moment a dark cloud came over the sun and a sudden gust of wind blew assorted papers and litter all around me. Peter looked back at me and I could tell he was getting worried.

“Dad said he’d wait for me here. I don’t know where he could have gone.”

I looked around at the crowd of people walking past us. They seemed different, somehow, more hostile and mean. There was a tall man in a checked shirt with a big scar across his forehead and he stared at me with an expression on his face like he meant to kill me. I shivered and turned away from him. Then someone started laughing, but it was one of those awful laughs and I felt really scared. I crept closer to Peter and he put his arm around my shoulder. I could feel he was scared too.

A boy about our age limped by. His left foot was turned almost at right angles to the right one and he had a cut on his knee with blood oozing out of it and down his leg. As he passed he turned towards us, but one of his eyes was just an empty socket. I almost screamed.

“Ah, there you are,” came a rough and phlegmy voice from behind us and we both turned around. There was a big fat man with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth coming straight towards us. He grinned and half his teeth were missing.

“That’s not your dad, is it?” I asked Peter.

“No way. Let’s get out of here!”

He grabbed hold of my hand tightly and pulled me out into the crowd. We ran a short distance and then turned down a side alley. We had to push our way through crowds of ugly smelly people, and then a woman stepped on my foot and almost broke it off. I screamed, and Peter stopped and grabbed hold of me.

“Watch where you’re going, you filthy Abo,” the woman screeched at me and then disappeared back into the crowd. I stood on one foot, holding the trodden-on one in my hand and rubbing it. It was sore but the skin was unbroken, much to my relief. I shuddered to think what sort of germs would be lurking on that woman’s shoe.

The clouds covering the sun must have been thickening because it was becoming quite dark and what light remained had taken on a reddish hue. A boy with pimples erupting all over his face walked right past me and he was eating some of that orange stuff I’d stepped in earlier, only in the dim light it looked more like congealed blood. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“Can you walk?” Peter whispered to me. I put my foot down and took a few tentative steps. It still hurt, but not too bad.

“Yeah, but no running for a while, okay?”

“Okay,” he said and started leading me further down the road.

“Peter, Billy, come here,” said a deep and powerful voice from the stall we were passing. I turned and saw a very old Aboriginal man standing there. He waved us over to him.

“Come inside, quickly,” he said.

“What’s happening?” Peter asked as soon as we were inside the stall.

“There’s a disturbance in the flow of time. Time has split into two, maybe three different streams, and it was vital that I reach both of you.”

“I don’t understand,” Peter said. “What’s going on outside?”

“You’re on a different level of existence. For want of a better name I call this the land of nightmares. I hope I didn’t scare you too much bringing you here, but by the time I realised what was happening I was unable to reach you in any other way. But forget about what’s outside for a moment, it’s not important. What is important is that in each time line there’ll be a Peter and a Billy, and when the time lines eventually merge you will need to retain your memories from each one. You are both very special, but more than that I cannot say.”

“What do we have to do?” I asked, not understanding in the slightest.

“I need to touch your minds to plant the seed of remembrance. Come closer to me and allow me to place my hands on you.”

I looked at Peter and he looked back at me and shrugged. I’d heard my parents’ frequent warnings about strangers, but by the same token I felt I could trust this man and there was no harm in him. I stepped forward and at

the same time so did Peter. The old man placed one hand on my shoulder and the other on Peter's.

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

For a moment my mind seemed to go blank and a feeling of great warmth and serenity welled up within me. Then I opened my eyes.

We were back on the grass near the ice cream stall and the world had returned to normal. Peter looked up at me with a puzzled expression on his face, and then a voice rose out of the crowd.

"Billy, there you are," it said and I turned to see Trevor striding towards me. "I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm okay. I got lost for a bit, but Peter here found me and bought me an ice cream."

"Hi," Peter said sheepishly.

"Nice to meet you," Trevor said as he shook his hand. "Thanks for looking after the kid here."

"No worries. Always happy to help a fellow barefooter in distress."

"Yeah, you two make a right pair with no shoes or shirts on," Trevor laughed, even though he was barefoot too. Then Peter turned towards me and looked into my eyes.

"I'm glad I met you, Billy, and I really hope we might meet again some day."

"Yeah, me too," I said and he patted me on the shoulder. I returned the gesture and then he turned away.

"There's my dad over there. See you."

"Hey, come on Billy," Trevor said. "There's this great ride I found that you're going to love."

"And that was it," Billy said. "I'd completely forgotten about the whole incident until just now."

"Yeah, me too," Peter said. "It must have had something to do with what the old man did to us."

"I think you're right. Hey, you know what?"

"The old man was Elko."

"Yes, I think he was. The time line split he referred to, I guess that would have been when Dad either did or didn't make contact with those renegade Eridanians led by Rebecca Gosling."

"Yeah," I said, "in the time line where I did, I disappeared in that car crash and Michael was transferred to Narrabri as my replacement. You and Peter then met at the school there. Elko needed to plant his seed of remembrance so that when that time line ended you two would be able to find each other again."

“But how did he know that things were going to pan out the way they did?” Julia asked.

“He probably didn’t. I guess he was just covering all his bets, making sure that whatever way things went Billy and Peter had the best chance of fulfilling their destiny.”

“Elko really was behind practically everything that’s happened to us,” Peter said. “I guess he was like our guardian angel.”

“Not just ours,” Billy said. “The whole galaxy owes him a huge debt of gratitude.”

“That land of nightmares,” Aaron said, changing the subject. “Does anyone know anything about it?”

“I’ve heard of such a place,” Maleena said. “It’s supposed to be on the fringes of Sheol. The people and creatures there aren’t real in a physical sense, they’re our spirits roaming in their dreams.”

“Sounds like a fun place.”

“They say that’s why Sheol is dark. If you could see what’s really there you’d go totally insane.”

“Well, before you give us all nightmares I think it’s time we hit the hay,” I said while struggling to stifle a yawn.

“I second the motion,” Sarah said and then turned to Mark and Lorina. “Are you sure you two will be okay sleeping outside in the tent?”

“Yeah, we’re looking forward to it actually,” Mark said and then took Lorina by the hand and led her out the back door. I thought Chris was going to make a fuss about wanting to sleep in the tent too but he just sat where he was and smiled to himself.

“Come on young fellow,” Maleena said to him. “We have a special bed set up for you in Tom’s study.”

I wondered what state my study would be in come morning, but I said nothing and followed Sarah into our bedroom.

Guardian Angel

I woke from a troubling dream. Elko was in it, along with a fat man with a cigarette in his mouth and half his teeth missing, but I couldn't remember anything more about it.

I rolled over but the other half of the bed was empty. Sarah was already up and about, no doubt getting breakfast for all our guests. I climbed out and made my way to the kitchen, still feeling the slightly disorientating effect of my nightmare.

Aaron was sitting at the kitchen table with a plate full of eggs, bacon and toast in front of him, and I sat down opposite him as Sarah handed me a steaming cup of coffee.

“Bad night, Tom?” he asked.

“Yeah, does it show?” I said, but he didn't answer as he'd just shovelled another large portion of food into his mouth.

Just then Mark and Lorina came bounding in through the door, their cheeks rosy and big grins plastered across their faces. I wondered if they'd, well, you know, and for that matter even whether they could. I mean Todd and Elissi couldn't, well they could go through the motions and all but nothing was ever going to happen. Eridanians and Earthlings were simply too biologically different. You just had to look at their blood, it was a pale reddish colour while flowing in their veins but as soon as it came into contact with the air it turned bright green. Weird.

But Aaron's mother was an Elf and his father an Earthling, and their offspring survived and became whatever it is that Aaron is. I looked up at him and saw those bright blue eyes staring at me through a curtain of blonde hair, and then he grinned at me before stuffing some more toast into his mouth. I sometimes wondered what went on inside his head, and what he sees when he stares at people like that.

“Did you sleep well?” Sarah asked Mark and Lorina. “Were you warm enough?”

“I know you’d have been, Mark,” she added before he could say anything. “I meant Lorina.”

“Yes thanks, I was very comfortable,” she said, but I couldn’t help noticing a little sideways glance at Mark. I thought my suspicions were probably correct, and when Mark blushed I was even more certain.

“Stop staring at Mark, Tom,” Sarah said. “You’re embarrassing the boy.” She winked at me.

“Sorry,” I said. “Is the kid up yet?”

“Yeah, he’s out the back with Peter and Todd. They wanted to have a look at something Todd brought with him from Eridani, some new bit of technology they’ve been working on.”

“No, I meant the other kid.”

Before she could answer Chris came wandering sleepily into the kitchen, lured no doubt by the smell of food. He sat down next to his father and Sarah placed a heavily-laden plate in front of him.

“Are you going to be able to eat all that?” I asked him.

“Just watch me,” he said with a broad grin across his face.

Jason and Jenny were the next to arrive in the kitchen. Jason took one look at his son and future daughter-in-law and must have reached the same conclusion I had. He smiled and ruffled Mark’s hair. Mark blushed again.

“I suppose I’m wasting my time offering either of you any food,” Sarah said.

“Just some coffee for me, thanks Gran,” Jason said. “Strong and black.”

“Me too,” said Jenny.

“I found an old photo album in your study,” Chris said to me between mouthfuls. “Lots of pictures of when Uncle Jason was a little kid.”

“Don’t you dare bring that out,” Jason said, threatening to put a headlock on him.

“What will you give me if I don’t?” Chris asked. I could see he was destined to become an astute businessman.

Before Jason could answer, Billy, Peter and Todd came back in and I could tell straight away that something was wrong. The three of them looked ashen, and everyone turned towards them.

“We were in the shuttle when a call came through from Genesis,” Todd said softly and with a slight waver in his voice. “Elko died last night.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“He became ill yesterday, they said, and then went rapidly downhill. The end came a couple of hours ago.”

We were sitting in the living room of Raphus and Dromaius's home on Genesis. The trip from Earth in Todd's shuttle had seemed to take forever and everyone was silent the whole time, even Chris.

"It often happens like that with our people," Dromaius said softly. "We live for what would seem an eternity for you, but when the end comes it happens very quickly. I was with him when he died, and he asked me to tell you something.

"He said to tell you he was just so proud of all of you," he said, struggling a little with a tear in his eye, "and to thank you for all you'd done for him. He said he'd be eternally grateful."

I nodded and patted him on the shoulder.

"He was a guiding light to us," I said, "over the four generations we have here and long before that as well I'm sure. We'd have been lost without him."

The coffin containing Elko's remains was set upon the funeral pyre and Dromaius called upon Barrad to say a few words.

"Elko and I grew up together. His family had darker skin than most and at school he was a bit of a loner, but he was a kind and gentle boy and we became close friends from an early age. He was always the dreamer while I was always the pragmatist. His mind was always on the future while I was only interested in the here and now, but in spite of that we got along extremely well.

"His father was involved in overseeing the beginnings of civilisation on Earth and took him many times to that world. He loved the place and often said the people there had great potential but I could never see it. To me they were only tribes of hunter-gatherers and I thought they would always remain so. In that, as in many other things, Elko was right and I was wrong."

He wiped a tear from his eye before continuing.

"On one occasion we had a school trip to Eridani. It was a funny-looking planet with its two polar oceans and dry highlands stretching right around the equator. By then the Eridanians were becoming moderately civilised although it was to be many tens of thousands of years before they ventured into space. We dressed in Eridanian clothes so as not to be too conspicuous and Elko had a wonderful time, but a few of the local children sensed something different about me and ensured that my time there was miserable. Perhaps that's why, later on when I was under the influence of that demon, I took my revenge on that planet.

"Outside of school Elko and I spent lots of time exploring the countryside looking for new and interesting places. As we grew older we took up sailing, and then eventually sailed right across the sea to the

mainland and began exploring there. We stumbled across the canyon where Torg's men had been encamped long ago and I found the entrance to Astel's cave. You've all heard the story of what happened then, so I hope you'll spare me the need to repeat it. Suffice to say, for close on a hundred thousand years I thought I'd killed my friend that day.

"I'll move on now to that blessed moment when Jason Collins drove the demon from me and Elko, alive and well, stepped out of the darkness to embrace me once more. That was far and away the happiest day of my life, and in the intervening years I've strived to make up for what happened in the canyon. Elko of course forgave me straight away, but in my mind I can never do enough to repay that debt and I swear that for as long as I draw breath I'll continue to serve in his honour.

"Elko always looked to the future and saw hope, and thanks to his efforts and those of everyone gathered here today, the future does indeed hold great hope for peace and happiness. Elko, my friend, my leader and my saviour, may you always walk in the light."

He ignited the pyre and we all sat in silence as the flames consumed Elko's remains, and watched as the smoke rose into the sky and obscured, for a little while, the light from the Pleiades cluster.

"Elko had one final request," Dromaius said after the flames had died down. "He asked that his ashes be scattered in a place on Earth he called the Emu cave. I'd be most grateful if our friends from there could do that for him."

"I know that place well," I said as I stood. "It was where I first met him and I understand why he's made that request. He was an elder in our tribe, as I suspect he'd always been, keeping watch over those who carried your spirit, the Emu people. He showed me the heritage I carried and guided both me and my son Billy who ultimately fulfilled our people's destiny. We'll be holding a ceremony for him there as soon as we return, in the customary way of our people, and any of you who would like to attend will be most welcome."

There were hundreds gathered around the Emu cave to join in our commemoration of Elko's life. Emu people had come from all across Australia, with a couple even from overseas, and there were also many other friends from Earth and throughout the galaxy. Sarah and a number of her Emu friends had choreographed a special dance for him which the younger members of the tribe were now performing. A stone bearing a plaque had been placed on the opposite side of the pool to the cave and it read simply,

*In memory of Elko of the Firstborn
Eldest of the Emu People
Guardian Angel of the Galaxy
Forever walk in the light.*

At the conclusion of the dance, and as the sun touched the western horizon and bathed us all in its reddish light, I entered the cave and scattered his ashes about on the floor. As always I felt a great presence, the spirits of our ancestors, and I knelt in prayer.

In time I returned to the outside world and a great feast had been prepared. While it was undoubtedly a sad occasion, it was also a celebration of a life that had ended in the fulfilment of his dream, and so we celebrated with that joy in our hearts as well. Songs were sung and speeches made, becoming more and more blurry as the night wore on, and I'm sure if Elko's spirit were with us he'd have approved, even though he was never much one for partying.

Eventually the fires burned low and one by one the people went home.

Sarah and I decided to sell the farm and move to Coolum Beach so we could spend our remaining years closer to our extended family. We both know it won't be too much longer before we follow Elko on his journey, and we want to be able to share the time we have left with our loved ones. One of the local Emu families who have been working on the farm for us in recent years has decided to buy it, and we'll be moving as soon as the sale is completed. Billy and Julia have found a very nice house for us on the coast and everything is in readiness at that end.

Mark and Lorina have commenced their studies at Brisbane University. Alas he's broken the family line of astronomers but I don't really hold that against him. I'm sure they'll both excel in their chosen field. There's no talk of marriage yet, and maybe they'll wait until they've completed their studies, or maybe not. Either way, they seem made for each other, and I'm sure they'll have a long and happy life together.

Norrie has announced his engagement to one of his co-workers on the southern ocean project, so we'll all be going to Eridani soon for the wedding. He has worked extremely hard throughout his life and fully deserves the rewards that marriage will bring him.

Well the time has come to conclude my contribution to this tale. Goodbye, and may your own barefoot times be as happy as ours have been.

Tom Collins

Part Nine

Old Ghosts

Red Sky

I was suddenly awake, my eyes wide open and looking straight at the reddish moon that was shining in through my bedroom window. I took a deep breath, and then another. *The sky was red*, I whispered to myself and a chill went up my spine.

We'd watched a movie last night I thought was a bit corny, but the real significance of the red sky in the final scene had only just occurred to me.

The story began with two teenage boys, Mark and his best friend Tony, riding the waves on some beautiful Florida beach. They emerge from the water, chattering about how absolutely awesome the waves are and then, as the sun sets and the sky turns red, they part company. Next we see Mark at home with his parents, just finishing their dinner, when the telephone rings. It's Tony's parents calling to say he hadn't arrived home and wondering if Mark knew where he was. Mark, of course, thought Tony had gone straight home and had no idea where he could possibly be.

Four days later and in spite of a massive police search there's no trace of Tony. It's late in the day, almost sunset, and Mark is sitting on the sand staring out at the waves he once loved. There's a lone tear running down his cheek. Very sad. Then a shadow falls over him and when he turns and looks up he sees a beautiful girl silhouetted against the red sky. She sits down alongside him and asks him what's wrong. He tells her about Tony's disappearance and she puts her arm around him.

The girl, whose name is Lorraine, is very shy, it seems, and whenever Mark goes to introduce her to anyone she's suddenly gone. But over the course of the next few days he falls in love with her and they spend more and more time alone together on the beach. Lorraine says something to him about other strange disappearances from that beach and Mark starts digging back through old newspapers in the library. He's stunned to discover that over the last ten years six other boys have gone missing. As he reads the reports we see shadowy flashbacks to each of those disappearances and, I now realised, each time the sky is red.

A few days later he meets Lorraine and she draws his attention to a middle-aged badly dressed man wandering along the beach. Mark says that's just Harry, he's always been hanging around since he lost his job ten years ago in some corporate collapse. But Lorraine is suspicious and they follow him to where he's living in a derelict house. They wait for him to go out again and sneak inside. There they find articles of clothing from all the missing boys. The police arrive and arrest Harry who protests his innocence and claims he has been framed. Mark turns to Lorraine but she has vanished again.

In the final scene we see them walking along the beach, surfboards in hand. They stop and kiss, and as they do the camera pulls back and we see the sky is starting to redden. Lorraine looks up at the camera with a strange expression on her face and the red light reflects in her eyes. There's a slight shimmering and the whole beach changes subtly. The camera swings around and where there were apartment buildings lining the beach a moment before there's now a tropical jungle, and the sky is a deep blood red. Then the credits roll.

The meaning of the red sky was now clear to me. Lorraine was the real villain and Mark her latest victim, taken off to a beach on some alien world where the sky is always red. But then something else hit me totally out of left field.

Four years ago a seventeen year old boy named Mark had found himself on an alien beach with a girl named Lorina, and had fallen head over heels in love with her. He was now back on that world, preparing to marry her.

Surely it was just coincidence? Lorina wasn't an evil temptress, of that I was sure. Her parents, well I wouldn't put it past them, but not her. Yet on two occasions the people of that galaxy had tried to snare Mark and make him their Supreme Ruler or whatever, and now he was back there again. Another shiver ran up my spine.

"What did you think of that movie, Chris?" Dad asked as we sat down for breakfast.

"Beware the red sky."

"Ah, so you figured it out. You've done well."

"It's really scary when you finally see it. Poor Mark."

"Yes, poor Mark," he said and then paused, staring into space.

"No, it couldn't be," he finally said to himself while shaking his head.

"I had the same thought during the night. Do you really think there could be any connection between that story and our Mark?"

“That movie was made in 2003, nearly fifty years ago. It’s just a coincidence, that’s all. It has to be, and yet...”

“What is it, Dad?”

“Probably nothing, only for just a moment I had a strange feeling that, um, I don’t know. It was creepy.”

Mark and Lorina had gone back to Bluehaven six months earlier to complete their joint honours thesis on Dolphin lore. Before they left they told us they were planning to marry sometime early in the new year, and that while they were there they’d make all the arrangements for the ceremony which would be held in the Delphinidae temple. Everyone was looking forward to it.

They had been sending us monthly updates, although communications between Bluehaven and Earth were rather tenuous and sometimes it took a week or two for their messages to arrive. Nonetheless, it appeared everything was going well for them and in their last message they said they expected to be home in time for Christmas. I admit I’d been missing Mark terribly and was eagerly awaiting their return.

Our breakfast was interrupted by a soft chime, indicating the arrival of e-mail. Dad and I both sprinted over to the terminal and opened the message. It was an audio-visual from Mark and Lorina, speaking to us from the beach just below the Delphinidae temple and giving us an update on the planning for the wedding.

“Everything’s going great,” Mark said. “We’ll be heading back to Earth in a few days so we can submit our thesis, and will probably hang around there for a couple of months before coming back here for the ceremony. It’s going to be grand. We’re looking forward to seeing you all again real soon.”

“We don’t know precisely when we’ll be getting back,” Lorina added. “We’re still trying to organise transport. I wanted us to come back through Sheol with the Dolphins but Mark wouldn’t be in it.”

“That place gives me the creeps. No, they reckon they’ll have a ship ready for us in a few days at most. We’ll see you all then.”

They waved to the camera and it pulled back, giving us a view out across the sea behind them. It was just before dawn and there was some high cloud out to the east. The sun’s rays striking that cloud painted the sky a brilliant red. I looked at Dad and he looked at me. We both shivered.

It was a week later and Mark and Lorina had still not returned to Earth. We’d heard nothing more from them since that e-mail and neither had Mark’s parents, but they weren’t overly concerned, given the unreliable

communications with Bluehaven, and assumed it was just taking a bit longer than expected to obtain a ship.

Summer had arrived with a vengeance and the pavement was frying my bare soles as I walked home from school. I didn't mind though, as unlike Mark, who loved coldness, I'd always preferred the heat. The hotter the better as far as I was concerned. I'd removed my shirt as soon as I left the school grounds and was looking forward to spending the rest of the afternoon down at the beach.

My thoughts of sand and salt water were interrupted, though, by a loud noise coming down the road behind me. I turned around and stared at the strange two-wheeled machine that was making all the racket. It pulled up alongside me and I realised then it was a motorcycle powered by an ancient internal combustion engine. I'd seen them in museums and knew there were still groups of enthusiasts who rode them. *Harley-Davidson*, I seemed to recall was the technical term for the beasts.

Sitting atop the Harley was a tall skinny man wearing leather trousers and a leather jacket mostly open at the front. He had tattoos all over his chest and when he removed his helmet I saw his head was shaven. He leaned over towards me.

"Sorry to bother you," he said in a voice that was unexpectedly cultured, "but could you tell me where I might find Hampton Road? I'm afraid the directions given to me have turned out to be somewhat inadequate."

I stood there with my mouth open but nothing coming out of it for so long he almost began to ask me again, but finally I managed to speak in a squeaky little voice. "Go along here for another two blocks, then turn right and continue down the hill until you almost reach the beach. Hampton Road is the last one on the left."

"Thank you so much. Enjoy the remainder of your day." With that he pulled his helmet back on and restarted the machine. With a roar he disappeared off down the street.

'Hampton Road,' I thought. *'That's where Mark lives.'*

I arrived home, changed into my surf shorts and was about to go running off out the front door when the phone rang. A shiver ran up my spine and I stopped dead in my tracks. Mum answered it.

"Yeah, Aaron's out the back and Chris just came in," I heard her say. "We'll be around straight away. Is it about Mark?"

There was a short pause and then she said, "Okay then, give us about five minutes."

She called out to us and we both arrived in the kitchen at about the same time.

“That was Jason, and he wants us all to come around to their place. I asked him if it was about Mark but he said he’d tell us when we got there. I hope it’s not bad news.”

Dad put his arm around my shoulder. “He’s fine, I’m sure,” he whispered to me, but I was too stunned to really hear him. ‘*Red sky*,’ I thought.

Normally we’d walk if we were going to the Collins place as it was only a couple of blocks away, but in view of the urgency Dad decided to drive. We pulled up outside the house and the first thing I noticed was the Harley-Davidson parked in the driveway. We hurried out of the car and up the front steps.

Jason met us at the door and ushered us into the living room. Billy, Julia and Peter were there, and sitting in the far corner was the motorbike man. He stood as we entered the room.

“Guys, this is Anton, and he’s just told us some disturbing news from Bluehaven,” Jason said. “It seems Mark has become embroiled in something of a controversy over there. According to Anton, there are many who say the marriage of Mark and Lorina will lead to another tyranny even worse than Morgoth’s.”

“But how?” Mum asked.

“Firstly, some of them are afraid of Mark himself,” Anton said. “That stuff about him being Morgoth’s grandson really scares them. But the bigger concern, and the more plausible one, is about any offspring they may produce. There are claims there could be as much as a one-in-five chance that a son or daughter would not only be a full-blooded Barefooter but a Delphinidae as well, and that would make him or her the most powerful person ever to live.”

“But all Mark’s Barefooter genes were destroyed when he set off that pulse,” Dad said.

“Are you sure?” Anton asked, a wry smile appearing momentarily on his face.

“Well, that’s what everyone says, based on the samples they’ve taken.”

“There are billions of cells in his body. It seems unlikely the fractal structure in every single one of them was completely destroyed, and there are experts on Meridian and elsewhere who are saying the damaged DNA may actually be regenerating in his reproductive organs or even throughout his body.”

“Oh my God,” Jenny said. “What can we do to help him?”

“I am instructed to bring his father back with me.”

“Instructed? By whom?” Jason asked. “Which side are you on?”

“I’m on no-one’s side, I’m just a hired hand who knows his way around.”

“Who’s paying you then?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. All I’m saying is it would be in Mark’s interest if you were to come with me. You can say no and I promise you’ll never see me again, but it’s also a fair bet you’ll never see your son again either. So what will it be?”

Jason looked around at everyone else, but any inspiration he was seeking wasn’t forthcoming.

“Very well, I’ll go with you.”

“I’m coming too!” I said.

“Oh Chris,” Mum cried.

“Forget it, kid,” Anton said.

“But I have to,” I said. “I’m Mark’s guardian, you know that, the Dolphins said so. I should be there now if he’s in any sort of danger.”

Jason glanced at Dad who nodded ever so slightly. Mum gasped.

“The boy comes with me or the deal’s off,” Jason said softly to Anton.

“Well, whatever,” he said while shrugging his shoulders. “But I take no responsibility for the kid. None whatsoever, you understand? I’ll give you an hour to sort yourselves out and then we go.”

With that he turned and left the house. Mum came running over to me and was about to say something but then thought better of it. She hugged me instead.

“Your heart’s in the right place, son,” she finally said. “Now you be careful and do whatever Uncle Jason tells you to do.”

“Jase, be careful and do whatever Chris tells you to do,” Billy said. “I mean that. He’s had a lot more experience of that place than you’ve had, and he’s an Elf as well.”

“Here we go again,” Peter said with a sound of resignation in his voice. “Won’t this ever end?”

An hour later and Jason and I were on the back of Anton’s motorbike. I was sandwiched between them.

“Shouldn’t we have helmets or something?” Jason asked as Anton was strapping his on.

“You should have thought of that earlier.” With that he started the motor, putting an end to all conversation. A moment later we were speeding off down the road towards Brisbane.

Some time later we arrived, alive and physically unscathed, in an empty laneway surrounded by old warehouses on the southern side of Brisbane.

My ears were still ringing from the noise of the motorbike and Jason was looking about as pale as it's possible for an Aboriginal man to look. His hair, which normally hung straight down to his shoulders, now wanted to keep pointing back behind him. He absent-mindedly tugged at it but only half succeeded, making him look quite comical, a bit like *Astro Boy* in that old cartoon show.

Anton pulled a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of his jacket, stuck one in his mouth and lit it. He offered one to Jason, but he feebly shook his head and turned even paler.

"Suit yourself, but by the time we come out the other side you're probably going to wish you had," Anton said. "What about you, kid?"

"Um, nah, not for me, thanks," I mumbled.

As the cloud of exhaled smoke enveloped Anton, Jason manoeuvred himself upwind and I followed. We waited in silence until he'd finished.

He flicked the butt away, then pulled a large key from his pocket and unlocked the door to the warehouse we'd parked in front of. He wheeled the bike into the building and ushered us in, closing the door behind us. I could see little but shadows in the gloomy light coming from a few small high windows. He led us deeper inside.

"You might want to tread lightly and watch your step," he said. "There's lots of glass and metal shavings on the floor of this place. Not that that would be a problem for you, Jason, but I don't expect the Elf kid would share your, how should I put it, recuperative powers, would he?"

"Do you want me to carry you?" Jason asked me.

"No, I'll be fine. My feet are pretty tough and anyway I have my Elvish sixth sense to steer me clear of any danger."

Jason smiled and then chuckled. I asked him what was so funny.

"I was just thinking back to a time when your father and I were kids. He led me off down some overgrown bush track, and I kept tripping on rocks and roots and mangling my toes while his Jedi feet avoided all the obstacles. He was always doing stuff like that."

We reached the wall on the other side of the warehouse without impaling our feet on anything. Right in front of us was a heavy metal door, and Anton produced yet another key and unlocked it. He pulled on the handle and it slowly swung open, the hinges squealing in protest. Behind it was a dull shimmering light.

"It gets pretty dark from here on in," he said. "I have a torch but once we're in there you probably won't want me to use it very much." An evil smirk spread across his face. "Stick close together."

He led us in and as soon as we passed through it became totally dark. Once we were all in I heard the door slam shut behind us. There was no way back now.

“Oh, there’s something else I should mention. There are things in here that, well, they like to eat Elf children. Just remember, it wasn’t my idea to bring the kid along.” Jason’s hand clamped tighter onto mine.

It was suddenly very cold but I knew to expect this so it didn’t bother me. Soon enough the cold turned into heat and then settled back down to a feeling of nothingness. Anton switched on his torch and pointed it at the ground. It picked out a small yellow mark that looked like the cross on a Greek Orthodox church.

“These markers are our trail,” he said as he started leading us into the darkness.

Apart from the yellow markers, the ground was a uniform dull grey. We walked slowly from one marker to the next, with Anton swinging the torch from side to side in front of him. Once he swung it up a little and I saw before me a huge screaming face with fangs like carving knives. I pulled back, almost knocking Jason over, but then I realised the thing was actually a dead tree. Or was it really dead? For a moment I thought I saw its mouth open a little wider. I crept closer to Jason.

“That’s just a little sample of some of the wonders of this place,” Anton said. “If you could see the other stuff in here you’d probably go running off screaming, never to be seen again.”

“Your mother said something like that the night Dad and Peter were telling us about the chance meeting they’d had when they were kids,” Jason said to me. “She said Sheol was dark because if you could see what was really there it would drive you insane.”

“That it would,” said Anton. “Yes, it would indeed.”

We continued to walk in silence for what seemed like many hours. It was almost impossible to judge time in that place, and I wondered if maybe time simply didn’t exist in here. It was something I must discuss with Mark when I caught up with him, I thought, and that reminded me of the reason we were in here in the first place. My heart sank.

Just when I thought my legs would drop off if I walked any further, Anton suddenly stopped. He waved the torch around on the ground but I could see nothing but the murky grey surface. He moved forward another two paces then knelt, concentrating the light on a small patch of ground.

“Ah, there it is,” he said. I came closer and could just make out the tiniest fleck of yellow paint.

“Something has been trying to erase our trail markers.”

At that moment there was a faint howling in the distance that ended with a horrible strangled scream.

“Probably one of those. It’s a fair way off but we’d better douse the light for a while. I pretty much know the way from here anyway. Keep quiet and follow the sound of my footsteps.”

“Just what is that thing?” Jason asked.

“Shh,” was all that Anton said in reply.

We walked along in total darkness, except it wasn’t completely dark. When I turned towards Jason I saw he was glowing ever so slightly.

“You’re glowing in the dark,” I whispered to him. He held his hand up in front of his face and looked at it for a few moments.

“Fascinating,” he whispered.

“Shh,” said Anton, and we continued walking in silence. I held my own hand up in front of my eyes, wondering if I was glowing too, but I could see nothing. Only Jason glowed, and I wondered what it meant.

I knew we were in considerable danger and yet amazingly I felt myself starting to doze off as we plodded along in the darkness. Then suddenly there was another of those howling screams and I snapped awake quick smart. It sounded a lot closer this time.

The sound of Anton’s boots moved to the left and we turned and followed in his wake. That was good because the howling had come from our right.

Finally after some long but indeterminate time he suddenly stopped and we almost bumped into him. We’d heard no more howling and I hoped the creature was now a long way behind us.

“Stand here,” he whispered to me as he reached back and took hold of my hand, pulling me alongside him. “Can you feel it?”

At first I didn’t know what he meant, but then I realised there was a very slight breeze blowing onto me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Now take a step to the left.”

I did as he asked and the breeze was gone.

“Now come back and take a step to the right.”

Again as I did the breeze disappeared.

“This is the exit. You can see how easy it would be to miss it and be trapped in here for eternity. Now you go through first, then Jason and then me.”

He nudged me forward and as I took a step there was suddenly bright light all around me, so bright I could hardly see. I felt Jason pushing through

behind me and took another couple of steps forward. Gradually my eyes adjusted to the light.

Days Beyond Reckoning, Life Beyond Hope

“Jason Collins,” the man said, “I’ve been looking forward so much to meeting you.”

We had emerged from Sheol into the spaceport orbiting Meridian and from there we’d been taken by shuttle to the surface. We’d landed in the countryside in front of a stately old mansion and had been escorted into a large and ornate room by what looked like a nineteenth century butler. A middle-aged man dressed in a business suit welcomed us and sat us in front of his desk.

“I don’t recall ever having met you before,” Jason said softly. “How is it you know me?”

“No, we’ve never met, Jason, but I knew your grandfather well. My name is Frank Halliday.”

“But, but you can’t be! You’d have to be at least a hundred and twenty years old.”

“I’m much older than that, but nowhere near as old as some members of our race you’ve known. Speaking of which, allow me to express my condolences to you and your family on the loss of Elko. I gather you and he were good friends.”

“Yes, we were. You knew him then?”

“Let’s just say our paths crossed from time to time. You know you and he have a lot in common and not just in terms of appearance, although I must say the resemblance is quite striking if you ignore the fact that he was a good deal taller than you are. You both have a similar nature as well, quiet and considerate, even shy perhaps, but deep. Yes, very deep. Am I right?”

“I suppose so,” Jason said, still speaking very softly. “I’ve never really given it much thought.”

“You also share a common heritage. Elko was a descendent of the Barefooters who fled this world with Gallad a million years ago. You, I

gather, were implanted with Gallad's DNA in an accident on Genesis. Quite remarkable, I must say."

"You know an awful lot about me, but Gallad's DNA only grafted itself onto those genes I inherited from my father, so you see, I'm only a half-blooded Barefooter."

"Yes, that's true, but even so you do appear to have remarkable powers. I've seen the security footage from the Old Temple on Bluehaven, and you gave that fool Farley one hell of a fright. To be honest I've never seen anything like it, the way that knife just popped back out of your chest. Remarkable. Now your son, I gather he was a full-blooded Barefooter until an incident here a few years ago, and I very much regret I was unable to meet with him before then. It would have been fascinating I'm sure."

Jason showed no reaction.

"But I digress. We were talking about age. My Barefooter DNA is very much diluted and my life expectancy is measured only in hundreds of years, whereas you, my dear Jason, will almost certainly live as long as Elko did. Perhaps even longer. Have you ever thought about that, what it will be like to see Mark's grandchildren growing senile while you're still precisely the same as you are now? A bit frightening when you think about it like that, don't you agree?"

Jason again said nothing.

"Ah yes, like I said, very quiet and very deep. Have you given any thought as to how you'd like to fill in the next hundred thousand years or so? Perhaps a crusade like Elko's?"

"I haven't really thought about it," Jason said.

"There are other options. It is said many of the original Barefooters simply couldn't stand the boredom of such long lives and passed through the portals into Sheol to lose themselves and find their own oblivion in that dark and timeless place. You'd do well to remember that option in the millennia ahead, if all else fails.

"Or you could choose the path your son turned down, that is, to become the new Supreme Ruler of the Universe. You know I think you'd make an excellent ruler, you have a much better temperament than Morgoth. Does that appeal to you at all?"

Jason said nothing.

"Think about it. You have plenty of time to decide, yes, plenty of time. Now, who's this youngster you've brought with you? I really wasn't expecting another guest so you have taken me somewhat by surprise. He's an Elf, that's obvious, but not a local one. Oh, now I know, you must be Maleena's son. Of course."

“Yes, I’m Christopher Smith and Maleena is my mother,” I said. “I heard all about you when Peter, that’s Peter Thorpe, read his father’s diary to us a few years ago.”

“Ah yes, Michael Thorpe and his accursed diary. How is he these days?”

“Michael died six years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Please pass on my condolences to his son for me, would you?”

I nodded.

“Ah yes, those were exciting times back then, most certainly they were,” he said while gazing at the ceiling. “I first went to Earth to check out reports of autothermia in an Aboriginal tribe and that trail ultimately led me to John Collins, but before I could do anything your second world war broke out and John joined the army. Strings were pulled and I ended up as his commanding officer, but then he was captured by the Japanese in New Guinea. I was about to send out a rescue team when he and twenty other captives came striding out of the jungle, large as life. When the war ended I was put in charge of an automotive parts factory and that kept me fully occupied for many years, but eventually I found the time to track down John again. I knew he was back in Narrabri, and by then he was married and had a son, Thomas, who was ten years of age. I realised two things the moment I walked into his house, firstly that his wife also carried the autothermia genes and secondly that their son’s heritage was even stronger than theirs. I had no difficulty convincing John to move his family to Brisbane and start work at my factory where I could keep a close eye on the boy, and all was well until that bumbling fool Andushin nearly ruined everything. He was posing as a Latvian refugee, God knows why, and then a genuine Latvian named Boscovich came to work at the factory and John became suspicious. I really should have let Boscovich expose him then and there, but that would have led to too many difficult questions so in the end I just had to try to divert attention away from him.”

I suddenly felt very light-headed and realised I was having what my father called a Jedi attack. I looked into Halliday’s eyes and saw the truth written there as plain as the nose on his face.

“You killed John Collins,” I whispered.

“Your insight is strong, Elf child, but I’d keep it to myself if I were you, if you want to keep that pretty little head of yours attached to your shoulders.”

“It’s true then,” I said, ignoring his threat.

“Yes it’s true enough,” he sighed. “Tom figured it out for himself many years after the event and I admitted it to him. By then I was disguising myself as an old man and had convinced him I only had a few months to

live, and he seemed satisfied enough that I'd confessed my crime. You see we all have skeletons in our closets, young Elf, those of us who live long enough to accumulate them. Although you do seem determined not to have that problem, don't you?"

"Where's my son?" Jason asked, clearly trying to change the topic before Halliday could decide to decapitate me on the spot. "We were told he was in some sort of danger and that's why we came."

"Mark is safe enough for the moment, now that you're here. But I've been most remiss in my duties as host, for surely you must be tired after your long journey. I'll have Jeeves take you to your room now and then you can join me for dinner in, what shall we say, an hour's time?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"You don't mind sharing a room I hope. I was really only expecting one of you, but if there's a problem I can have another room prepared and ready by the time dinner is over."

"No, one room will be fine."

"Very well," Halliday said and then pressed a button on his desk, bringing the ancient butler back in. "Jeeves, please show our guests to their room and then bring them to the dining hall in about an hour."

"Very good, sir," Jeeves said and ushered us from the room. He escorted us down several corridors and then up an ornate flight of stairs. After a couple more twisting corridors we were led into a spacious room with a view out over the countryside and off to the ocean in the distance.

"You can have first shot at the bathroom," Jason said as soon as Jeeves had left us. "I need to do some serious thinking."

I emerged cleansed and refreshed to find Jason stretched out on the bed. I thought he was asleep but as soon as I came into the room he lifted his head.

"My turn I guess," he said as he hauled himself up and sauntered into the bathroom. A few moments later I could hear running water.

Up until that day I'd only thought of Jason as *Uncle Jase*, Mark's dad, a nice pleasant family man and astrophysics genius. I guess I'd witnessed something of his powers in our encounter with Farley on Bluehaven but with everything that was happening then it never really sank in. That Jason was in the same league as Elko, or even Morgoth, shook me deeply. I suppose I should have felt excited to have suddenly discovered that my best friend's father was some sort of modern day Superman, but all I could feel was great sorrow for him. It must be so incredibly hard for him to try to lead a normal life knowing he is virtually immortal and indestructible, I realised, and I wondered how I'd cope if I knew I'd see my grandchildren's grandchildren

die of old age long before the first grey hair appeared on my head. The thought made me shudder.

Mr Halliday said Elko had filled in the millennia with a crusade. I suppose by this he meant his long-running battle with Barrad, all the while hoping he might yet be able to redeem his long-lost friend. Yet in the end it wasn't Elko but Jason, then only fifteen years old, who had driven the demon from Barrad and reunited them. I shuddered again as it finally sank in that the skinny little guy taking a shower in the room next to me was almost without doubt the most powerful being in the universe.

So what would he do? Would he find some great and noble crusade of his own to keep him occupied for a few million years, or pass into Sheol and lose himself there, or would he do what Halliday clearly wanted him to do, which was to become supreme ruler of the galaxy? I didn't like the sound of any of these options. There was also a fourth option, I realised, which was to have himself zapped with a subspace pulse to deactivate his autothermic DNA and make him just a normal person again, like what happened to Mark. But even that may not work, for didn't Anton say that Mark's DNA was regenerating?

The door slid open and Jason walked over and sat down on the side of the bed next to me.

"You look like you've been doing some pretty serious thinking too," he said.

"Yeah, I was," I started to say, but before I could go on my emotions burst out and I fell across his lap, crying my eyes out.

His hand found my shoulder and rubbed it gently until I'd cried myself out. I looked up at him and he smiled, a warm sad smile that almost started me crying again. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly, and he went back to rubbing my shoulder.

And so we sat, each comforting the other as best we could, until there came a gentle knocking on the door. It was Jeeves, and Jason told him we'd be with him in a moment. He grabbed a damp towel from the bathroom and gave my face a good wipe, and that made me feel a little better.

"I hope we're not expected to dress for dinner," I said. "I seem to have misplaced my tuxedo."

Jason laughed, and the sound of his laughter dispelled what remained of my melancholy mood.

The first thing I noticed when we entered the dining hall was that Mr Halliday was in fact wearing a tuxedo, and I was certain both he and the hired help would think us total retards to be coming down to dinner in just

board shorts. But we really had no choice as we didn't have anything else to wear, and of course Jason couldn't wear anything more substantial anyway.

Mr Halliday, thankfully ignoring our lack of attire, begged us to sit and Jeeves then brought in a bottle of wine.

"Without wishing to offend," Jason said, "I'm sure your wine is delightful but it is the wish of Chris's parents that he not drink alcohol, and that being the case I'd also prefer something non-alcoholic."

"But of course, sir," Jeeves said. "If I may suggest, we do have an excellent grape juice made from the produce of our own vineyard. Would you care to sample it?"

"That would be excellent," Jason said and I nodded as well. I suspected he may have had other reasons for remaining fully sober apart from just setting a good example for me, though. More so as Jason, unlike his father and grandfather, rarely drank anyway, mostly out of deference to my dad who doesn't, in fact can't, drink at all.

After filling Mr Halliday's wine glass Jeeves walked back to the kitchen and returned a few moments later with the grape juice.

"This is really most excellent," Jason said after taking a sip.

"Why thank you sir. Would you care for some herb and garlic bread to begin with?"

"Yes please," Jason said and took another sip. I did likewise and had to agree it was very tasty indeed. Jeeves departed once more.

"May I ask where my son is?" Jason asked our host.

"You may ask, yes, but I think for the moment I will decline to answer, other than to reaffirm that he's in no immediate danger."

"I see," Jason said, maintaining his composure perfectly. "Then why were we brought here?"

"May I remind you it was only you who was brought here, Jason. That child of yours tagged along of his own volition, or so I've been told, although for what reason I can't begin to imagine."

Jason remained silent and impassive, defeating Mr Halliday's attempt to change the subject and forcing him to continue.

"Yes, well it's obvious, is it not? You were brought here to secure your son's safety, and now that you're here he is safe. But if you were to leave, and you're most certainly free to leave at any time you wish, then you would be placing your son in, how should I say it, in a position of extreme prejudice."

"I see," was all that Jason said.

Jeeves returned with the bread and that brought an end to the conversation for a little while. It, like the grape juice, was wonderfully

delicious. While we were eating Jeeves placed a soup bowl in front of each of us and then a young woman entered the room with the soup. She looked to be about seventeen or eighteen with long blonde hair, and when I saw her bright blue eyes a tingle went up my spine. ‘*She’s an Elf*’, I realised. She winked at me.

“*We must talk later,*” her voice spoke inside my head. For the slightest moment I was stunned but then I regained my composure and nodded ever so slightly back to her. I looked over at Mr Halliday, fearing he may have observed my reaction, but thankfully he was turned away from me and in quiet conversation with Jeeves.

“For the main course I’ve chosen a local fish specialty,” Halliday said after we’d finished the soup. “I hope it’s to your liking.”

“If it’s as good as your soup then I’m sure it will be,” Jason said.

“I’m actually surprised to see you eating so much, given your autothermia.”

“We’d been expecting Mark and Lorina to return home and were planning something of a feast to welcome them back, so I’ve been fasting.”

“Ah yes. You know I think that once our negotiations here have been concluded, it might be best for Mark and Lorina to be sent back to your world. Permanently, perhaps, I think. That should please young Christopher, who I’m sure will want to escort them home, assuming of course he hasn’t given me cause to have him executed before then.”

I gulped, even though I was pretty sure Mr Halliday was just teasing me. It would probably be better for me to appear frightened anyway, so I gulped again and looked down at my lap.

The Elvish girl returned at that moment with our main course, which was so delicious I forgot all about being executed. Even Jason ate everything on his plate which was quite a rare feat for him. As soon as we’d finished she brought out a generous serving of dessert for each of us. It tasted a bit like chocolate mousse but with a slight tang to it. I made a mental note to ask her for the recipe.

Jeeves reappeared to serve coffee to us and a liqueur to Mr Halliday. My hopes lifted a little at the sight of him consuming more alcohol but I didn’t know if it would be enough to give us any real advantage. He took a sip and leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head.

“Let me be frank with you,” he said. I couldn’t help it, honestly, I really couldn’t. I burst out in a fit of uncontrolled laughter and simply couldn’t stop. Jason glared at me but it was no use, I was down for the count. I almost stopped and then my mind replayed his saying ‘*let me be frank with you*’

and I was off again. I blushed with embarrassment and wished I could just crawl under the table and disappear.

“Yes, very well, Frank by name and *frank* by nature, as Tom Collins was fond of saying to me,” he said once I’d finally regained some semblance of self control. That almost set me off again but I held my hand firmly over my mouth and tried to think of something totally unfunny, like geography lessons. It worked.

“As I’m sure you know by now, it is a tradition amongst the Delphinidae that when the High Priestess’s eldest daughter weds she becomes the new High Priestess, and her husband by law becomes Bluehaven’s Head of State and chairman of that world’s governing council,” he said. That was something I didn’t know and it knocked all the hilarity out of me. I wondered if Mark knew that.

“Now Mark will make a fine husband for Lorina and a fine Head of State for Bluehaven, I’m sure. In the six months he’s been on Bluehaven he has become very popular, not only amongst the people of that world but throughout the galaxy, and there are moves afoot to have him nominated to chair the Galactic Council here on Meridian. With his popularity and the lack of any serious opposition he’d surely win such an election, but I fear he is too young, too naive and too unfamiliar with our politics to take on such a role. He would be used, by those who claim to advise him, and all too quickly would become a puppet ruler for people with less than scrupulous agenda. Not the least of those is Lorina’s father, Kevin, who has made it no secret he’d like to see Bluehaven play a much greater role in the galaxy’s government.”

He paused and took another sip of his liqueur. I looked at Jason but his face was impassive and I couldn’t sense his thoughts. This was a totally different story to the one Anton told us to lure us here, and I wondered how much truth there was in it. I could believe what he was saying about Kevin, though, I really could, and that more than anything else scared me.

“There’s no doubt the passing of Morgoth has left a power vacuum that’s not been completely filled by the new government,” Halliday continued. “As they say, nature abhors a vacuum, and we do need a benign but powerful figurehead to stand behind the governing council and ensure its authority is upheld. But not Mark. Not yet, at any rate, and from what I’ve seen of the boy’s nature, probably not ever. So let’s just say I’ve been given a task, to find someone who’ll be popular with the people, who’s strong-willed and experienced enough not to be unduly influenced, and is someone whom Mark would be unlikely to ever challenge.”

He paused while Jeeves refilled his glass and our coffee cups. I looked across at Jason but his face was a mask of impassiveness.

“You’re the one for the job, Jason. You’re popular with the people, both from your well-publicised confrontation with Farley and simply because you are Mark’s father. Many say you are Gallad reborn, and perhaps in a way you are. You’re at the very least a half-blooded Barefooter so no-one would be able to harm or threaten you, while at the same time by your nature I believe you’d be unwilling to use your powers save in self-defence. And finally, of course, Mark would never stand against you.”

He raised his hands, fully expecting Jason to object. “Now before you say anything, I want you to sleep on it, let it mull over in that wonderful brain of yours, and we’ll discuss it further in the morning.”

“Very well then,” Jason said softly and my heart sank. I could feel the tears welling up inside my eyes as I realised Mr Halliday had all but won. I was devastated that Jason would give in so easily, but when I turned to face him he winked ever so slightly. I almost let out a sigh before realising that Halliday would almost certainly be watching.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” he said, “I have some work to catch up on before I too retire. Jeeves will escort you back to your room.”

The first thing I noticed when we returned to our room was that a bunk had been set up for me in the corner of the living room, and that sitting on the table were two steaming cups of hot chocolate and a plate of assorted cakes. If nothing else, the domestic staff here were certainly very efficient.

“Ah, just what I need,” Jason said as he sat down and took a sip of chocolate. I did likewise and then offered him first pick from the cakes.

“No, if I eat just one more mouthful I’m sure I’d explode,” he said with a grin on his face. “It’s all yours, kiddo.”

I helped myself and the cake was as delightful as it looked.

“I don’t think Mr Halliday likes me,” I said.

“What do you expect? You came right out and accused him of murdering my great-grandfather.”

“But he admitted it,” I protested.

“Yes, but I’m sure that wasn’t part of his script.” I couldn’t argue with that so I stuffed another piece of cake into my mouth.

“Do you think it’s true what he said about Mark becoming leader?”

“I think Lorina may have mentioned something about becoming the High Priestess after her marriage, but as for the rest of it, well I just don’t know, although I suppose it’s all plausible enough.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, still with a mouthful of cake.

“I don’t think I have much choice but to go along with his plan, at least for now.”

I almost choked on a crumb. “But you can’t!”

“My number one concern, and yours too if I may say so, has to be Mark’s safety. Anything else is secondary. But I want you to help me, Chris.”

Before I could say anything there was a gentle knocking on the door. When Jason opened it the Elvish serving girl was standing there.

“I was hoping you’d come to us,” he said as he ushered her inside. “I saw you and Chris exchanging glances during dinner.”

“You don’t miss much, do you?” I said. He smiled.

“My name is Cloe,” she said. “Are you really the father of Mark the Bewildered?”

“Yes I am,” Jason said, “and we came here because we were led to believe he was in some sort of danger. Do you know anything about it?”

“To the best of my knowledge he’s on Bluehaven as a guest of the High Priestess. I’m sure he’s safe there.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I think the threat to Mark was just a lure to bring me here. Now would it be possible for you or your people to take Chris to Bluehaven?”

“Yes, he’s Elvish so that would be an easy matter. There’s a daily shuttle service between here and Bluehaven.”

“Excellent. Now Chris, when you reach Bluehaven I want you to do several things. Firstly, find Mark and Lorina and make sure they’re okay, then tell Loretta and Kevin everything about Halliday and what he said to us tonight. Try to get word back to me via Cloe to let me know how you go and then, most importantly, take Mark and Lorina back to Earth with you as quickly as you can. Travel through Sheol with the Dolphins, even if you have to drag Mark screaming along behind you.”

“But what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. The only way they can hurt me is by hurting you or Mark, so it’s your job to make sure they don’t. Once you’re all safe I’ll deal with Halliday.”

“But,” I started to say but he cut me off.

“No buts, Chris. Finish the rest of that cake with Cloe and then both of you make haste.”

I lowered my head and turned away. I could feel tears welling in my eyes but I was determined not to cry. I grabbed another slice and stuffed it into my mouth, but it was tasteless. I chewed, swallowed and then turned to Cloe.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

As we left the room I glanced back at Jason and saw there were tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Travel safely,” he whispered and then the door closed behind us.

Flight to Bluehaven

I had expected to meet some opposition on our way out of Halliday's mansion but there was none. Cloe led me through a maze of corridors, then through the deserted kitchen and finally out the back door to her car. We drove off out of the gate and towards town.

We passed through the countryside for about twenty minutes and then came to a small village. She pulled up outside a house in a quiet suburban street and led me inside where she introduced me to her parents. Mum and Lorina had taught me the Elvish language so I had no trouble understanding or speaking with them.

"Christopher, these are my parents, Roderick and Sophie."

"Nice to meet you," Roderick said. "Do you work with Cloe?"

"Christopher is from Earth and was brought here with Jason, the father of Mark," Cloe said. There was an audible gasp from both her parents. "He needs to go to Bluehaven as quickly as possible."

"There's a shuttle first thing in the morning, Christopher," Roderick said. "You're welcome to stay here tonight if you wish."

"Thank you. That would be excellent."

"Now tell us, how well do you know Mark?" Sophie asked.

"I've known him all my life, and was chosen by the Dolphins to protect him."

"But you're so young," she said.

I told them all about Mark and his family, and how Jason had fallen into the pool on Genesis and been implanted with Gallad's DNA. I went on to the story of how Mark and my father had come here to Meridian to confront Morgoth and how Dad had first met my mother. As soon as I mentioned her name there was another gasp from them.

"We are indeed most honoured to have someone of such lineage staying under our roof," Sophie said. I felt myself blushing.

Cloe disappeared for a few minutes while I continued my tale, and returned carrying a tray of hot chocolate and more cake. She placed it on the

table and everyone looked at me until I'd taken a cup and a slice. I took a sip and nodded.

"Excellent, thank you," I said, and then the others took their cups and started digging into the cake.

I heard the front door open and close, and a few moments later a boy of about my age walked into the room. He had shoulder-length blonde hair, bright blue Elvish eyes and was wearing only a pair of rather scruffy brown trousers. I stood to greet him.

"This is my brother Damon," Cloe said. "Damon, this is Christopher."

He looked at me, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Um, you look kind of familiar," he mumbled. "Those shorts you're wearing, they're like the ones Mark the Bewildered wears, but no, you couldn't be, not that Christopher?"

"The very one I'm afraid."

"Is Mark here too?"

"No, Mark's on Bluehaven, I hope, and I'm going there first thing tomorrow to try to find him."

"So what are you doing here? In our house, I mean."

I quickly told him of the events that led to my being in his living room, drinking his hot chocolate and eating his cake, and that seemed to satisfy his curiosity for the moment.

"Can I go to Bluehaven with Chris?" he suddenly asked his mother.

"Don't you have school tomorrow?"

"Well yeah, but I mean, really Mum, this could be Elvish history in the making. And it's only for one day."

"Oh very well then, but I want you to do extra homework when you return to make up for it."

"Yeah, sure," he said, a look of both pleasure and surprise on his face. "Thanks Mum, thanks."

"I'm sure you'll want to rest up before your journey tomorrow," Sophie said, taking advantage of the momentary silence. "If you'll excuse me I'll prepare the guest room for you." She bowed ever so slightly and hurried from the room. I blushed again.

I finished drinking my chocolate and forced the last morsel of cake into my mouth. I thought if I have to eat just one more crumb it will be my turn to explode. Cloe reached down and I was sure she was going to offer me another slice but instead took a piece for herself. I sighed with relief.

Sophie returned, saw that I'd finished my supper and said, "If you wish I'll show you to your room now."

I stood up, feeling decidedly top-heavy, and followed her through the hallway to their guest room. It was enormous with two giant-sized beds and an en-suite.

“You are most kind,” I said.

“Not at all,” she said and bowed again. “If you have everything you need I’ll wish you a pleasant night.”

I thanked her and she stepped back out of the room and closed the door. I sat down on the corner of one of the beds and just stared into space for several minutes, then forced myself up and into the bathroom.

My ablutions completed, I stretched out on the bed and was immediately asleep.

I woke to a gentle knocking on the door of my room. I opened it to find Sophie and Damon standing there, and invited them in. Sophie had a bundle of clothes and a pair of boots in her hands.

“These are some of Damon’s clothes. You’re both about the same size so they should fit you pretty well and make you look a little bit less conspicuous than with what you’re wearing now.”

“Excellent, yeah thanks.”

There was a brown pair of trousers similar to what Damon was wearing and a pale green shirt. I pulled the trousers on over the top of my board shorts and they were indeed a good fit. I then took the shirt and pulled it over my head. It was a billowing loose-fitting tee shirt with an oversized vee-neck and sleeves that came halfway down my forearms. I liked it. Then I looked down at the boots.

“Um, do you, well, do you think the boots are really necessary?” A big grin suddenly appeared on Damon’s face.

“No, I suppose not,” Sophie said. “I bought them for Damon last year but he’s never worn them, so I thought if you liked them you might as well have them.”

“They’re very nice, I’m sure,” I said, feeling like an ungrateful wretch, “but it’s just that I never wear anything on my feet. I’m really sorry.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I can never get Damon to wear shoes either and it was stupid of me to buy them in the first place.”

“Sorry Mum, but even just thinking about putting anything on my feet makes me feel queasy,” he said. She ruffled his hair and kissed him briskly on the cheek.

“The clothes look good on you at any rate, Christopher,” she said.

“Yeah,” Damon added, “but for your short hair you could pass as a local.”

“Too late to do anything about that now,” Sophie said. I knew I should have waited until after Christmas to have my hair cut. Oh well.

“Is there anything else you might need?” she asked.

“Not that I can think of. I’ll just visit the bathroom and then we can be off, I guess.”

I came out into the living room and found them all waiting for me. Sophie gave her children a big kiss each and then gave me a hug.

“Take care, all of you, and good luck with your quest, Christopher.”

“Thank you,” I said, and then Roderick shook my hand and patted me on the shoulder. I thanked him as well.

“Right, let’s go,” Damon said and turned towards the door.

“Shirt, Damon,” his mother said.

He frowned but said nothing and walked off, returning a few moments later with a crumpled-up shirt in his hand.

“Put it on Damon.” He reluctantly pulled it over his head.

“That’s better honey,” she said and kissed him again. He turned and opened the door, and Cloe and I followed him through.

“Mothers,” he whispered after the door had closed behind us. I giggled, but Cloe wasn’t amused and glared at him with such utter contempt it shocked me.

It took us about thirty minutes to reach the shuttle port, and once we’d parked Cloe took us to the check-in desk. I fished out the ID card I’d been given when Jason and I arrived on the orbiting spaceport yesterday and held my breath while the agent scanned it, but there was no drama and I was given my boarding pass. Cloe led us through the maze of corridors until we finally reached our gate lounge. She told us to sit down while she went across to the cafeteria opposite and bought us some breakfast.

There were probably about thirty other people waiting in the lounge, mostly Elves judging by their hair colour. Many must have been family groups as there were plenty of children running around. All the children were barefoot, I noticed, as were quite a few of the adults. Sitting opposite us was a group of five teenage boys and none of them were wearing shirts or shoes. Damon kept glancing at them and then tugging at his own shirt collar as if it was very uncomfortable on him.

“Do you think it would be okay if I took my shirt off?” he asked Cloe when she returned with the breakfast.

“If you must, but put it back on before we board, okay?”

“Yeah sure,” he said as he whipped it off and tucked it down the back of the seat. “You can take yours off too if you want, Chris.”

I looked around and saw that no-one had taken the slightest notice of Damon, so I bent down and slipped mine off. Damon grinned.

The breakfast was a mixture of fruit, grain and juice and was delicious, even though I was still feeling a bit full after last night. Damon sipped a little juice but otherwise ate nothing.

"I'm not really a breakfast person," he explained.

Cloe glared at him again. "Did you have any dinner last night, Damon?"

He looked down at the table and said nothing.

"You didn't, did you? Honestly, I'm surprised you don't just fade away to nothing."

"I just don't feel hungry very often," he said.

The gate finally opened and the attendant called us all forward, reminding us to have our boarding passes ready. Some rituals were the same no matter where you were in the universe, I mused. We stood up and joined the line behind the five shirtless boys. Damon was just holding his shirt and I followed his lead.

"Shirt, Damon," Cloe said without even having to turn around and look at him.

"But what about them?" he protested.

"Them's them and you're you," she snarled. "Now put it on." He did and I followed suit.

I was seated next to a window, with Damon alongside me and Cloe in the aisle seat.

"Welcome aboard Universal Spaceways' flight 804 to Bluehaven," the attendant's voice boomed from the overhead speakers. "*Please make sure all your carry-on luggage is stowed in the overhead lockers or under the seat in front of you, and fasten your seatbelts in readiness for our departure.*" Yep, some things never change.

When all was in readiness the lighting dimmed and I felt a slight bump as we became airborne. We then surged forward and quickly rose into the sky. I looked out the window and saw the city below us and the coastline stretching away in both directions. I wondered where Mr Halliday's mansion was, but we were now too high for me to be able to recognise anything. I looked upwards and the sky was becoming a deeper and deeper blue. Before long the horizon began to show a distinct curvature, and then the acceleration force pushing me back into my seat stopped.

"Attendants prepare for subspace jump," a voice said over the speakers and the two flight attendants darted about making various checks before strapping themselves in.

There was a blue flash outside my window and then it turned completely black. We were now cruising through subspace, but there was no feeling of movement whatsoever. Even though I'd done it many times before, I still found it slightly disconcerting.

I leaned back and was about to close my eyes when there was another blue flash. Outside I now saw a planet again, but it wasn't Meridian any more.

"Welcome to Bluehaven. We'll begin our descent as soon as we have clearance from Dolphin Island Control. Please remain seated and with your seat belts fastened."

A couple of minutes later I felt the craft begin to decelerate and the planet loomed up towards us. Below I could make out the familiar shape of Dolphin Island and hoped that Mark and Lorina were down there somewhere, safe and well.

"That was one of the shortest flights I've ever been on," I said as we emerged from the shuttle and descended the stairs onto the tarmac. There was no sky bridge here and the terminal building was little more than a shack. The air was warm and humid and when I glanced at Damon he already had his shirt off. I did likewise.

"Yes, it's not far from Meridian to Bluehaven," Cloe said. "There are some people who spend a few years doing the trip at sublight speed, just to say they've done it." I shook my head.

Cloe hired a car and soon we were cruising north towards the pointy end of the island where the Delphinidae temple was located. It was a beautiful day with just a few puffy white clouds about. We slowed as we passed through several small villages and many of the people waved to us. Cloe waved back.

"Cars are pretty rare here," she explained. "Most village folk prefer to walk or ride." I was imagining horses but then we passed a couple of people on bicycles and I realised what she meant. I remembered now that there were no land animals on Bluehaven, except for people of course.

The road climbed onto the ridgeline that ran up the middle of the island and on either side, away in the distance, I could see the sea. Ever so gradually the land narrowed, until finally the road turned off to the left and descended into the large village that was near to where the Old Temple used to be. That thought caused a shiver to run up my spine.

"Cars aren't permitted over on the New Temple side of the island," Cloe said, "so we'll have to park here and walk across. Is that okay with you guys?"

Damon and I both murmured our agreement, not that we had much choice anyway, so we parked on the side of the road that Mark and I had walked along on the way to the Old Temple four years ago.

We walked in silence as we made our way through the farmland and began the climb back up to the top of the ridge. When we reached the top I caught my first glimpse of our destination. The New Temple was gleaming in the bright sunshine and there were pennants flying from the towers. Beyond it was the yellow beach and then the deep blue of the sea. It looked like something out of a fairy tale. We stopped for a drink of water, probably on the very same spot where Mark, Lorina and I had stopped when we'd been going the other way. The feeling of *dèjà vu* was very strong indeed.

At long last we reached the temple gate. It was open and there were no guards in sight so we wandered in and through to the main courtyard. There were many people milling about but none paid any attention to us. Some were dressed in the robes of the Delphinidae monks while others were in the uniform of the guards, but without the boots and spiky hats I was pleased to see. Most though were dressed similarly to us.

Cloe led us diagonally across the courtyard to a door on the opposite side.

"Shirt, Damon," she said. Damon and I looked at each other and then reluctantly pulled our shirts back on. We entered the building.

On the other side of the door was an enquiry counter, and a young Elvish woman came over to greet us.

"We're looking for Mark and Lorina," Cloe said to her.

"May I have your names please?"

"Cloe and Damon Enderling from Meridian and Christopher Smith from Earth," she said in a matter-of-fact voice, as if we were just neighbours dropping in to borrow a cup of sugar.

"Take a seat just over there," the receptionist said, pointing to a collection of lounge chairs in the far corner of the room. We sat down and waited.

"It sounds at least like they're still here," Cloe whispered to me.

"And still alive," Damon added. She poked him in the ribs.

"Chris, what the hell are you doing here?"

I looked across the room and there was Mark, his hair a bit longer and his tan a bit darker than when I'd last seen him six months ago, but otherwise unchanged and, to my great relief, unharmed. Cloe and Damon both stood and bowed before him, and I almost giggled.

“Arise, my friends,” he said in a voice that sounded almost regal. “Please, come join us for lunch.” With that he led us off down a corridor, with me alongside him and Cloe and Damon following along at a respectable distance behind.

As we entered the dining room Lorina rose and rushed over to greet me.

“Chris, it is you!” she said while hugging me to death. “I couldn’t believe it when Mark got the call saying you were here.”

Cloe and Damon remained waiting just outside the door. Mark turned to them and said, “Come on in. We don’t stand on formality here, as you’ll no doubt soon discover. Take a seat and dig in. You too, Chris, and then you can tell us what brings you here.”

All through lunch Mark kept looking across at me and grinning. It was just so good to see him again and only then did I realise just how much I’d been missing him over the last six months. I didn’t know how I’d cope if, after the wedding, he had to stay here and be Head of State or whatever.

“We were expecting you home days ago,” I finally said.

“Didn’t you get my last message?”

“The last one we received was over a week ago, when you and Lorina were standing on the beach at sunrise.” I remembered again that red sky and shivered.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, you must have all been worried sick. I sent another message the next day letting you know the ship we were booked on had major technical problems and was withdrawn from service for repair. We were hoping to go next week, but even that’s looking doubtful now. Is that why you came here?”

I leant back, put my hands behind my head and told him the long story that began with the appearance of Anton and ended with our arrival here. A few times he tried to interrupt me to ask questions but I wouldn’t let him. I wanted, needed, to get the whole thing out in one hit.

At the end of my tale I looked up at him and he was as pale as a ghost. That finally did it, I leaned over, buried my head in my hands and started crying. Damon put his arm around my shoulder and then Mark was around on my side of the table, doing likewise.

“Oh Chris, I had no idea any of this was happening, no idea at all.”

“But your father,” I managed to say, “he’s still back there, with Halliday.”

“Yes, and we’ll have to rescue him.”

“No, your dad gave me strict instructions to get you and Lorina back to Earth through Sheol and that’s what I’m going to do, or die trying.”

Mark said nothing, but tightened his grip on my shoulder. I wiped my eyes and sat up.

“Before we do anything, I wonder if you could both answer some questions that have been bugging me,” I said.

“Fire away,” Lorina and Mark both said in unison, and that caused them to giggle. Damon and Cloe looked at each other in surprise for a moment and then they too giggled. That their soon-to-be High Priestess and her consort were really just a couple of giggling kids was something they were having trouble coming to terms with, it seemed.

“Okay,” I said to Lorina. “Is it true that, when you marry, you’ll become the High Priestess?”

“Yes, it’s true, but it’s purely a hierarchical thing within the Order. I’m promoted to High Priestess, my mother becomes Reverend Mother and my grandmother becomes Mother Superior. It doesn’t change anything from a practical perspective.”

“Good. Now is it true that the husband of the High Priestess is also the Bluehaven Head of State?”

“Yes, my father currently holds both positions, as I’m sure you know, and if you go right back to Loria, her father was also Head of State. But for the million or so years in between we had no Head of State at all, save for Morgoth himself. If what you’re asking is whether the husband of the High Priestess is automatically made Head of State, then the answer is no. It’s an elected position, and when our government was formed following the fall of Morgoth, my father was elected. He’ll remain Head of State until he either dies, retires or is voted out, whether I marry Mark or not.”

“I see. Now one for Mark. Is it true that your Barefooter genes are regenerating?”

“What? No, that’s impossible. The subspace pulse was strong enough to destroy every fragment of fractal DNA within about a five metre radius and you saw what it did to Morgoth. I was a whole lot closer to it than he was. All the tests I’ve had, and there’ve been plenty done, have found absolutely nothing. Zilch. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying.”

“They also said some DNA fragments in your genitals may have survived and that, with Lorina’s lineage going back to Martyn, there was a chance your children could become full-blooded Barefooters.”

“You’ve read your father’s account of what happened,” he said patiently. “Do you remember where the pulse generator was hidden?”

“Yeah sure, it was in a stud on your board shorts. Oh I see, yes, your genitals would have been right in the firing line, so to speak.”

“So to speak.”

“Okay,” I said, now steadying myself. “One more. After the wedding, will you both be living here permanently?”

Mark looked at Lorina, and after a few moments she nodded her head.

“We were going to wait until we were back on Earth to tell you,” he said, “but now that you’ve asked I can’t lie to you, Chris.”

I took a deep breath and told myself not to cry, no matter what. Mark would always be my friend, whether he’s living here or on Earth, and I’d just have to accept whatever decision they’ve made.

“We have approval to establish a Delphinidae temple on Earth, right in Coolum Beach actually,” Lorina said. “We’ll be starting work there straight after the wedding.”

I gasped. I couldn’t believe my ears! This was the most wonderful piece of news I’d heard in ages.

“I thought you’d be pleased,” Mark said, now grinning from ear to ear. “But don’t tell anyone back home, will you. We want to surprise them.”

“Yeah, sure,” I whispered. “Wow, that’s great, just wonderful!”

“I have a question, if you don’t mind,” Damon said timidly after we’d all settled down again.

“Not at all,” Mark said. “Go for it.”

“Okay then. The ship you mentioned you were booked on, would that be the *Endeavour* by any chance?”

“Yes it is. Why do you ask?”

“I know someone who works in the maintenance section at the line’s headquarters on Meridian, and I was just thinking it might be worth asking him if he knows when the ship will be ready.”

“Who are you talking about?” Cloe asked with a tone of voice that suggested Damon was making it all up.

“Pip’s father.”

“Yes, of course, Richard Ingle, his name is. You should call him.”

Mark walked over to the phone in the corner of the room and put the call through.

“Yes, Richard Ingle please. Hello, Mr Ingle? My name is Mark Collins and I’m calling from Bluehaven. Yes, that’s right, Mark the Bewildered. A friend of your son’s suggested I call you. You see, my fiancé and I are booked on one of your ships, the Endeavour, only we’ve been told it’s undergoing major repairs at the moment. I was wondering if you could tell me when it’s likely to be ready. What? Okay, I see. Well there must be some misunderstanding somewhere along the line. Thank you for your help anyway. Goodbye.”

Mark turned pale.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with the *Endeavour*. It’s currently out on an exploration mission and isn’t due back for another three months.”

Now it was Lorina who turned pale.

“That can’t be,” she said. “The Temple’s own travel agent made the booking for us.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Damon said.

“Neither do I,” Cloe said.

“Um, Mark,” Damon said, “I wonder if I could impose upon you to call our parents and tell them you’d like us to stay a little longer? I don’t think it would be wise for us to travel back to Meridian right now.”

“I think you’re right. I’ll make the call now.”

“Hello, it’s Mark Collins here, calling from Bluehaven. Yes that’s right, Mark the Bewildered. Your children arrived here safely with Chris this morning and, yes, I’m glad they’ve come. Look, I was wondering if I might keep them here with me for another day or two. There’s something going on that I need to sort out and I think they’ll be of great help to me. Yes? That’s great, thanks so much. I’ll keep you informed of how we go. Goodbye.”

“They said I could keep you here for as long as I wanted.” Damon grinned from ear to ear but Cloe only looked worried.

“I think we should go and see my parents now,” Lorina said and Mark nodded.

We walked back out into the courtyard and headed across to the other side. Damon came alongside Mark who turned towards him, smiling.

“Um, Mark,” he stammered. “Do you think, well, I’ve noticed you’re not wearing a shirt and I was wondering if it would be okay if I removed mine. I hardly ever wear one back home and I’m finding it’s becoming more and more uncomfortable on me.”

“By all means. Get Chris to take his off too and give them to Lorina. Her laundry staff will take good care of them for you.”

After Damon had done that he returned to Mark’s side.

“Um, I still can’t quite believe that you and Lorina are just ordinary folk like we are. I mean, back home everyone looks on you as, I don’t know, almost gods I suppose.”

Mark stopped walking and put his hand on Damon’s shoulder. For just a moment he flinched, but then he turned and looked Mark directly in the eyes for the first time. A smile crept slowly across his face.

“I was once more powerful than Morgoth, or so I’ve been told,” Mark said softly, “but even then I was just an ordinary boy with some whacky psychic powers. I cringe now whenever anyone calls me Mark the

Bewildered, not because it's a stupid title - I really am bewildered most of the time - but because it puts me on some sort of pedestal, makes me out to be something greater than I am, or was, or would ever want to be."

"I think I understand now, and I hope very much that I might become your friend," Damon said.

"You already are."

We'd almost reached the other side of the courtyard before I realised Mark and Damon had both been speaking English. I was about to say something but then thought perhaps I shouldn't. There was something about Damon I'd vaguely sensed from the moment I first met him, but I didn't know what it was or what it meant.

We descended the stairs leading down to the Shrine of Loria. The air was cold down there and I shivered a little but none of the others seemed to notice. We passed the statue of Loria and the Dolphins and entered the ante-room on the right. Lorett and Kevin were inside.

"Do we have visitors?" Lorett asked as we entered.

"May I introduce Cloe and Damon from Meridian," Lorina said. "And Chris, of course, you already know."

"Why Chris, it's so wonderful to see you again. I simply can't believe how much you've grown! What brings you here?"

"That's what we need to talk to you and Dad about," Lorina said.

Kevin sat us down in front of his desk and asked me to recount all that had happened.

"And now we've just found out the *Endeavour* isn't being repaired," Lorina said after I'd finished. "It's off on some mission and will be gone for three months."

"Are you sure?" Lorett asked.

"There's no doubt," Mark said. "I spoke to their head of maintenance on Meridian myself. Someone is playing games with us."

"Frank Halliday. Just who the hell is he?" Kevin asked, but before anyone could answer the lights went out.

A few moments later the emergency lighting flickered on and several guards came running into the room.

"Someone's cut the power and all communications to the Temple," the leading guard said.

Kevin reached under his desk and a panel in the wall behind him slid open, revealing a glowing doorway.

"The five of you, go through there into Sheol. Lorett, summon the Dolphins and tell them we have five to transport to Earth."

We stepped through the portal and waited for the Dolphins to appear. I glanced at Damon and saw he was glowing ever so slightly, just like Jason had done. I wondered again what this meant.

Pieces of the Puzzle

I suppose it must have been something of a shock to Mum when a shimmering doorway suddenly appeared in the wall of her kitchen and five weary travellers emerged from it, but it sure didn't show.

"Will your friends be staying for dinner?" was the first thing she said to me, before she grabbed me and smothered me with hugs and kisses and then did the same to Mark and Lorina. Finally she looked up at the remaining two members of our party.

"Mum, this is Cloe Enderling and her brother Damon," I said to her and she welcomed them in Elvish.

"It's a pleasure and an honour to meet you, Maleena," Cloe said, also in Elvish.

"I am at your service," Damon said while bowing.

"Enderling, now that name rings a bell but I can't quite place it," Mum said. "Never mind, it will come to me eventually. Now where's Jason?"

"He's still on Meridian but I'm sure he's okay," I said. "As soon as Dad gets home we'll tell you the whole story."

"I'm sure you will. Now Mark, do you want to call your mother and tell her you're back? She's been worried sick, as we all have been."

He nodded and walked over to the phone while Mum ushered the rest of us into the living room. A few minutes later he joined us.

"Mum's coming round here straight away, and my grandparents and Peter won't be far behind, I'm sure."

"I'd better call Aaron then and ask him to buy some extra food on the way home," Mum said as she wandered back to the kitchen.

Dad decided it would be best to have a barbecue out in the back yard, which was just as well as Billy and Julia brought Tom and Sarah with them and then about half an hour later Tim and Susan turned up. Mark and Lorina quickly became the centre of attention while Cloe set about helping my parents with the food preparation. Damon was left sitting by himself and

was watching all the activity with a gentle smile on his face. I wandered over and sat down on the grass beside him.

“You and Mark both have wonderful families,” he said softly to me. “So much love, but there’s worry, too, about Jason. The Dolphins will get word back to him, one way or another, that you and Mark are safely home, and I’m sure once he knows that he’ll have no trouble dealing with Halliday and returning here.”

“I wish I had your confidence. There’s something very odd about this whole business, and the more I think about it the less sense I can make of any of it. What’s Halliday achieved out of this? Mark and Lorina are back here on Earth, but they were going to come back anyway so what was the point?”

“You’re right, Chris, it really doesn’t make much sense, unless there’s something Jason has, something Halliday thinks he can take from him.”

Before I could say anything more Cloe came over and handed us each a plate stacked high with food.

“If I didn’t know better I’d think you two were up to no good, sitting over here by yourselves and whispering to each other,” she said with a chuckle in her voice. Damon grinned but said nothing.

“Thanks Cloe,” I said. “My compliments to the chef.”

“Dig in,” I said to Damon as soon as she’d left and then made short work of demolishing the meal in front of me. I wasn’t sure how long the journey through Sheol with the Dolphins had taken, and hence how long it had been since lunch, but I was ravenous.

It wasn’t until I’d eaten almost everything on my plate that I noticed Damon had eaten almost none of his.

“I guess I’m still not hungry,” he said, a look of utter misery on his face.

“Tell me, did you eat anything in the Temple at lunch time?” He slowly shook his head. “So when was the last meal you had?”

“Three, maybe four days ago.”

“And you’re still not hungry?” He shook his head again.

“You sound just like Jason.” Then in a flash I realised what I’d just said.

“Damon,” I whispered to him, drawing in as close to him as I could. “I’m no doctor, but I’ve been living with the Collins family all my life so I have a pretty good idea of what it’s like. I think you might be autothermic.”

He remained silent for a long time, just staring into space.

“Maybe I am, but that’s supposed to be impossible,” he finally said. “I’m an Elf, and from what I know of the history of our people, no Elves were ever autothermic.”

Before I could explore this any further, I began to hear a noise that sent a chill down my spine. It was very faint at first but steadily grew louder and

louder. Soon everyone else heard it too and all conversation stopped. I pulled Damon up by the arm and we both ran around to the front of the house, just in time to see the Harley-Davidson pulling into the driveway. On the front was Anton, and perched behind him and this time wearing a helmet was Jason.

He pulled it off, handed it to Anton and came running towards us while Anton turned the bike around and took off with a roar back down the street. Jenny and Mark came running out from behind us and engulfed him with hugs and kisses.

Damon put his arm around my shoulder and I turned my head towards him.

“Only love now, all the worry has gone,” he whispered. He had a soft smile on his face and a far-away dreamy look in his eyes.

For just a fleeting moment I had a vision of a burnt-out village. The ashes were cold but the smell of smoke and death still hung in the air, and above it all was a blood-red sky. Then it was gone.

“Strong love,” he whispered, then he blinked and for a moment looked completely lost.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry Chris, people tell me I do that sometimes. My mind kind of drifts away but afterwards I can never remember where it went.”

I leant closer to him and looked deeply into his eyes, and began at last to see what lay behind all the smoke and mirrors that had been surrounding and confusing us over the last two days.

We gave Jason a little time to refresh himself and then all gathered in a circle in the back yard to hear his tale. The sun had set but a half moon riding high in the sky provided sufficient illumination for us. While we were waiting Dad went in to prepare the coffee, and when he returned carrying a tray full of steaming cups he said two e-mails had just come in.

“The first was from you, Mark, saying they were having technical problems with the ship and you’d be delayed a bit longer.”

Everyone laughed.

“The second one was from Kevin. He said the power outage was caused by nothing more than a faulty circuit-breaker and apologised for his over-reaction. He said everyone is still a bit jittery there after what happened four years ago.”

“We should let him know everyone arrived here safely and that Dad’s back as well,” Mark said.

“I already have.”

Jason, now looking very much refreshed, stepped out into the middle of the circle and began his tale.

“Chris has no doubt told you everything of what happened up to the point where he went off with Cloe, so I won’t bother repeating it all again,” he said and I nodded.

“After they left I tried to go to sleep but couldn’t. I kept tossing and turning, going over in my mind all the possible scenarios and trying to figure out how best to proceed. I failed, for none of what had happened really made any sense. Eventually I must have dozed off, though, for the next thing I remember is waking up with the sun beaming in the window.

“I quickly showered and then waited in my room, expecting a summons from Halliday at any moment. But no-one came. I watched the sun climb higher and higher, and by my reckoning it must have been about ten o’clock when I decided I should go out and wander through the corridors to see what I could find. I was halfway to the door when somebody knocked.

“It was Jeeves doing the knocking, and when I opened it he asked me if I was ready. I said I was and he then led me down the corridor, but instead of taking me back to Halliday’s office he led me out the front door. Sitting at the bottom of the steps was the shuttlecraft Anton had piloted us down in yesterday, and standing alongside it was Anton. Jeeves said, ‘My master tenders his apologies,’ and then turned and walked back inside the mansion, closing and locking the door behind him. Anton opened the hatch to the shuttle and waved me on board.

“We returned to the space dock where he whisked me through customs and back into the portal. At first I thought he was leading me through Sheol to Bluehaven or another of their worlds, and it wasn’t until we emerged back in the warehouse in Brisbane that I realised what was happening. And really that’s the end of the story. Anton refused to answer any of my questions, so now I’m back here still none the wiser as to what any of this was about.”

I wanted to jump up and say I knew what the answer was, but I couldn’t. Damon was the key, I was sure of that, but he was quiet, shy and very deep, just like Halliday had described Jason. This in itself, I suddenly realised, fitted in like another piece of the puzzle. Almost everything Halliday had said had a double meaning, it seemed. Anyway it would take time for Damon to feel comfortable enough with the rest of us to open up to them, but that was just what was needed if we were to solve this riddle.

Mark, though, had established a rapport with him, so I thought perhaps I could start with just him. As soon as the opportunity arose I waved him over to us.

“Mark, we need to talk, just the three of us alone.” I saw Damon smiling out the corner of my eye and that was a great relief.

“Yeah, sure,” Mark said. “Here or at my place?”

“Actually I was thinking maybe down on the beach might be better.” Damon was still smiling.

“Good idea. I’ll go and let the others know what I’m up to, then we can wander down there.” I turned back to Damon as Mark walked off.

“Thanks Chris,” he said.

We found a comfortable-looking spot on the sand and sat down. The tide was out and with a small swell running the sound of breaking waves would make the perfect backdrop for what was to come, I thought. I looked at Damon and he smiled back at me, so I took that as a cue to start the ball rolling.

“I think Damon may be autothermic.”

“So do I,” Damon said, “even though it shouldn’t be possible. I’ve never worn shoes in my life, have never felt comfortable in a shirt and have always been a pretty small eater, but in the last few months it has been getting a lot stronger. I hardly eat anything at all now, and this morning just having that shirt on for a few hours made me feel as if I was about to burst into flame.”

Mark’s gaze was fixed on him and the smile on his face grew broader the more Damon spoke. I think that in itself was enough to encourage him to keep going.

“Is there anything else you’ve noticed?” Mark asked him.

“There’s a dream I have on and off. In it I’m a healer. I can heal people of their injuries or illnesses just by touching them. Anyway, there’s a war on and I receive word that my home town is coming under attack. I want to go to them, to help and try to save them, but at the same time I’m needed where I am, treating the sick and wounded. Eventually I get away, but by the time I arrive my town is just a smouldering ruin and there’s no-one left alive. I let out a mournful cry and that’s when I wake up.”

“I see. In this dream, are you older than you are now?”

“Yes older, much much older.”

“How old are you now, Damon?”

“I’m thirteen, but I turn fourteen in a few months time.”

“Yes, I thought that might be the case. So you’d have been born just after Meridian came out of the time freeze.”

“Yes, Mum said I was born two months after you toppled Morgoth.”

“So you’d have been conceived about seven months before the time freeze started,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, now with a smile lighting up on his face. “I’ve never thought about it before, but it would have to be, wouldn’t it? So that would have been right in the middle of when Morgoth and Gallad were waging war on each other.”

“The dream,” I said.

“Yes, the dream,” he whispered.

“When time was frozen on Meridian, the spirits of those who lived there went wandering lost in Sheol,” Mark said. “Aaron, Peter and I heard their voices when we passed through on the way to confront Morgoth. I wonder, now, if the same would have applied to the spirit of an unborn child? I suppose it would, but what would it be like?”

“The Delphinidae say an unborn child is like an empty book, waiting for life’s experiences to be written into it,” Damon said.

“Exactly,” I said. “Now here’s my theory. It’s a bit of a long shot, but everything seems to fit. Halliday was going on about how Jason’s heritage would give him a lifespan of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years, and he said some of the ancient Barefooters, despairing of such a long life, chose to go through the portals into Sheol and lose themselves in its timeless darkness. But everything Halliday said had a double meaning. He was playing games with us. He said that stuff to Jason but really it was intended for me to hear. It was one of the clues in his puzzle. Because, don’t you see, it all fits. One of those lost Barefooters, wandering about in Sheol, stumbles upon the spirit of an unborn child, and either accidentally or deliberately imprints a part of himself on that empty book.”

“That’s a pretty long bow you’re drawing there, Chris,” Mark said.

“But he’s right, absolutely right,” Damon whispered. He had that far-away dreamy look on his face again.

“One of the first things Halliday said to us was that he originally went to Earth to check out reports of autothermia in an Aboriginal tribe,” I said. “Your mob, Mark, the Emu people. You see, tracking down autothermics is his job, or maybe just his hobby. Somehow he gets wind that Damon is autothermic, in fact the only autothermic Elf ever in the history of the universe, and starts doing some digging. He figures some of it out from Damon’s birth date, but he can’t go any further for some reason. Maybe he can’t approach Damon and get close enough to him without arousing suspicion, I don’t know. So he concocts this strange story about Mark’s autothermic DNA regenerating itself in order to lure us to him and then, through Cloe, he leads me to Damon, knowing he’ll probably open up to another boy his own age. Of course I, being intimately familiar with the peculiarities of autothermics and also of great insight and intelligence, would be expected to solve his little puzzle and lead him, to where?”

“Great insight and intelligence?” Mark said with a chuckle. Damon also started laughing and then couldn’t stop himself. It was like *‘let me be frank’* all over again. Could even that have been another of Halliday’s double-meanings? Or maybe he was just testing my crazy sense of humour.

It was the first time I’d heard Damon really laugh and it made me realise what a terrible burden had just been lifted from his shoulders. For all his thirteen years he’d lived with his autothermia in a society that decreed such a condition impossible for his race, making him an outcast, even in his own family. It explained his mother buying those shoes, the constant urging for him to put on a shirt, and even Cloe’s dismissive and contemptuous attitude towards him. Mark and I were probably the only real friends he’d ever had.

I put an arm around him and Mark did the same, and we sat like that, each with our own thoughts, as the stars and galaxies wheeled overhead.

There were still many unanswered questions. What did Halliday expect us to do with our new-found knowledge? Was Damon in any danger? What, ultimately, would become of him? But my insight, great as it was, failed me and eventually we returned home. Mum and Dad were sitting up waiting for us, but didn’t ask any questions we didn’t want to answer. Their insight was pretty good too when it came to things like that.

Mum had put Cloe in my bedroom and Dad had pitched the tent out the back and set up a couple of stretchers for Damon and me. It seemed like a pretty good arrangement and Damon was happy as well. We wished Mark a good night as he wandered off home and then we too retired for the night.

I was woken by the noise of the tent door being opened and I looked up to see Mark poking his head through.

“Is it morning already?” I asked in a voice that still sounded half asleep.

“It’s well on the way to becoming afternoon,” he said.

Damon sat up, rubbing his eyes, and then looked at Mark and smiled.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Mark said, now speaking to him, “but I just had to tell Lorina what we spoke of last night. She’d like to talk with you, if that’s okay.”

“Yes, of course, but I think it might be best if we go outside and perhaps sit under the shade of that tree in the corner of the yard. It’s getting a little too hot in here for me.”

Lorina joined us as we sat down on the grass beneath the huge banksia tree that adorned our back yard. Her eyes were fixed on Damon and on her face was a look I could only describe as awe. She then spoke to him in what I’ll call High Elvish, the dialect Mark always refers to as temple-talk. She

said, as best I can translate it, “By your leave, Highness, I would touch your mind.”

“Your touch is welcomed,” Damon replied in that same tongue.

At the word *highness* I shot a glance at Mark, but his eyes were fixed on Damon and across his face was a smile of great satisfaction. I turned back as Lorina gently placed her hand on Damon’s forehead.

I saw Mum and Dad approaching out the corner of my eye and raised my hand to stop them. They complied, but when I turned towards them I saw the same look of awe on Mum’s face. Just when I thought I had it all figured out, events had suddenly gotten away from me again and I was lost in confusion.

Lorina lowered her hand and Damon looked up into her eyes and smiled. She then turned to my parents and waved them over to join us.

“What’s happening?” Dad asked.

“To answer that I must tell you a story,” Lorina said. “It’s the history of the Elves as passed down from mother to daughter since the time of our beginning.

“The first shipload of settlers to come to Bluehaven from Meridian included amongst their number a boy named Damien and his twin sister Lorna. From the ship’s manifest, copies of which are still held in the archives on Bluehaven, it’s known they were eight years old when they left Meridian, and as their journey at sublight speed took five years, they’d have been thirteen when they arrived. The same age as Chris and Damon are now.

“While their parents were busy establishing the colony the two children spent most of their time fishing and swimming in the warm sea. The Dolphins, being inquisitive by nature, came to observe these newcomers and within a few months were even catching fish for them. This was a good thing for the settlers, for apart from birds and insects there were no other land animals and fish therefore formed a major part of their diet.

“One day the children were caught in a rip and swept out to sea. The Dolphins came to their rescue and in the heat of the moment one of them spoke soothing words to them to ease their panic. After that, well the Dolphins couldn’t keep their sentience a secret any longer, so they began telling the children all about themselves and their world. Now I used the words ‘spoke’ and ‘tell’ but of course all Dolphin speech is telepathic.

“In return the children told the Dolphins all about life on Meridian and about the ships that had brought them to their world. They were fascinated as, being aquatic mammals, technology of any kind was beyond their reach.

“The years passed and the children grew towards adulthood. It was then that the Dolphins decided to offer them each a gift. To Lorna, who had

expressed a wish to learn more from them and to teach others in the ways of the Dolphins, they gave the power of empathy and communication skills equal to their own. This ability has been passed down from generation to generation and today every Elf carries a little of her gift. For Damien, who wanted to be an explorer of the universe, their gift was autothermia, which allowed his body to draw energy from subspace and gave him, amongst other things, almost unlimited lifespan, freedom from disease and an ability to heal others who were sick or injured.

“Both Lorna and Damien were overjoyed with their gifts and immediately put them to use. Lorna established the Order of the Delphinidae and many scholars were drawn to Bluehaven to receive the teachings of the Dolphins. Damien ventured into Sheol, a realm the Dolphins had discovered but were afraid to enter, and mapped its dark passageways and caverns for them. With his help, they found portals into many other worlds and colonised oceans far and wide.

“Then the wars came. The Delphinidae closed the spaceports and turned inwards, but Damien returned to Meridian where he worked night and day aiding the casualties of the conflict. Word soon spread of his abilities and before long he was taken by the military and handed over to their microbiologists to uncover his secret. His autothermic DNA was dissected, mapped and ultimately made into a virus that could be injected into soldiers, giving them superhuman powers. He was devastated by what had been done, but eventually managed to escape and return to Bluehaven where the Delphinidae gave him sanctuary.

“The military’s gains were short-lived, for the soldiers who had been given the autothermia virus soon died a terrible death. Their children, however, not only survived but thrived and became the race of Barefooters. Being almost immortal and indestructible, they quickly brought an end to the wars and enforced a peace that lasted five thousand years. Damien, relieved now that his gift was bringing peace instead of conflict, emerged from hiding and became a great teacher at the Delphinidae temple. There he established a hospice, and the frail, sick and despondent came from throughout the galaxy seeking his healing and guidance which he gave freely and without favour or prejudice.

“Thousands of years passed, and eventually the temptations of absolute power corrupted the ruling Barefooters. A young Barefooter named Morgoth, who was deeply disturbed by this, came to Bluehaven eager to learn the ways of enlightenment from the Delphinidae. Damien saw great potential in him and became his personal tutor. He had an insatiable appetite for knowledge and Damien took him through Sheol to other worlds where together they studied many different cultures. Using the skills he had

learned, and with Damien's blessing, he returned to Meridian and overthrew the corrupt government, installing himself as Supreme Ruler of the galaxy. But he had a weakness, a lust for power, and fell victim to the very corruption he'd sought to purge. His eldest son, Martyn, became estranged and fled to Bluehaven where he met and married Loria, daughter of the High Priestess. But Morgoth had them executed and moved the headquarters of his government to that world, taking over the Delphinidae temple. Damien, dismayed by what had become of his former pupil, fled to Meridian where he aided Morgoth's younger son Gallad and those remaining Barefooters who were loyal to him, forming a popular resistance movement. When Morgoth learned of this he unleashed a rain of fire and death on Meridian, and the village where Damien had been living was completely destroyed.

"Thus began the horrific War of the Barefooters which in its ultimate tally cost the lives of billions. Damien fell into utter despair. In his final journal entry he wrote, *'I can't abide this war any longer. I pass now into Sheol and hope those who fight may some day resolve their differences and bring a truly lasting peace to this galaxy. Should that day ever come to pass, perhaps I may return as but a humble fisherman.'* The latter day scholars believed this to be a reference to his childhood days spent fishing in the seas of Bluehaven.

"The journals of course were written in High Elvish, and the word in that language for fisherman is enderling. Now Enderling is a fairly common name amongst the Elves, a bit like Smith is here, so that's probably why nobody noticed when a humble boy named Damon Enderling showed up with all the signs of autothermia."

"Nobody except Halliday," I said.

"That's right, Chris, nobody except the mysterious Mr Halliday."

"I thought the name Enderling sounded vaguely familiar when I heard it yesterday," Mum said, "and of course you're right. Enderling means fisherman."

"So are you really the reincarnation of Damien?" Dad asked Damon.

"All my life I've sensed there was something within me that made me different from everyone else and I felt lost and alone, an outcast. It was the friendship of Chris and Mark that awakened my awareness of what I truly am. It's difficult to describe, other than as a sense of being but a part of a greater whole. I'm still Damon, not Damien, but I embody much of Damien's essence. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes, I think it does," Dad said.

Cloe came walking out of the house, saw us all gathered under the tree and said, "What's all this about?"

Maleena dashed over and spoke to her in Elvish, describing everything that had happened. As she spoke Cloe's jaw sagged lower and lower and her face turned whiter and whiter. '*Serves her right*', I thought, '*to suddenly find out that the little brother she'd treated like a leper was actually her people's holiest of holy men reborn*'.

Cloe knelt before him. "I'm sorry Damon, I didn't know. How could I know?"

"Rejoice, my beloved sister, for today is a new beginning for us all." She kissed him on the cheek and then stepped back.

Jason and Jenny came running around the side of the house.

"Hey, everyone, you won't believe what's happening!" Jason cried. "There's hundreds, maybe even thousands of dolphins frolicking in the water. You have to see it!"

We followed them down to the beach, with Mark filling them in on the morning's revelations. As we reached the shore it looked like the entire ocean was just full of dolphins.

"They are calling me," Damon said as he ran down into the water and then swam out through the breakers.

"Do you think he'll be safe?" Cloe asked.

"Yes," Lorina said. "He's receiving their blessing."

By then Billy, Julia and Peter had joined us to witness the event. We'd occasionally catch sight of Damon, surrounded by dolphins, and then he'd disappear amongst them again for a while. Other townsfolk came down to watch and before long the whole shoreline was full of onlookers.

A noise from overhead caught my attention and when I looked up I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. Descending towards us was a golden shuttle, its surface gleaming in the sunlight. It landed on the beach beside us and when the hatch opened Kevin and Lorett emerged.

"So this is what it was all about," Kevin said as he watched Damon's head bob up again amongst the dolphins. "I never thought I'd live to see this day." They stood back and watched in silence, their eyes wide in amazement.

After a time Damon came out of the sea and, to my great surprise, ignored everyone else and ran straight up to me.

"Thanks, Chris, thanks for making all this possible. But now I'm hungry again, so do you think I could impose upon you for some lunch?"

I laughed, then put my arm around his shoulder and walked him back up the beach. When I looked round all the dolphins had gone.

My parents, the extended Collins family and our visiting Elves escorted him into the restaurant overlooking the beach and gave him a feast to remember. He sat next to me, laughing and joking and having a wonderful time. Finally he stood, raised his glass and proposed a toast.

“Much love and happiness,” he proclaimed and we all responded in kind.

As Kevin and Loretta prepared to take Damon and Cloe back home, Mark came up to Damon and said, “I hope I’m not out of line asking this, but do you think, well, Lorina and I were wondering if you’d be able to perform the ceremony at our wedding.”

“I’d be most honoured to do so,” he said. He looked up at Kevin who nodded in agreement.

“Thanks Damon,” Mark said, now blushing.

“It’s the least I can do, the very least.”

“Take care, Chris,” Damon said to me just before entering the shuttle. “We’ll meet again soon at the wedding and then after that, well I’m thinking I might begin my ministry at the new temple Mark and Lorina are building here. That’s what your Dolphins have asked me to do at any rate. Now stay happy, and don’t let anyone force you into wearing a shirt!”

With that he patted me on the back and stepped into the shuttle. I moved away as the hatch closed, and then they were gone.

So Much Love

The New Temple was a sight to behold with brightly coloured streamers adorning its towers and hordes of people milling around the grounds. Camera crews were frantically setting up their equipment in whatever vantage points they could find and on the beach below the Temple a huge pavilion was being erected, for that was where the ceremonies would be taking place. The pavilion faced the sea so the Dolphins themselves might witness the day's events.

A prelude to the afternoon's wedding but just as, if not more important, was the ordination of Damon. Wearing white knee-length shorts with gold trim, his choice of what was to become his official dress, he stood on the shore with Loretta on his right and Kevin on his left, and then the three of them walked slowly into the water and swam out to where the Dolphins were waiting.

The Blessing of the Dolphins took about ten minutes, and then they emerged from the sea and walked straight up onto the podium, salt water still running from them. I gathered this was an important part of the ceremony, signifying Damon's link to the sea. The gathered crowd hushed as Loretta stepped forward to the microphone.

"In days long ago there lived a man named Damien, who with his sister Lorna, Mother of all Elves, received the Gifts of the Delphinidae. At the height of the War of the Barefooters he left this realm in despair, promising though that if genuine peace were ever to endure he would return to us as a humble enderling, a fisherman.

"Today, a million years on, the spirit of Damien has returned in this boy, Damon Enderling, a purebred Elf of Meridian."

Damon stepped forward and I expected there to be great cheering. I'd almost brought my hands together to clap when I realised instead there was absolute silence, so I sheepishly lowered them again.

“The Dolphins have confirmed Damon’s heritage and given him their blessing. It is therefore my duty, and honour, to confer upon him the title of Brother of the Delphinidae.”

She held up a gold medallion and hung it around his neck. He bowed firstly to her, then to Kevin and finally to the assembled multitude. Kevin lowered the microphone for him.

“I, Damon, son of Roderick and Child of the Delphinidae,” he began in High Elvish, “do take up this mantle passed to me by Damien, brother of Lorna, and do swear, by witness of High Priestess Lorett, her consort Kevin and all the Delphinidae here gathered, to uphold the tradition of Damien and to serve my people, always, to the best of my ability.”

He stood still as Lorett and Kevin bowed to him.

“Behold Damon, Brother of the Delphinidae,” the crowd called as one, myself included even though I didn’t know I was supposed to say it.

Lorett and Kevin stepped back and for a few more moments Damon stood as still as a statue, facing the crowd. Then he relaxed his stance.

“I thank you for bearing witness to my ordination,” he said, now in the common speech. “There has been much said about me in recent weeks, much speculation. Let me make it quite clear to begin with that I am Damon, not Damien, and while the essence of Damien is within me, I am not he. Some have said the last thing this galaxy needs right now is another Barefooter in a position of power, and I fully agree. I am autothermic but not a Barefooter, even though my feet and upper body will always be bare. My gift is that originally given by the Dolphins, not an imitation wrought by the hands of men. As such, I do not carry the weakness that betrayed Morgoth and you need have no fear of me. I stake my life upon the oath I’ve just given and which you have witnessed.

“There is genuine peace in our galaxy now for the first time, almost, since Damien received his gift. I call upon you all, every single one of you, to maintain that peace for as long as this realm endures.”

“So we swear,” the multitude cried.

“Let there be love in your hearts, so much love that all sorrow and misery is driven away for ever,” he said and bowed.

“So much love,” the crowd chanted, and then erupted into cheering and applause.

“Please refresh yourselves,” he said once the noise of the crowd had abated somewhat, “and return here in a few hours time when I shall perform my first duty, which is to be the marriage of Mark and Lorina. Thank you.”

The crowd went wild again as he stepped down from the podium, flanked by Lorett, Kevin and numerous aides.

A light luncheon was served and then I was escorted to the Shrine of Loria where Mark, Lorina and their parents were gathered in preparation for the ceremony.

There had been much debate in the Collins family as to whether Mark's friend Sean or I should be his Best Man. Mark considered both of us his closest friends and didn't want to be forced to choose. Some argued that Sean should be the one as he was the same age as Mark while others felt it should be me as I was Mark's Elvish guardian. In the end it was Sean who decided for them by offering to stand aside in favour of me, and in return he was invited to sit on the podium with the rest of the family.

Lorett spoke to us and made sure we all knew the order of proceedings, and took the extra precaution of giving me a card with it all printed out. Then the aides dressed Mark and me in the dark green trousers and the light green shirts that were the official uniform of the Delphinidae men. Although Damon had told me not to allow anyone to force me to wear a shirt, I felt on this occasion I should bow to custom over comfort. Besides, the Delphinidae shirts were loose-fitting and cool so I didn't really mind.

At last all was in readiness, and Mark and I were led onto the podium where Damon, wearing the same white shorts as he'd worn earlier, was standing waiting for us.

"I'll let you off this time, Chris," he whispered to me, "but next time I see you, no shirt, okay?"

I nodded and he grinned. In spite of all the pomp and ceremony surrounding him, there was still much of the thirteen-year-old boy I'd known left in him.

The crowd opened up, forming an aisle down the middle, and Lorina, escorted by her father, walked forward. She was dressed in the traditional Delphinidae long white gown while Kevin was wearing the same light and dark green as Mark and me. The crowd grew silent as they joined us on the podium. I glanced above their heads and out to the ocean where I could see hundreds of Dolphins jostling for position.

"In the name of Mother Loria let us begin," Damon said, and his voice echoed around the island and across the galaxy.

"Lorina, daughter of Lorett, and Mark, son of Jason, you have come before me this day to be joined in wedlock, and to pledge your vows before the Dolphins and the whole of the Delphinidae. Before we begin, are there any here who would speak against such a union?"

I held my breath, but there was total silence and I relaxed again. Damon turned to face Mark.

“Do you Mark, son of Jason, take this woman before you to be your lawful wife, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?”

“I do,” said Mark in a loud and confident voice. Damon turned to Lorina.

“Do you, Lorina daughter of Loretta, take this man before you to be your lawful husband, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?”

“I do,” said Lorina. Damon then turned to me.

“The rings please Chris.” I reached into my pocket and for just a moment I was sure it was empty, but my fingers found the two rings and closed around them. I handed them to Damon who then handed one to Mark and the other to Lorina.

Mark placed the ring on Lorina’s finger and said, “With this ring I wed thee, Lorina.”

Lorina then placed the other ring on Mark’s finger and said, “With this ring I wed thee, Mark.”

Then they kissed.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Damon said and the crowd erupted with cheering and applause. He held up Mark and Lorina’s hands in his and the three of them bowed.

As the sun’s last rays of light spread across the beach, Mark and Lorina walked down to the water’s edge, removed their clothing and swam out to where the Dolphins were waiting for them, and their union was blessed. When they returned to the sand, aides wrapped towels around them and escorted them back to the Shrine where the formal documentation of their marriage was completed. The rest of us remained on the beach as temple staff brought out refreshments. I wandered amongst the crowd, seeking out any familiar faces, but then when I turned my heart sank into the pit of my stomach.

Standing not ten metres away was Frank Halliday and with him, talking to him, was Mark’s great-grandfather, Tom Collins. I simply couldn’t believe Tom would even give the time of day to the man who had killed his father, and yet there they were, chatting away like old friends. I slowly made my way towards them.

“Ah, here’s young Christopher,” Halliday said as he saw me approach. “You still have your head firmly attached, I’m much relieved to see.”

Tom must have seen the look on my face, for he said, “What is it, Chris?”

“The young lad here believes I murdered your father, Tom.”

“Oh, that,” Tom said and smiled. I was stunned and confused. “Perhaps you should stop teasing the boy and tell him what really happened, Frank.”

“Oh very well then, if you insist,” Halliday said with a chuckle. He closed his eyes for a moment as he collected his thoughts, and then recalled that fateful day almost ninety years ago.

“I was in my office going through the monthly sales reports when John Collins knocked on my door. I waved him in while I checked off the last of the figures, and only when I looked up at him did I see the worried expression on his face.

‘What’s up John?’ I asked him.

‘There’s a boy at school who’s become close friends with Tom. He goes by the name of Andrew Schilling although his real name was a bit different to that. He said he was a refugee from Latvia, but the accent he had, and which I might add has now totally disappeared, was nothing like that of the new fellow, Boscovich. I’m worried Frank.’

I sat back with my hands behind my head, thinking. This was going to be difficult.

‘You’re right, Andrew Schilling isn’t Latvian,’ I eventually said. ‘Look, there are things happening here, things I am not at liberty to discuss, and your son is, or perhaps will be, a key player. I think Schilling has been planted more as an observer than as any real threat to your son, and it would be most unwise to expose his real identity just now, for to do so would have unpredictable and dangerous consequences.

‘I know this is hard for you, John, but for now I want you to just play along with Schilling. Don’t let him know you suspect anything.’

‘But I already told Tom of my concerns.’

‘That’s unfortunate, but look, tell Tom you were mistaken and that everything’s sweet. Okay?’

‘I guess so,’ he said and stood up to leave.

As he was walking out the door I said, ‘Trust me, John. It’s for the best.’

He turned his head back towards me but kept walking, right into the path of a heavily laden fork-lift. He died instantly.’

“In a way it was my fault,” Halliday said softly. “If I hadn’t distracted him, made him turn his head, but no, accidents happen and that truly was an accident.”

“I’m so sorry for jumping to conclusions,” I said, now feeling like an absolute goose. “I guess my insight isn’t as good as I thought it was. But why didn’t you tell me straight away?”

“Come now, you have to let an old man have a bit of fun occasionally, and it was quite amusing really, watching you squirm.”

“But why all the subterfuge in the first place? Why bring Jason and me all the way out here with that story about Mark being in danger?”

“Think about it Chris, put yourself in my position. I’m an archivist at the Central Library on Meridian and my life’s work has been tracking down descendents of the Barefooters, purely for historical interest you understand. Can you imagine my surprise when I discovered my Elvish kitchen hand had a brother who was showing all the classic signs of autothermia? I went back through the records, trying to figure out how that could be since there were no Elves amongst the Barefooters, and then his name gave me the clue I was looking for. It seemed incredible but I had no doubt this Damon Enderling was somehow tied to the ancient and legendary Damien. I also knew the boy himself was quite unaware of this. There was no way I could approach him directly, so I spent weeks and months trying to figure out how I could get someone close enough to open him up and expose that essence within him. Then quite unexpectedly I thought of you.

“You Chris, were about the same age as him, of Elvish descent and also intimately familiar with the characteristics of autothermia. You were perfect for the job. But I couldn’t just come right out and say, ‘*Chris, there’s this kid who I think has the spirit of the Delphinidae’s holiest man locked up inside him, and I want you to go and become his best friend and release the essence within him*’. It wouldn’t have worked. The moment you saw him you’d have been overawed and he’d have either taken you for a fool or thought someone was having a go at him. No, I had to play it the way I did, and you must at least give me some credit, Chris, because it worked.”

“Okay, I guess you’re right,” I conceded.

“I gave you plenty of clues anyway.”

“Yes, you did,” I admitted, now feeling a bit better. “Anyway, Damon’s now a fully ordained Great One so in the end it was all for the best.”

“Yes, it’s all turned out for the best. No hard feelings?” he said as he offered me his hand.

“No hard feelings,” I said and shook hands with him.

The lights dimmed and the spotlights over the podium came on. As I rose and stepped up to the microphone the crowds of people before me fell silent. I turned my head back towards Mark.

“Hello Markie,” I said and he grimaced.

“Did you see that everyone? He absolutely loathes it when I call him that. So a word of advice, Lorina, if you value your life don’t ever call your husband *Markie*.”

“Thank you Chris, I’ll remember that.”

“Calling him Markie aside, now everyone who knows Mark will agree with me when I describe him as an easy-going, cheerful, caring, loving, honest, brave and dependable young man. A bit dull-witted at times, perhaps, but hey, nobody’s perfect. But, as someone told me not so long ago, everyone has at least one skeleton in their closet, something they hope no-one will ever find out about. Mark is no exception.”

This brought a mixture of cheering from those who actually knew Mark and stunned faces from those who didn’t.

“It happened when he was fifteen years old.” Mark, now aware of the event I was about to relate, turned bright red and covered his face with his hands, and this brought more cheering and laughter, particularly from Sean.

“It had been raining non-stop for a week and everyone’s nerves were on edge. Jason was away on business and Jenny had been having an awful day at work. There was a new research assistant who just wasn’t up to the job and she’d had to let him go. He thought he was being victimised and it turned pretty ugly from all accounts. Mark had also had a miserable day at school, with his mathematics teacher threatening to hit him over the head with the textbook if he’d thought there was any chance it would knock some sense into him. He’d walked home in the pouring rain and then came straight into the kitchen, leaving a trail of muddy footprints right across the floor. For Jenny that was it. She tore into him using language that would make a sailor blush, while Mark just stood there in abject misery with a pool of muddy water spreading out around him. He then stalked off to his room, threw a random assortment of things into his backpack, and stormed out of the house vowing never to return.

“Jenny tried calling Jason but couldn’t get through, so instead she called my father. He told her not to worry, that Mark just needed to let off steam and would be back when he was ready. Meanwhile Mark, totally consumed by his emotions, just kept walking until he finally looked up and discovered he was in Noosa Heads, almost twenty kilometres from home. Now I don’t know anyone else who could walk that distance in bare feet, on the gravel shoulder of the road and in the pouring rain, without being aware that he was even walking, but Mark did. He was too scared and embarrassed to call his mother so in the end he rang my father instead. Without saying anything, Dad pulled me out of bed, put me in the car and drove us off to collect him. We found him standing in the rain on the side of the road and looking like a drowned rat. Dad dried him off with the towel he’d had the foresight to bring and bundled him into the car. Mark pleaded with him not to tell his mother what he’d done, and in return Dad said that while he wouldn’t lie for him, he wouldn’t say anything if he wasn’t asked.

“Anyway Jenny was so overjoyed to have him back she didn’t ask any questions. Dad made Mark promise he’d never do anything like that again, and got Jenny to promise she wouldn’t take out her frustrations on her son, and that was it.”

“Is that all?” someone in the crowd yelled, obviously expecting something a lot more raunchy.

“Well, yes. Apart from that, what you see with Mark is pretty much what you get. I’m sure Lorina will have no trouble with him at all, just as long as she doesn’t call him Markie or let him go off walking in the rain. So anyway, with that, please be upstanding and raise your glasses to the bride and groom.”

“The bride and groom,” everyone cheered and drank their toast. I sat down and Mark stepped forward.

“Thank you Chris. For a moment I thought you were going to tell about the time I, no, never mind. Anyway they say revenge is a dish that is best served cold, so just you wait till your own wedding.”

There was some clapping and laughter from the crowd and I blushed.

“I have been truly blessed with the most wonderful parents a boy could ever hope to have,” he said. “Up until the age of seven I was extremely autothermic and had other psychic powers I’m sure they must have found quite alarming. Then they had to wait behind as I went off with Peter and Aaron to face Morgoth, and having made it through that ordeal they then had to do it all over again ten years later. That neither of them has had a nervous breakdown because of me is something they should be proud of.

“On my second trip away I brought back a souvenir from Bluehaven.” This caused a few chuckles. “Mum and Dad welcomed Lorina into their home and from the moment she arrived treated her as one of the family. The last four years have been such a wonderful experience for us, and I’m once more blessed to have Mum and Dad here with us today to join in the celebration of our union. A toast, then, to Jason and Jennifer.”

“To Jason and Jennifer,” the crowd cried as one. Lorina stepped forward as Mark sat down.

“I too thank Jason and Jenny for welcoming me into their family, even though I’m one of those dreadful Elves. For the Elves must be dreadful since, when I was but seven years old, the imperial guards took my father away and prepared him for execution. But for the actions of a brave little boy from a distant world, I’d now be fatherless and probably rotting away in some dungeon in the Old Temple.

“Ten years later, when the Dolphins told us Mark was returning in our time of darkness, my father thought he’d be receiving a mighty warrior, more powerful even than Morgoth had been. You can imagine his

disappointment when what he got instead was a skinny pimple-faced boy who, just for good measure, had fallen head over heels in love with his daughter. I was terribly afraid he'd execute him on the spot, but he didn't and soon came to realise what a wonderful, loving and brave person Mark truly is. So I propose a toast to my parents, Loretta and Kevin, for welcoming him into our fold and making all this possible." She raised her glass.

"To Loretta and Kevin," came the response, and then Kevin rose and stepped forward.

"Gone are the pimples from the face of the boy who swept my daughter's heart away. Before us now is a man of great honour and stature, one who has been through more dark times and harrowing experiences than most of us would care to face in a lifetime. Yet through all that he has retained his boyish charm, sincere good nature and sense of humour. If you're in any way typical of the people of Earth, Mark, we have a great deal to learn from you. That's why we had no hesitation in agreeing with your plan to establish a Delphinidae temple and school on that world. I wish both you and my daughter the happiest and most fulfilling of lives together and assure you that, come what may, Loretta and I will always stand beside you.

"To Mark," he said, raising his glass.

"To Mark," the crowd responded, and finally Jason came forward.

"The first time I saw Lorina was in the ante-room to Morgoth's palace in the Old Temple, where she was being held by Farley. She was terrified, and with good reason, but I could see in her eyes that, if push came to shove, she'd stand and be true. Fortunately for Chris that proved to be the case as she bravely saved him from falling through the portal and into that doomed time line.

"I also saw from that very first moment the powerful love between her and my son, and that their union was truly meant to be. Having Lorina living with us while they attended university has been an absolute pleasure, and Jenny and I have learnt so much about your world and your special relationship with the Dolphins. I also welcome their decision to establish a temple in our town and it goes without saying that we'll offer them our full support and assistance. So now I formally welcome you, Lorina, into our family, and may your marriage to Mark be filled with happiness and joy forever."

"To Lorina," the crowd responded. I then stood again and returned to the front of the podium.

"I thank you, one and all, for your presence here today and on behalf of the happy couple I thank you for your well-wishes. That brings to a close the formal part of these proceedings, but I'm told a great feast has been prepared

in the courtyard and everyone is invited to move on up and enjoy the festivities.”

The partying raged until the early hours of the morning. At about midnight Mark and Lorina bid us all farewell as they boarded the *Endeavour* which would take them to their honeymoon destination. They were going to Eridani where they’d be staying in a resort on the shore of the new southern ocean. This had been a wedding gift from the Eridanian government.

Mum, Dad and I finally made it back to our room. Dad made some hot chocolate and the three of us sat on the floor, sipping in silence as the sounds of more revelling occasionally drifted in through the open window.

At length Dad stood and went into the bedroom, returning a moment later carrying a small wrapped box.

“Mark asked me to give this to you,” he said as he handed it to me.

I opened it, and inside was the heart-shaped shell the Dolphins had given Billy on the occasion of Mark’s birth.

“Mark wanted you to have it as a token of your friendship, for without you, he said, he’d have been lost long ago.”

Mum and Dad then hugged me as I held the shell close to my chest and let the tears of happiness and joy wash down my face.

Chris Smith

Immortality

“Hold still.”

“Ouch!” cried Jason as Jenny pulled a single hair from his head.

“Look honey, your first grey hair,” she said, holding the strand out to him.

Jason looked puzzled, as if such a thing was impossible, but then a broad smile erupted across his face and he laughed.

“Halliday was wrong then,” he finally said when he’d controlled his mirth. “I’m not immortal after all!”

“You’re only a half-blood, remember. The part of the Barefooter DNA that turns off the aging process must have been in the half you didn’t get.”

“It must have been, yes of course.”

He laughed again, and they kissed.

Part Ten

Full Circle

A Time That Never Was

The new students are asked to wait behind after the rest of the school moves off to their classes. Mrs Everlast, the vice principal, takes us under her wing and gives us our timetables along with a little pep talk to help us on our way. There are two others in my year, a tall, thin, anaemic-looking boy named Jim Hamilton and an attractive scantily-clad Aboriginal girl named Sarah Fields. Our first class is English and the three of us make our way through the twisting corridors to the classroom.

Jim, who's in front, knocks on the door and our teacher, Mr Fitzwilliam, comes out to meet us. He's a fat, balding man with a jovial face that gives me the impression he enjoys laughing a lot, and he beckons us into the room.

"Everyone, please welcome three new fellow sufferers," he says, taking our forms from us. "Class, meet James Hamilton, Sarah Fields and Peter Thorpe. James, Sarah, Peter, meet your cellmates, I mean classmates."

There's gentle applause from the group of about 25 students.

"James, or do you prefer Jim?" he asks.

"Um, Jim actually," Jim Hamilton squeaks and then coughs.

"Okay, Jim Actually, you can sit next to David, second row across on the right." David waves his hand and Jim walks over and sits down, carefully managing not to trip over his own feet.

"Now Sarah, you can sit with Jenny, third row back in the middle," he says and Sarah goes and sits down. All the male eyes in the class follow her closely.

"Now Peter," he says to me while looking around the room for another vacant seat. "I'll put you up the back there with Matthew."

There's a deathly silence and everyone looks around to the back where a big heavily-built boy with a crew cut is sitting. He grins at me as I make my way clumsily towards him.

I woke up, my heart pounding in my chest. *'It should have been Billy sitting there at the back of the class, not Matthew'*, I thought as I shook my head to clear away the shock. I rolled over and tried to think of something completely different, but as I drifted off again the dream returned.

Mr Fitzwilliam is writing the term's booklist on the blackboard and I start copying it into my exercise book. Suddenly half the page as well as my hand are covered in ink. I look across at Matthew to see him quickly lowering his fountain pen. He raises his hand and calls out to the teacher.

"Sir, Peter seems to have had an accident with his pen."

Mr Fitzwilliam turns around and walks down to have a look at the mess in front of me. He shakes his head.

"That's not a good start to your literary career, Mr Thorpe," he says and walks over to the cupboard in the corner of the room. From within he pulls a roll of blotting paper then walks back and hands it to me.

"Try to clean up as much as you can without spreading it around too much," he says, but I notice he's eyeing the ballpoint pen in my hand. He shakes his head again as I tear off a sheet and start cleaning up. I glare at Matthew but he just shrugs his shoulders.

I manage to clean up the mess and the rest of the lesson passes uneventfully. When the bell goes we all start walking out, but as we're leaving Mr Fitzwilliam calls Matthew aside. "A word, Mr Hardcastle, if you don't mind," he says, making sure the whole class can hear. I smile.

Next up is maths and I breathe a sigh of relief when I realise Matthew is in a different class for that subject. I sit down at an empty desk at the back of the room and a few moments later Jim Hamilton comes and sits beside me.

"It looks like David and Matthew aren't in our maths class so I thought I'd sit next to you if that's okay, Peter."

"Yeah, sure Jim," I say, smiling at him. "It's a relief to get away from Matthew."

"David said he's the school bully. I'm sorry you ended up next to him in English."

"It figures. Hey, I notice that like me you're also wearing shoes and socks. Just about everyone else in this crazy school is barefoot."

"Yeah, but I never go barefoot."

"Me neither," I laugh.

'Enough', I thought, and woke up. The morning sunlight was now streaming into my room and I pulled myself out of bed, looking down at my feet just to make sure I hadn't put shoes and socks on in my sleep. I wondered if maybe I'd eaten something the night before that disagreed with me, and made a mental note to tell Billy about it when next I saw him.

* * *

It had been a year now since the wedding of Mark and Lorina, and we'd all been very busy helping them with the building of their new Delphinidae College. They decided very early in the piece to call it a college rather than a temple, as it was feared the latter may have conjured up images of hordes of strangely-dressed devotees wandering the streets and upsetting the locals. As it turned out they had received full support from the community and many of the tradesmen offered their services either free of charge or at a substantially reduced cost.

Damon had returned from Bluehaven the night before and was eager to speak to me about an idea he'd had to create a direct pathway through Sheol from the college to the Delphinidae temple on Bluehaven. He said I'd become the recognised authority on the physics of Sheol, if that was the proper term to use. I sometimes wondered about that myself, as that realm seemed to defy most of the accepted laws of physics. Anyway, I told him to call in anytime in the morning and with that thought in mind I made my way to the bathroom to prepare myself.

There was a knock on the door at ten o'clock and standing before me was a tall, slender fifteen-year-old boy flanked by two Delphinidae guards. I invited him in and asked the guards if they wished to come in as well, but they said they were required to remain outside. I took him through to the living room and sat him down on the sofa. He was wearing his official dress of white shorts with gold trim, and his shoulder-length blonde hair was neatly brushed and parted down the middle. From within him shone an intellect and spiritual radiance that was almost dazzling.

"Good morning Peter."

"It's good to see you again, Damon. Can I get you anything to eat or drink?"

"A cup of tea would go down well," he said, as I knew he would. He'd become quite addicted to tea during his time on Earth. I went out to the kitchen and returned a short time later with two steaming cups.

"Wonderful as always," he said as he took a sip. He leant back, took another sip and began.

"I've spent the last few months going through Damien's journals that have been preserved in the archives on Bluehaven and Meridian. As you know, he spent much of his early days exploring Sheol and wrote quite a lot on the nature of that realm. He figured out early in the piece that it consists

mostly of a mixture of large chambers interconnected by narrow passageways, and discovered that, even with the absence of light, it can nonetheless be readily navigated using sound. The Dolphins of course do that all the time in the ocean to locate food, so it's perfectly natural for them to apply their sonar in Sheol. With a bit of training and a lot of trial and error people can get the hang of it as well.

"Damien mapped thousands of passageways and chambers and found portals to hundreds of different worlds. I've assigned a group of scholars on Bluehaven the task of transcribing all this information into our computer systems, and I'm interested in any patterns that might emerge that would allow us to predict other portals that could exist or perhaps shortcuts between existing portals. So far this work is looking very encouraging.

"That's all well and good, but right now my main concern is trying to find a quicker and safer way to travel between Earth and Bluehaven. As you know, there are many hazards in Sheol for those who travel through there unaccompanied by the Dolphins, particularly those of Elvish descent. The other option is to use an intergalactic ship, but they are still a very scarce resource which I'm sure can be put to much better use than shuttling me back and forth between offices.

"I know you've done a lot of theoretical work on the physics of Sheol, so I guess what I'm looking for is any suggestions you may have that might offer a solution to my little problem."

I sat back and collected my thoughts for a moment.

"From a physicist's point of view, Sheol has no right to exist at all. The intra-galactic and extra-galactic subspaces form a complete and closed underpinning for the fabric of the universe and there's no need, or room, for anything like Sheol. And yet it's there, as you and I both know from personal experience. When I first began my research some ten years ago it didn't take me very long to come up against this impasse, so I did what every good physicist does when faced with a situation like this. I took a long holiday."

He looked puzzled for just a moment but then laughed.

"When I returned to work I realised I had to approach the problem from a different angle. Proving mathematically that Sheol couldn't exist was at best futile, so I started making a list of everything that was known about that realm. Things like *'Sheol cannot exist but it does, it's always dark in there, it sounds hollow, there's good breathable air in there, upon entry there's a brief sensation of intense cold and then intense heat, the spirits of the time-frozen people of Meridian resided there, Dolphins reside there and their bodies glow, physical beings can pass through carrying inanimate objects*

like clothing and interact freely with the spirits’, were the sort of things I put on my list. I pinned it up on the wall of my office and pondered it, occasionally adding more items as I or others at work thought of them.

“It was actually Mark who gave me the nudge in the right direction. He called in at work after school, as he often did to see what we were all up to, and saw the list in my office. He looked at it for a few minutes and then said something that completely blew me away. I was actually hoping he’d be here this morning as he can explain it much better than I can.”

Just at that moment there came a familiar knocking at the door.

“Speak of the devil,” Damon said and his face lit up in a wide grin. In total he’d only been on Earth for about six months and yet in no time at all had picked up all our idioms and figures of speech. I grinned back at him and yelled for Mark to come in, and a moment later he and Chris came bounding into the living room.

“Sorry we’re late,” Mark said, sounding out of breath. They’d obviously run all the way from his place. “We were helping Lorina with some stuff and I lost track of the time.”

He looked across at Damon and bowed deeply.

“Quit it, Markie,” Damon said, trying to look annoyed but quickly breaking down into uncontrollable laughter. Mark, Chris and I looked at each other and then fell about laughing as well.

I made Mark and Chris some coffee (they don’t like tea) and then once we were all settled down I returned to the subject at hand.

“I was just telling Damon about the famous *Properties of Sheol* list I had pinned on the wall at work, and how you’d given me the clue I needed to solve the paradox.” Mark blushed.

“It wasn’t such a big deal,” he said. “Anyone who wasn’t a physicist probably would have seen it right away.”

Damon and I glared at him, urging him to get on with it.

“Physicists see the universe as just matter and energy, but as a philosopher I know that’s not the whole story. What the universe is really about is life and consciousness, and that requires a sort of spiritual dimension as well. That dimension, for want of a better name, is Sheol. Its passageways link up all the worlds where sentient life exists, and I believe somewhere in there is the ultimate passageway to what lies beyond this realm. Sheol presents itself to us as a physical manifestation because that’s how our minds work, but really there’s nothing physically there at all. When we pass through a portal, our bodies are actually travelling through subspace in a form of suspended animation, while our spirits enter Sheol. The cold and heat phenomenon is simply the effect we feel when our spirits become detached from our bodies. We think we’re breathing air in there, but that’s

just because our minds are conditioned to doing that. We feel solid ground under our feet whereas the Dolphins think they're swimming in water. It all fits, you see."

"Yes, I see," Damon said. "Damien always believed Sheol to be some sort of physical place. He often described it as a network of caves inside the core of the universe, but that analogy never really worked when you got right down to the nitty gritty. Now I can see why."

"When we travel through subspace in a ship," I said, "it provides us with an environment of air and light and insulates us from what's outside. If any living thing were to go unprotected into subspace, the chemical reactions that make up the physical side of life would simply stop. When the organism comes back out into realspace the reactions start up again as if nothing had happened. So what a portal into Sheol does, is allow our bodies to directly enter subspace while our spirits wander through Sheol. The spirit essentially drags the body along behind it until both emerge through another portal. It turns out this can only work if the portals open onto both sides of the subspace fold, hence my Duplicity theorem."

"So why is it always dark in there?" Chris asked.

"For the same reason there's no texture in the floor and no warmth or coolness in the air," Mark said. "Sheol is a living thing, perhaps the ultimate living thing. It's the spiritual embodiment of all life in the universe, our collective mind perhaps. Inside Sheol we're only spirits and there's no sensory input save what we pick up from other spirits. For the most part that's interpreted only as sound."

"But the Dolphins glow, and so do Jason and Damon."

"The Dolphins are strong telepaths so we can see them as well as hear them. As for Dad, he became telepathic from Gallad's genes that he picked up in that pool on Genesis, even though he does his best to hide it. And Damon of course has his heritage from Damien."

"I also noticed a feeling of timelessness in there. After a while I really had no idea how long I'd been in there."

"Yes," Damon said. "Damien also reported that, saying you never feel hungry or need to go to the bathroom in there."

"Exactly," I said. "When the mind is disconnected from the body it quickly loses all sense of time. Also the constant darkness means there's no pattern of night and day to help us keep track of time."

"I see," Chris said. "So what are the monsters in there, the ogres as Mark calls them?"

"Damien reckoned they were the original inhabitants of Sheol," Damon said. "Perhaps they came from some ancient world that no longer exists. Anyway they didn't seem to mind the Dolphins but for some reason they

resented the Elves coming into their domain. We and the Dolphins have tried talking to them but without success. They can devour our spirits and are not to be treated lightly.”

“Which brings us back to Damon’s need for a safe passage,” I said. “I have an idea that’s starting to take shape. Damon, are you able to touch Jason’s mind telepathically?”

“I’ve never tried, but I’ll give it a go,” he said and closed his eyes.

A few moments later the telephone rang. It was Jason.

“Damon just spoke up inside my head and told me to call you. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine, we’re just trying an experiment. Would you be able to come around here?”

“Get him to bring some pizza for lunch,” Mark said.

“I guess you heard that. Well there’s me, Mark and Chris - *Damon, are you eating today?* - Damon said he’d have some - *what about your guards?* - yes, and some for the Delphinidae guards as well. Great, see you soon.”

Whatever other attractions Coolum Beach might have, it is most assuredly blessed when it comes to gourmet pizzas. We adjourned to the back decking for lunch and even the Delphinidae guards, who as a rule don’t go much for foreign food, enjoyed their meal. While we were eating I let my idea slowly take form.

“This is what I think we should try,” I said after we’d returned to the living room. “You’ll need to construct portals into Sheol in both the college here and the temple on Bluehaven, preferably somewhere that has spiritual significance. If I may be so bold, I would suggest the shrines to Loria and the Dolphins would be ideal places. Then ask the Dolphins of both worlds to aid us by concentrating their thoughts on creating a direct link between the two portals. Finally, we put Damon at one end and Jason at the other and they try to connect their minds as soon as the portals are opened. Since Sheol exists as a sort of collective consciousness, I’m hoping that with enough thought-power we can make it grow another passageway.”

“I think that could work,” Damon said as he pondered my suggestion.

“I guess it’s worth a go,” Mark said. “I don’t know what our chances are of success, but I suppose there’s no harm in trying.”

I turned to Jason and for just a moment caught a worried expression on his face.

“What is it, Jase?”

“Um, nothing really. It’s just me thinking of worst case scenarios, that’s all.”

“Well, thank you for your time and your suggestions, Peter,” Damon said as he stood up and stretched. “We’ll go and set the wheels in motion now I think.”

I escorted them to the door and the guards snapped to attention as Damon stepped out. “Thanks again,” he said as he, Mark and Chris walked down the path and out onto the street. I waved and then turned to Jason.

“Can you hang around for a bit?”

“Sure Peter.” I led him through the house and out onto the deck where it was a bit cooler. His autothermia was as strong as it had been when he was seventeen and he was still unable to wear even the lightest of shirts, so I thought he’d appreciate the bit of sea breeze that usually came through out there.

“You have reservations about my suggestion,” I said once we’d made ourselves comfortable.

He leant back with his hands behind his head, gathering his thoughts for a moment before speaking.

“I guess I’ve always been a cautious kind of person, perhaps even overcautious. It’s just that I think we might be being a tad overconfident about Sheol. As you said, it’s a place that doesn’t lend itself to mathematical analysis, and while I’m sure you and Mark are on the right track with your theories, I fear it’s a much more complex and potentially dangerous place than any of us imagine.”

As he spoke his voice lowered and his head dropped down so that the last few words were addressed to his feet. This was just so typical of the Jason of old that I couldn’t help but smile.

“You have something of a reputation for being able to sense catastrophes in advance,” I said. “The headache you had prior to Aaron’s accident when you were boys, for example. Do you think that’s happening now?”

“I really don’t know,” he said, still speaking to his feet. “I don’t have any headaches or anything, but I just have, well, misgivings.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and he looked up into my eyes and smiled weakly.

“I have absolute faith in your judgement, Jase, and if you think there’s any risk to Damon, yourself or anyone else in this endeavour then just say the word and we’ll look for another way, even if it means getting Damon his own private intergalactic ship. I’d rather a few disappointed youngsters than, well, you know.”

“Blood on the temple floor.”

“Well I wouldn’t have put it quite so bluntly, but yes.” This brought a more substantial grin to his face.

“Now it’s my turn for confession,” I said.

“Really?”

“Back when I was fourteen, there was a time line in which my parents brought me to Narrabri and I met your father at the school there.”

He nodded.

“But there was also another version where Billy had flipped over to Eden three years earlier and I ended up being seated in class next to Matthew who was the school bully in that time line.”

“Yeah, I remember that from your story. You were dreaming of your life in that time line after you and Dad ended up trapped on Eden in the other one. It was pretty funny as I seem to recall.”

“Funny for you maybe,” I said, chuckling. “I was only aware of that time line after we’d flipped across to Eden, when in a dream I found myself lying injured on the side of a dirt road. Last night I started dreaming of that time line again, but this time going right back to my first day at school. Before last night, I’d never had any knowledge of my previous history in that time line.”

“Have you told Dad?”

“Not yet, but I will as soon as I get the chance. There was another new boy in that class, someone named Jim Hamilton, and he and I seem to be striking up the same sort of friendship as I had with your father, only in that time line he and I always wore shoes.”

“I can see why it upset you then.”

“Yes, it was very disturbing.” I told him about checking whether I might have actually put shoes on in my sleep.

“I didn’t think you owned any shoes.”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t. That dream must have really had me rattled.”

He got a good laugh from that, but then his expression turned serious again. “Let me know if it continues.”

That night the dream did indeed continue.

“What brings you to Narrabri?” Jim asks me. We’re sitting together under a tree during the lunch break.

“My father is an astrophysicist with AusScience and he’s just been transferred to the radio telescope here.”

“Cool. That must be an interesting job.”

“Yeah, I hope to do something similar when I grow up. What about you?”

“I’m an orphan. My parents were killed in an accident last year, and I’m now living with my uncle here in Narrabri.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry.” It shocks me to think of what it would be like for a boy of my age to lose his parents and I feel tears starting to well up behind my eyes. Jim puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Thanks Peter. It still hurts a lot, you know, but my uncle’s a good man and I think I’m going to like it here.”

“Where did you used to live?”

“A long way away, in a little town called Angust. I’m sure you’ve never heard of it.”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Angust? I woke with a start. Surely that couldn’t be what he’d really said, if this dream was indeed a replay of what took place in that time line. For Angust was the town on Eridani where Elissi’s parents lived, and where we’d all been kidnapped after attending Todd and Elissi’s wedding.

Untangling the Web

“Jim Hamilton, now I think that name rings a bit of a bell.”

Billy walked over to the bookcase and pulled down a copy of my original journal, *The Course of History*. It was the morning after Damon’s visit and I was sitting in his living room. Jenny had let Jason sneak out from work for an hour or so and he’d joined us just as I was telling them about my dreams.

“Yes,” he said, now with the book open to chapter two, *The Barefoot School*. “In the time line where you met me at school, Jim was the other new student with you and Sarah Fields. But in the final version of reality, the one where you never came to Narrabri, there was no Jim Hamilton either, I’m sure. Sarah Fields was still there though, as a couple of years later I was dating her for a short while, and Matthew was there of course, but not Jim.”

“And that Eridanian, Andrew Schilling, he wasn’t there either, if I recall from your book,” Julia said. Billy nodded.

“Do you think Jim might have been an Eridanian as well, Peter?”

“Yes, I think perhaps he was. It all fits with him saying he came from Angust, and also he was tall with pale skin and always wore a long-sleeved shirt, jeans and shoes.”

“So tell me, what is it with Eridanians and shoes?” Julia asked. “Everyone I’ve ever seen on Eridani was barefoot, but Andrew and now this Jim person weren’t and somehow that marks them as Eridanian? I don’t get it.”

“It’s their feet,” Billy said. “The most noticeable difference between Earthling and Eridanian anatomy is the shape of their feet. Their longest toe is the middle one. So if an Eridanian is trying to pass as an Earthling then, in spite of the great discomfort it must cause them, they are forced to wear shoes.”

“That and make sure they never cut themselves,” Jason said. “Their blood turns green on contact with the air.”

A chill ran up my spine and I recoiled slightly from the shock. Jason must have sensed something through his latent telepathy for his head spun around towards me.

“Are you okay Peter?” he asked with a worried look on his face.

“Yes,” I managed to say, even though I was still quite shaken. “Something about green blood has struck an old memory somewhere, but I’m not sure what it was. Strange, because it gave me quite a shock.”

“It wasn’t the time we confronted Andrew Schilling on the beach and he hit his head on that rock, was it?” Billy asked.

“No, that was much later on. This has something to do with my time at that school, but for the life of me I can’t remember what it was.”

“I’ve just had a thought,” he said. “Remember when Elko planted that Seed of Remembrance in us so we’d remember meeting in that other time line? Well, your memory of that came back to you as a dream when you visited Narrabri with the group from the university, your *Great Telescope Tour* I think you called it.”

“That’s right,” I said, having now recovered my composure somewhat.

“The same thing’s happening again, you’re remembering another time line in your dreams. I think the green blood may be in a memory your dream hasn’t reached yet.”

“You may be right. Do you think it’s Jim’s blood that gets spilled?”

Nobody wanted to answer that question.

“You said your earliest memory until now of that time line was finding yourself injured on the side of the road,” Julia said, breaking the silence that followed. “Do you remember if Jim was still around after that time?”

I thought for a few moments and then said, “Yes, I’m sure he was. We went bushwalking together during the holidays shortly after that, doing the same circuit Billy and I did in the other time line. I think I actually mentioned that in my write-up.”

Billy flicked through the pages of the third chapter, *Poles Apart*, and eventually nodded. “You did the walk, wore all the clothes and the hiking boots, ate all the food and then were still hungry afterwards.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled as those memories came back to me.

“So Jim was alive then, right up to the point when that time line ended,” Julia said. “That means if it was his blood you saw, it can’t have been from a serious injury.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said, feeling a little easier now.

“Look, Billy and I have been thinking of going to Eridani sometime soon to visit my brother, so maybe we can ask around and see if anyone knows anything about him.”

“Elissi would have been living with her parents in Angust at around that time so she may know something,” Billy said.

“Except we’re talking about events in a time line that ended, things that now never really happened,” Jason said.

“Good point, but if Jim never came to Earth in this time line he may still be living in Angust and might have some memory of those other events.”

“I wouldn’t mind tagging along with you if you don’t mind,” I said.

“Of course not, Peter,” Julia said. “The more the merrier.”

“Actually Norrie has been hounding us to come and visit him, so maybe we’ll tag along as well,” Jason said.

“Excellent,” said Billy.

Over the course of the two weeks prior to our departure for Eridani my dream continued every night, much like episodes in a soap opera. Jim and I had started walking down to the creek after school and would spend hours skipping stones and watching ducks diving for fish, while talking about stars, galaxies and space ships. It was just like what Billy and I had been doing in another version of those days.

A week after school began Mr Fitzwilliam comes up to me in the playground and walks me away from the other students.

“I hope Matthew isn’t giving you too much of a hard time,” he says. “The last few years have been very difficult for him at home, and he does have a tendency to take out his frustrations on his classmates. I’d like you to try to become friends with him, Peter, because that more than anything else is what he needs. Would you be willing to do that?”

“I’ll try, but he sure isn’t making it very easy.”

“No, but be of stout heart, young prince. By the way, I’ve noticed you and that other new boy, the shy one, have become friends. That’s good I think. Yes, I believe it is.”

With that he turns and waddles off to accost another student, leaving me to ponder what he’d said about both Matthew and Jim.

I soon learn from the other kids what Matthew’s home difficulties are all about. Three years ago his father had suddenly started drinking, and when drunk would rave to anyone within earshot about how we were being invaded by aliens from outer space. He soon lost his job at the radio telescope and then started bashing his wife and, eventually, Matthew as well. Then six months ago Matthew’s mother had taken her own life and it was soon afterwards that he became the school bully, although nobody really blamed him.

I wondered if there was a connection between the time Matthew's father had started drinking and the car accident that had seen Tom flip across to Eden and become stranded there, and, in the time line I was dreaming of, had seen Billy follow him to that world shortly afterwards. I put it to Billy and he agreed there was almost certainly a connection.

In both of those time lines, Tom Collins, then director of the SETI project, had made contact with an Eridanian ship which, as we found out many years later, was actually crewed by Rebecca Gosling and other Barradhim operatives. In the time line Billy and I both remembered, and that I'd written about in my journal, they had attempted to use Matthew's father to gain access to the radio telescope by bullying Matthew. Perhaps in the other time line they'd tried to approach his father directly, leading to his breakdown.

That then raised the question of how Jim Hamilton fitted into this picture. Was he one of the Barradhim? I feared that in all likelihood he was.

Meanwhile the dreams continued, and I gave Billy, Julia and Jason a daily update as the story unfolded.

"I used to go barefoot all the time," I'm saying to Jim, "but a couple of years ago I went to an agricultural show in Brisbane and, well, things starting getting weird after that. I helped a lost Aboriginal boy there that day, but afterwards a really awful feeling came over me, like there were monsters lurking around every corner just waiting to jump out at me. Then a few months later I had a terrible nightmare. There was a big fat man with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and half his teeth missing, and he was chasing me and yelling at me to stop, and I couldn't get away. I woke up screaming and my parents came running into my room, but I was too scared to tell them anything about it.

"The very next day our school went on an excursion to the museum. A group of about six of us became separated from the rest of the class and I was the only barefoot one amongst them. We were looking intently at a display of space memorabilia when I heard a man say, 'that's him, the one with the long hair and bare feet'. I turned around and saw him, the fat man with the cigarette, together with two other vicious-looking men. I started running but caught my toe on the corner of a table and almost broke it. I hobbled down the corridor as the man ran towards me, then ducked into a stairwell and almost fell down the stairs. I could hear his shoes pounding above my head but I kept going down, my foot now hurting like mad every time I took a step.

"There was a door on my left and I swung myself through it, coming out into the lobby area. Immediately ahead of me were the rest of my class and I

half-hobbled, half-ran in amongst them. I peered around the shoulder of another boy and saw the fat man come out the door, still with his cigarette hanging in the corner of his mouth. He looked around but couldn't see me, then swore and disappeared back into the stairwell.

"After that I had my hair cut short and started wearing shoes all the time, and gradually my fears subsided. But even now if I so much as think about going outside barefoot my stomach cramps up."

Billy was fascinated. He reminded me that we'd seen the fat man with the cigarette at the agricultural show, when Elko had pulled us aside into the so-called land of nightmares, in order for him to plant the Seed of Remembrance into us. That was the moment when the flow of time had first split and the other time lines had begun. He fished out a copy of *Barefoot Roots* and quickly found his description of the cigarette man in the fourth chapter, *A Chance Meeting*. He passed the book around to each of us.

"This of course raises another mystery," Jason said. "Just who was that man?"

"One of Barrad's people, perhaps?" Billy pondered.

"Maybe we should just ask Barrad," Jenny said.

"Barrad doesn't think he was one of his men," I said after concluding the call to Genesis. "He said the smoking of cigarettes was something only Earthlings did and he'd never employed anyone from that world. He told me he'd ask around to see if any of his people had ever come across someone matching that description, and would get back to me if anything turned up.

"I also asked him if he'd ever employed a young Eridanian who went by the name of Jim Hamilton. He said he wasn't sure as he had many Eridanians working for him then, but the name wasn't familiar. When I told him what Jim's age would have been at the time, he said it was more likely he'd have been the son of one of his operatives. He said Andushin had started off with him that way."

"I must admit a similar thought had crossed my mind," Billy said.

* * *

A week later we were on board a subspace cruiser bound for Eridani. Along the way Billy, with a lot of prompting from Julia, told us of his brief romantic interlude with Sarah Fields.

"Star Trek 6, *The Undiscovered Country*, had opened in the local cinema and I found myself sitting next to Sarah when I went to see it. Afterwards

she said how much she'd enjoyed it and how she'd always been a great Star Trek fan, and we walked home barefoot together in the light misty rain that was falling at the time. She told me how she admired me for never wearing anything other than board shorts and how she also loved going barefoot everywhere. When we reached her house we agreed to go for a bit of a bushwalk the next day, and I thought all my Christmases had come at once.

"The walk was nice and along the way we talked about the Star Trek series and movies. It soon became apparent, though, that whereas I was totally rapt in the physics of warp drives and transporters, she was more interested in the physiques of the cast and admitted to having a secret crush on Leonard Nimoy."

He was silent for a little while, just staring out the window into the blackness of subspace.

"We went on a few more walks together and I think we enjoyed each other's company, but ultimately there really wasn't any chemistry between us and we just drifted apart again."

Julia took hold of his hand and kissed him gently. "You know, I'll take you over Leonard Nimoy any day."

Todd, Elissi and Norrie met us at the space port and drove us to Angust. Elissi's parents had died some years back and her brother, Norrie's father, now occupied their house. We'd been invited to stay there as long as we needed to.

Along the way I filled them in on the dreams that had led to me being here. Elissi asked me to describe Jim to her and I did the best I could, but she said just about any Eridanian boy could fit my description.

"Did he have any distinguishing features, a scar perhaps?"

"No, I don't think so," I said, now struggling to remember if there was anything like that.

"Well we do have good records of the people from Angust who were involved with the Barradhim. Many came forward after Barrad rolled over and are now well respected members of the community, so perhaps that will narrow our search a bit. It's also likely that his real name will sound similar to his adopted Earth name, like Andushin used the name Andrew Schilling."

"Good point," Todd said. "There's much less chance of a slip up that way, particularly with children."

The road we were following began to wind its way through the range of hills that separate the space port from the town. The countryside was green and lush as it always is in this part of Eridani. With no seasons on this world, the climate is very stable and the rainfall regular and consistent.

We passed very little other traffic on the road as Eridanians by and large don't travel much and mostly stay within walking or cycling distance of home. That, Elissi had said earlier, made our chances of finding Jim so much better than if he'd lived somewhere like Earth where people are constantly moving about. She'd often said Earthlings were inflicted with an insatiable and incurable wanderlust, and she was probably right.

"So how's everything been going here?" Jason asked Todd after a pause in conversation.

"Very well thanks, Jase. Elissi and I are enjoying our retirement in the new village of Renwick on the shore of the southern ocean. Most of the population have come from the old southern enclaves and we're doing what we can to help them along. Not that they need a great deal of help, though, as you'll see when we take you there later. These are good times at last for the southern folk."

"We've been following all the news of Mark's deeds in that other galaxy," Elissi said. "We met him and his lovely wife when they were honeymooning here last year and they had some grand tales to tell. I'm surprised you and Jenny aren't nervous wrecks by now."

"Who says we're not," Jenny said.

"Well you've all been pretty heroic, anyhow. Maybe we should give you a proper Eridanian award ceremony."

"There's no way I'm going to stand naked in front of the whole galaxy," Jenny said.

"It's not that bad, really," Norrie said. She laughed, but not very convincingly.

We came over a rise and there before us was the town of Angust, lying snugly in its broad valley and surrounded by rich farmland. From the hills to the south the river wound its way through the centre of the main business district, and surrounding it on each side were the leafy residential areas. Memories of my last visit over thirty years ago came flooding back to me as if it were only yesterday.

Before long we'd arrived at the house with the big tree out the front. We were met by Elissi's brother Rendel and his wife Anthia, who quickly invited us inside and made us comfortable. Soon Norrie and Jason went out the back to discuss old times while the rest of us sat around nibbling biscuits and tried to come up with a good starting point for our search.

"It's very much a long shot he'd even still be living here after all these years," I observed.

“I’m not so sure I agree, Peter,” Rendel said. “You’d be surprised how many of the old folk in this town were actually born here, and many are still living in the same house they grew up in, myself included of course.”

“Let’s hope in Jim’s case you’re right and his time on Earth didn’t contaminate him with our wanderlust.”

Elissi giggled and I was sure it was the first time I’d ever heard her laugh. ‘*So Eridanians do have a sense of humour after all*’, I mused.

The next morning saw us beginning our search in the library. We were all gathered around Elissi as she sat at the computer terminal and methodically went through the records of former Barradhim agents, taking note of any who had children of about Jim’s age. I’d been hoping one of them would have popped up with a similar-sounding name to his, but none did. Nonetheless she collected the names and then went to the town directory page and found addresses for those who were still listed here. By the end of the search we had eight people on our list.

“Even if Jim’s not one of them, someone else may know of him,” she said, trying to keep our spirits up.

The first house we visited belonged to an elderly couple who freely admitted that their parents had been members of the Barradhim. They hastened to add they’d been just administrative people, office staff, and had never actually gone about killing or torturing anyone. They insisted on us coming in for some tea, and after telling us their life story regretted that, no, they hadn’t known anyone with a name anything like Jim Hamilton. It was going to be a long day.

At the second house we endured much the same ritual, and ultimately with much the same result. Likewise at the third house. Thankfully the fourth house was empty so we adjourned for lunch down by the river. It was a warm and sunny day and we sat under the shade of the trees along the water’s edge, watching in wonder at the antics of this world’s strange and beautiful aquatic birds.

House number five seemed a lot more promising. It was owned by a man of about the right age whose name was Jameed but was known to all and sundry as Jimmy. He’d never been to Earth, though, and had never even heard of the place. He’d been an accountant with the Barradhim and afterwards had joined the taxation department. It figured.

The remaining three houses had been sublet to families unrelated to the owners and, apart from offering us more nourishment, were as unproductive as all the others. On the off chance we returned to house number four but it was still unoccupied. The sun was sinking low and so were our spirits.

We arrived back at Rendel and Anthia's place late in the afternoon, having eaten far too much cake and biscuits and drunken way too many cups of tea. The line outside the bathroom was long and excruciatingly slow.

As dusk settled over the town I stood out the front of the house with Billy, pondering whether there was really much point in trying to continue our search here.

As we spoke I noticed an old man walking slowly down the road, and as he approached he waved and we waved back to him. He was about to turn away from us and back to the street when he decided he might just take a closer look, and beckoned us over to him.

"You're Peter Thorpe, are you not?" he suddenly said in perfect English.

I nodded, unable to speak.

"I'm sure you won't remember me, but I once knew you, or at least I did in a time that's long since faded away except in my dreams of late," he said.

"My name's Jim Hamilton."

Jim Hamilton

The old man made himself comfortable on the sofa as Anthia brought him a steaming cup of Eridanian tea.

“It’s been a long time, Peter, a very long time,” he said at last.

“Indeed it has, Jim.”

I told him about the dreams I’d been having and how I’d come to Angust in the hope of finding him. “I was hoping you might be able to tell us how you came to be on Earth back then, if you don’t mind of course.”

“Not at all,” he said, and paused for a few moments before beginning his tale.

“I was born here in Angust, although my parents’ house was on the other side of the river in what was the poorer part of town in those days. They were both customs agents and worked at the space port, inspecting cargo ships mostly that came in from around the galaxy. Sometimes during the school holidays they’d take me with them and I’d sit totally enthralled watching the big ships coming and going while they went about their work.

“I had a happy and simple childhood, but when I was about ten years old we had a visitor late one night, a tall and rather elderly man. My parents said he was the head of an order to which they belonged, but it was the first time they’d ever mentioned any such thing to me. I tried asking them about it but they told me I was too young to understand.”

Elissi shook her head and frowned, but Jim either didn’t see her or ignored her.

“He came again a few months later, only he was there when I arrived home from school and was in a heated discussion with my parents for many hours. Finally I was called out into the living room and introduced to him.”

“It must have been rather daunting coming face to face with Barrad at such a young age,” Elissi said.

“Barrad? No, I think you have the wrong idea. Yes, totally wrong dear lady. The old man’s name was Elko.”

“Elko!” I cried as a great weight was lifted from my heart.

“You know of him then, Peter?”

“Elko and I were good friends for many years, up to his, his...”

“Yes, his passing came as a great shock to me too. You have my deepest sympathies, Peter.”

“I was also a member of Elko’s order at one time,” Elissi said, “although after my marriage to Todd my work took me away from any further involvement.”

“Then my deepest sympathies go to you as well,” he said.

“So what did Elko have to say to you?” I asked, now eager to hear more of his tale.

“He told me there were some very bad people travelling around the galaxy, and that my mother and father were helping him keep a lookout for them. He said if I wanted to I could come along and see what his people did and perhaps think about joining them when I was a little older. It sounded very exciting and I was eager to go with them.

“We travelled through subspace in a shuttle for a while and then, without returning to realspace, docked at a huge space station. Elko told me this was his home and workplace, and that it was suspended in subspace between a pair of twin planets. He took us in and there were all sorts of wonderful things, like swimming pools and games’ rooms, and everywhere there were lots of happy people. He introduced me to a boy and girl who were just a little older than me and they showed me around and made me feel like one of the family.

“About a year later I was down at the river when I started feeling that something strange was happening. The people around me had changed, become harsher and rougher, like I was trapped in a nightmare. Then I heard Elko calling out to me and I went to him. He said the flow of time had split and he needed to plant a Seed of Remembrance in me so that afterwards I’d be able to remember what happened in each time line. He said it was very important that I be able to do so, and then placed his hand on my forehead. A few moments later I was back where I’d been next to the river and the world had returned to normal.

“Not long after that my parents were sent to intercept a suspicious freighter that had come in from the Anteres system. Normally they’d do their customs inspections after a ship had landed but on this occasion they were required to board it while it was still in space. When they returned home they were quite badly shaken and a few hours later Elko turned up. He told us the ship’s crew had been high level Barradhim agents and

congratulated them on making the arrest, but my parents said their work was becoming too dangerous and they now wished to stand aside. After a lot more discussion Elko finally agreed to let them leave the order and that was the last we saw of him. My life since has been mostly uneventful and unremarkable. I worked in a government office for many years, and then in the political shake-up that followed the revelations about the southern hemisphere I was elected to the Eridanian Council and served there until poor health forced me to retire a couple of years ago.

“But there was once another version of reality in which those events played out quite differently. A few hours after my parents had gone off to intercept that ship, three senior people from the customs department came to my house and very gently told me there had been a malfunction with their shuttle and they’d been killed. I was devastated, naturally, and they asked me if I had any relatives nearby I could go to. Before I could answer Elko appeared and told them he’d take me into his care for the moment, and they left.”

He leant back and closed his eyes, letting his memories of that time play out once more.

“Come for a walk with me, Jim,” Elko says, and we leave the house.

“What happened?” I manage to ask between sobs.

“This will be hard on you, Jim, but I have to tell you this. It wasn’t an accident. I think there may have been a Barradhim agent within the customs organisation who sabotaged their ship, causing the engines to fail shortly after lift-off. As a result, the freighter they were going out to intercept has now disappeared back into subspace, headed in the direction of Earth. We fear this could be the beginning of some very nasty business on that world.”

“I want to help you. If what you tell me is true, then at the very least I must avenge the death of my parents, but even so there’s a wrongness here that in my heart I can’t just walk away from. Let me join your order and do whatever I can to help.”

He remains silent for several minutes as we walk along the quiet street. Usually there’d be people out and about and children playing, but today it is empty, as if in respect for my grief.

“There is a task you can do for me,” he eventually says. “It could be dangerous, I wouldn’t tell you otherwise if it were so, but the very future of the galaxy may well hang on this.”

“Go on,” I say.

“There are two boys of about your age on Earth who are carrying the spirits of two of my people who once lived on a distant planet. The heritage of one of those boys is well enough known but he’s in no real danger

provided the other is kept hidden, for those who oppose us seem content for now to just ensure those spirits are kept apart. Currently they're living in different towns and there's no immediate problem, but I'd like to have someone on standby who can provide a little extra protection for the second boy."

"What would I have to do?"

"Mostly just become friends with him, become someone he's comfortable with and can trust, and if you see or hear anything suspicious let our people know. Of course we'll provide full language and cultural training for you before you go in there."

He pulls out an envelope and from it removes a photograph which he hands to me. It shows a pleasant-looking brown-haired boy who could have been just about anyone, and I feel a stab of pain as I realise he is yet another innocent pawn in this ancient battle between great and unseen foes.

"I'll do it, for his sake." I hand the photo back, but he says I may keep it if I wish.'

"My training began almost immediately. I was placed in a group of about eight other boys and girls ranging in age from nine or ten through to late teens. They were all friendly towards me and we had lots of fun together as we studied just about every facet of your world. Several times we were taken on excursions to Earth so we could experience it first hand, and it was certainly very much different to what I'd expected. I found the wearing of shoes to be the most difficult part, but the instructors told us it was essential because our feet were shaped differently to those of the people there. We were also repeatedly warned that Earth people's blood remained red even when spilled and we were each given a small kit of dye that we could use in an emergency to cover up our own blood should any of it come into contact with the air and turn its customary green.

"We were also told that Earth's sunlight has a lot more ultraviolet in it than our own, and we'd need to keep our bodies covered as much as possible and stay out of the sun in order to avoid serious skin damage. Of course getting young boys to stay out of the sun is next to impossible, but I did eventually get used to the feel of the long-sleeved shirts and trousers that I had to wear.

"About three months into my training I was woken by the sound of shouting voices and many people running about. It was rumoured that the father of the boy Billy had been killed by a Barradhim agent. A few weeks later we heard that Billy's mother had died in a suspicious fire and then that the boy himself had disappeared without trace. Everyone was in a state of absolute panic, believing a major war with the Barradhim to be imminent,

but instead they quickly went to ground throughout the galaxy and we had three years of relative peace. Looking back I can't help but think those deaths may well have been accidents that proved to be highly embarrassing for the Barradhim responsible."

At that point Anthia brought him a fresh cup of tea and he sat quietly sipping it for several minutes. Outside the sky had darkened and night was upon us.

"Finally I was called before Elko and given my assignment on Earth," he said. "He told me that, in an unexpected quirk of fate, Peter's father had been chosen to replace Billy's father at the radio telescope where he'd worked, and that Peter would be starting school there in a few days time. I'd been given the name Jim Hamilton and enrolled with the cover story that I'd recently been orphaned and taken in by my uncle in that town. The 'uncle', although an Earthling, was actually a member of our order, and he was both my guardian and principal contact.

"On my first day at school I was immediately unsettled when I noticed that hardly any of the other students were wearing shoes. We'd been constantly told during our training that having shoes on our feet would make us inconspicuous, but now I feared the opposite might well be the case. Still, I knew the shape of my feet was sufficiently non-Earthlike that I couldn't risk being seen barefoot.

"I met you for the first time when all the new students were herded together at the front of the hall," he said, now addressing himself directly to me. "We quickly introduced ourselves and you struck me at once as the kind-hearted pleasant boy I'd always imagined you to be, and that eased my terror a little. We then went off to our first class and I was hoping we might be seated next to each other, but that wasn't to be. Instead I was placed with a boy named David while you were put up the back with that horrible boy Matthew. I was terrified Matthew might actually be a Barradhim agent, but later David told me a bit of his history and I realised he was just a plain old ordinary bully. Fortunately David and Matthew were in different classes to us in mathematics and science and you and I were able to sit together in those subjects."

"Did you know there was another version of those events in which my mother extinguished the fire and survived, and I remained with her?" Billy asked. "On the first day of school it was me sitting up the back instead of Matthew and that was when I first got to know Peter."

"I've occasionally had dreams along those lines, but I really have no recollection of any of it. Strange, don't you think?"

“Yes,” I said. “It’s the same with me only the other way round. I’ve only seen the time line you’re describing in dreams, and the early part of it only in the last few weeks.”

He glanced out the window and saw how dark it had become.

“I’m afraid I must leave you now, if you don’t mind. I’m really not supposed to leave the house, doctor’s orders you know, and my wife will be starting to panic. Come, Peter and Billy, you can walk me home and I’ll tell you a little more along the way.”

Rendel helped him to his feet and escorted the three of us to the front door.

“I live just around in the next street, so they shouldn’t have any trouble finding their way back here,” Jim said to him as we were leaving.

As soon as we were away from the house he continued his tale.

“There’s probably not a whole lot more of interest to tell. We quickly became good friends and would often hang out together down by the creek after school. Matthew’s bullying of you continued and on one occasion I tried to intervene but you told me it would be better if I didn’t. You explained about his father and how you were really trying to help him if you could. It hurt me to see him hurting you, but I knew I had to stand aside and let it run its course.

“As the weather turned cooler I felt less conspicuous in my shoes and full covering of clothing and began to feel a lot more comfortable with the others at the school. There were three boys who used to go bushwalking with us a fair bit, and I’m just trying to remember their names. Now let me see, they were Chris, Simon and, um, Gary I think the third one was. Am I right?”

“I’m not sure, as my dreams of that time line haven’t reached that part yet,” I said.

“They were the boys in our Bushcare group!” Billy said, now grinning widely.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“There was one bushwalk that only you and I were on, Peter, and I can only assume you haven’t seen it in your dreams as yet otherwise I’m sure you’d have asked me about it already. Let me see, oh yes of course, it happened only a couple of weeks before that time line ended, so you probably have a good way to go before you reach it if your dreams are in any sort of chronological order.”

We turned the corner into his street.

“I’m afraid I won’t have time to tell you about that tonight as my house is the next one down, but if you’d like to come around here tomorrow morning I’ll gladly finish my story for you.”

“That’s most kind of you, and thank you so much for all you have told us tonight,” I said. “You’ve certainly filled in a lot of the gaps for me.”

“It’s been a pleasure. Now I’d like you to meet my wife. Dornie, this is Peter Thorpe and Billy Collins from Earth.”

“You’re not that Peter Thorpe, are you?” she asked in Eridanian. “Jim’s often told me the story about his time on Earth with you, but honestly I thought he was making it all up.”

“No, I’m definitely real and it definitely happened, but in a different version of reality to this one.”

“That’s what Jim’s always said, but I’ve never really understood.”

“I’ve invited them to come around tomorrow morning so I can finish telling them my story,” Jim said.

“That will be wonderful. You’re both most welcome. Where are you staying in town?”

“We’re with Rendel and Anthia Harrish,” Billy said. “Rendel is my wife’s brother’s wife’s brother.”

She counted all the wives and brothers on her fingers and then nodded.

“Young Norrie’s folks,” she said. “He and our son are the best of friends. What a small world it is.”

“Well we’d better let you go inside,” I said. “The air is starting to turn cool.”

“Yes, the doctor would have a fit if he knew I was standing around out here at this time of night,” Jim said. “Until tomorrow then, my friends.”

They turned and walked slowly into their house and we waved as we headed back down the street.

“What an amazing man,” Billy said, and I nodded.

I fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow and my dream, perhaps sensing the urgency in the events that were already unfolding around us, skipped all the way forward to the bushwalk that Jim had alluded to.

It’s a Sunday in winter, but the day is mild and clear with no wind. In other words, a perfect day for bushwalking. Jim had come around to my place for an early lunch and then we’d set off on foot towards the woodlands south of the town. Our plan was to follow a picturesque walking trail that wound its way through the countryside before joining Haddon Lane, a dirt

road linking back onto the highway about three kilometres southeast of Narrabri.

It's now mid afternoon and we've just crossed the highest point of the trail. From the top we enjoyed a good view back towards town and away in the distance I could just make out the sunlight glinting off one of the dishes at the radio telescope. Tomorrow Dad will be back at work there, searching the skies for alien life. Little do I know there's a prime example of such standing right beside me.

We press on and before long reach the point where the trail meets Haddon Lane. The road passes through a bit of a cutting below us and I sit on the edge dangling my legs over the two metre drop while Jim goes off to relieve himself behind a tree. It's been a while since I've done any serious bushwalking and it feels like my new hiking boots have produced a blister or two, but I needed to work them in before the much longer walk Jim and I are planning for the start of the holidays in a couple of weeks. We're going to be doing the circular track that starts and ends at the summit of Mt Kaputar and from all accounts it's a beautiful three-day walk.

I hear a noise behind me and turn around, but the person standing there looking down on me isn't Jim.

"Ah, there you are," he says with a phlegmy voice and I freeze solid.

Before me is the fat man who had terrorised me in the museum two years ago, still with a burning cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. For all I know it's the same cigarette. He reaches down, grabs hold of my arm and pulls me up against him. He reeks of body odour, beer and tobacco, and the stench revives me a little.

He starts to pull me towards the bushes when I hear Jim call out from behind me. "Let go of him!"

I twist my head around to see him running towards us carrying a large tree branch in his hands. He runs straight at us and whacks the man across the shoulders with it. He instantly lets go of me, swings around and grabs hold of the end of the branch. They dance around, each trying to wrestle it from the other.

When the man has his back towards me I take a big deep breath, close my eyes and kick him as hard as I can in the shin. He cries out and loosens his grip on the branch. Jim gives an almighty tug and it comes free. The man stumbles forward onto one knee.

"Stand back, Peter," Jim says in a cool, calm voice that really scares me.

He takes a big backswing with the branch, steps forward and brings it down crashing over the man's head, dropping him onto both knees. He takes another swing and crashes it over his head again, and then again and again

and again. The man crumples to the ground but Jim keeps right on swinging.

“That’s enough, Jim,” I cry. “You’re killing him!”

But he pays me no heed and keeps swinging the branch. Bits of it are now starting to break off and one substantial piece flies back and cuts him just above the eye. Blood starts flowing freely down his face but he ignores it and swings again. There’s a sickening crunch as the remains of the branch connect with the man’s skull.

I gasp in disbelief and I’m about to turn away when something truly amazing happens. As I watch, the man’s skin and clothing begins to develop a whole lot of little cracks all over it, as if he’s a clay statue that’s just been dropped. All colour fades from him and then he collapses in upon himself in a cloud of dust. I turn to look at Jim and then I scream.

In the heat of what was happening it simply hadn’t registered any earlier, but now I see all too clearly that the blood running down his face is bright green. I take a couple of steps backward as my stomach cramps, but before I can regurgitate my lunch I take one step back too many and tumble over the edge of the road cutting.

It isn’t very steep and the ground at the bottom is fairly soft, but I hit my head pretty hard on the way down and I’m knocked out. I come around for a few moments to see Jim crouching over me checking for broken bones, but then I see the green blood again and the world turns to grey.

I wake up next to a dirt road. A utility truck has just rumbled by, leaving a cloud of dust behind it. I stand up, feeling sore and stiff all over. I look down and my jeans are dirty with a little bit of blood soaking through them where my left knee is, and it’s then I realise that my knee is stinging. As my line of sight slowly moves upwards I observe that the front of my pullover has a big hole torn in it and the exposed skin of my stomach is covered in scratches. Mum won’t be too pleased when she sees me.

I walk out onto the road and follow in the direction of the truck. My shoes are kicking up dust behind me as I shuffle along, but as I walk the stiffness gradually leaves me. I have no idea where I am or what I’ve been doing out in the bush, but from the look of me I must have taken a fall and probably hit my head.

The dirt road soon meets the highway and a conveniently-placed sign informs me that Narrabri is three kilometres to the left. I shuffle onwards.

I woke from the dream and it was morning. I quickly dressed and found the others waiting for me around the kitchen table.

“In my dream last night I saw the green blood that’s been haunting me,” I said. “It was Jim’s but like you said, Julia, it wasn’t a serious injury.”

I looked around at everyone then and finally took in all the sad and drawn faces.

“We’ve had some very bad news, Peter,” Julia said. “Jim’s wife called about half an hour ago. He suffered a brain haemorrhage in the early hours of the morning and was rushed to hospital. She said he’s unconscious but stable, although the prognosis isn’t too good from the sound of things.”

I was in shock. I sat down heavily at the table and Anthia handed me a cup of tea. I sipped it slowly.

About an hour later Dornie arrived and took us to see Jim at the hospital. He was in an intensive care bed surrounded by myriads of instruments with dials and flashing lights that meant nothing to me. The nurse told us there’d been no change in his condition.

“Jase,” Billy said softly to his son, “do you think you’d be able to do anything to help him?”

“I’ll try.” He stepped forward and took hold of Jim’s hand, then closed his eyes and grimaced in concentration.

I wondered how long it had been since Jason had used his healing gift, indeed whether he’d used it at all since helping his mother recover from her captivity on Eden all those years ago. Probably not, I thought, but I had no doubt he still had that power, as everything else he’d received from Gallad’s genes was still as strong as ever. I was quietly confident that Jim would soon be opening his eyes, good as new.

Jason released his hand and stepped back from the bed, slowly shaking his head. “I can’t reach him. I, I don’t think my touch works with Eridanians. I’m sorry.”

I moved alongside him and placed my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Jase, at least you tried.”

He looked at me and nodded grimly.

We returned to the house and sat around doing nothing for the rest of the day. Dornie called in the evening but with no further news for us, so eventually we all went to bed. That night, for the first time in weeks, I had no dreams.

Blood on the Temple Floor

The youngsters had been busy during our absence.

Damon and Lorina had returned to Bluehaven and after a very long and often heated argument with Loretta and Kevin, finally received their approval to install a portal in the temple's shrine. In the end there was a long list of conditions that had to be met, including a requirement that it not be attached in any way to the stonework. They immediately gathered a team of technical experts around them and set to work.

Mark, Chris and Aaron led the construction team at the Coolum Beach end of the project, and while they didn't have any ancient stonework to protect there were nonetheless plenty of technical challenges to keep them working late into the night. Not the least of those was the need for a real-time radio link between each end so that the opening of the portals could be coordinated. I'd have said such a link across intergalactic space was impossible, so I guess it's just as well they didn't ask me before they went ahead and built one. Aaron told me it consisted of a local subspace link to Genesis where it then connected into some 'special gizmo' the Firstborn had come up with. Whatever it was, it worked surprisingly well with only the slightest perceptible end-to-end delay.

Back on Eridani Jim Hamilton remained in a deep coma, kept alive only by machines and drugs. The doctors held out very little chance of recovery, but even so Dornie had been unwilling to allow the life support to be removed. '*Where there's life there's always hope*', she'd said to me, but deep in my heart I knew he'd gone beyond hope now.

Finally everything was in readiness, and we all gathered around the shiny new portal in the shrine at Mark and Lorina's college to see if my idea for creating a passageway to Bluehaven was going to work.

"How are you feeling, Jason?" I asked.

“Very nervous, but the forebodings are no worse than they were when we first discussed the idea. There’s no headache or anything.”

“You have the final call,” I said, placing my hand on his shoulder. He stood in silence for a while, grimacing.

“Let’s do it,” he finally said.

“Bluehaven, this is Coolum Beach,” Billy called into the radio.

“Bluehaven here,” came the voice of Damon in reply.

“We’re all set to go at this end,” Billy said.

“Likewise here. What’s the procedure?”

“We should open each portal to start with and make sure everything is stable and working correctly. Let me know when you’re happy at that end.”

As Aaron activated the portal there was a brief humming sound and the rectangular frame in front of us filled with a shimmering light. He, Mark and Chris poured over the instrumentation and soon gave Billy the thumbs up.

“The portal’s open at this end, Damon,” he said.

A few moments later Damon confirmed that their end was open and ready as well. “I’m going to hand the radio over to Kevin now.”

Jason stood in front of the glowing portal with his hands resting on the edges of the frame. He closed his eyes, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“My spirit’s entering Sheol now,” he whispered. “It’s dark, very dark. I’m all alone in here and it’s a bit scary. Lots of passageways, all empty and dark. No wait, there’s something through there. Is that you Damon? Yes, it’s Damon’s spirit, we’ve made contact.”

The shimmering light across the entrance to the portal grew brighter and then started moving inwards, forming a glowing passageway extending back into the wall.

“It’s working!” I heard Aaron say from behind me, but I was focused on the corridor between galaxies that was forming in front of me.

“Wait, there’s someone else here,” Jason said. “Peter, is that you? But how...”

Before he could finish his question his legs folded beneath him and he collapsed to the floor.

“Bluehaven here,” boomed Kevin’s voice over the radio. “Damon’s just collapsed and appears to be unconscious. What’s happening?”

“The same thing’s happened to Jason,” Billy said and then handed the microphone to me. He dashed over to his son and knelt beside him, but he appeared to be out cold. ‘*Blood on the temple floor*’, he’d said when expressing his earlier reservations, and now, metaphorically at least, he was

right. This was all my fault, and I cursed myself for not taking his misgivings more seriously.

“Should we shut down the portals?” Kevin asked.

“No, keep them open. Jason sensed someone else in there. I’m going in after him.”

I dropped the microphone and leapt through the portal. Billy saw what I was doing and followed me through into the darkness.

“Billy, are you there?” I called out to him.

“I’m right here,” he said from just behind me.

“Grab hold of my hand before we become separated.” A moment later I felt his hand link up with mine.

“Jason! Damon!” I cried out, but all I heard was the echo of my voice reverberating around in the darkness of Sheol. Billy called out as well but with the same result. Then, ever so softly, the bagpipes started.

“Can you hear that?” he whispered.

“Yes, it’s the piper. I thought he’d gone along with everyone else when Meridian was unfrozen, but apparently not.”

Gradually the bagpipes grew louder, or we’d begun to move towards them, I’m really not sure which. The tune was nothing I recognised but it was sad and mournful and made my skin crawl.

We seemed to come out of a passageway and into a large chamber, for the sound of the pipes was suddenly almost deafening and reverberating all around us. Then it stopped.

“Ah, there you are,” came a phlegmy-sounding voice from right in front of me and my heart froze.

“I think a little light might be handy, don’t you?” the voice said, and almost immediately we were surrounded by a dull orange glow. I could see we were in a huge featureless cavern with a dark passageway disappearing off behind us.

Before us stood the fat man, complete with burning cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and lying motionless on either side of him were Jason and Damon.

“Who are you? What’s going on?” I asked defiantly, although on the inside I was quaking.

“You really don’t know who I am, do you Peter.” I shook my head. He stood in silence just staring at me for a few moments, then drew in a deep breath.

“When you look in the mirror, it is me that you see! I am you, Peter!”

“I don’t understand,” I whimpered.

“I am you,” he said again but now in a much softer and calmer voice. ‘*From time to time there are momentous events that change the course of history, but what would have happened if some of those events had gone the other way?*’ Remember those words, Peter?”

“Yes.”

“The beginning of *The Course of History*,” Billy whispered.

“That’s right. The words in those chapters you called *Husks* are my voice. I’m what you became when one of your *momentous events* went the other way.”

“For the first twenty-two years of my life I was you,” he said. “I attended school in Brisbane, then we all moved to Sydney where I finished high school and went on to study science at Sydney University, from which I graduated with First Class Honours in 1995. I started on my doctorate in 1996 and my future looked rosy and bright. *The world was solid*. But then on the fifteenth of February 1997, something changed. I felt as if I’d been torn apart, or perhaps hollowed out is a better description. I lost interest in my research and soon dropped out of university. I hunted around for work, half-heartedly, but no-one would touch me and before I knew it I’d become a regular at the local hotel. Drinking eased my sorrow, so I drank.

“I was an aggressive and boisterous drunk and got into my fair share of fights. That’s how I lost most of my teeth. I spent many a night as a guest at the local lockup but was never charged with anything. Perhaps the police pitied me, or more likely they just didn’t care about one more drunk who was hell bent on self-destruction. Then one night, either in spite of the beer or because of it, I had a panic attack. I felt as if I was about to collapse in upon myself like a burst balloon. Someone thrust a cigarette into my mouth and I inhaled. The smoke drove away the fear and I inhaled some more. I was hooked.

“The years went by. I started calling myself Pedro, for it sounded more in keeping with my new persona than plain old Peter, and pretty soon everyone knew me by that name. Now and then I managed to find work for a few weeks, collecting shopping trolleys, driving fork lifts, mopping out toilets. Sometimes I thought I was getting on top of my problems, but then I’d slide back down into an ever-deepening despair.

“Then on the morning of the fourteenth of May 2001, I was sitting at my kitchen table in the rundown one bedroom unit I was living in, reading the newspaper. On page three was a story about a house fire in Brisbane in which four people had died.”

It was tragic enough in its own right, with two adults and a small boy burnt to death and another man, a relative, killed in a freak accident as he ran across the road to help. But I'd known one of the victims, the man killed crossing the road. Back when I was doing my doctorate in physics at the university, Todd Myers had been a research assistant on a special project for a few months. I remember him because he was always barefoot, as I too had been back then. Those were happy times for me when the world seemed solid and wholesome. Not like now.

“Todd Myers was the name I'd recognised, but into my mind came the burning image of a smiling Aboriginal boy. His name was Billy, and I knew then it was his absence, his loss, that was at the heart of my problems. I stood up and walked out of the house to try to clear my head.”

I need some fresh air. I put the newspaper aside and walk out the door. The warm sunny day has suddenly become cold and overcast, and the sound of my shoes against the pavement is dull and lifeless. When did I stop being a barefooter and start wearing shoes all the time? I can't remember, and that scares me.

There's no traffic in the street and no-one else about. The whole world seems deserted and the silence is boring into me. A chilling wind blows against my face, yet in spite of the cold I'm sweating profusely. About fifty metres down the road I stop as a wave of memories washes over me, of a time that never was but should have been. I stagger and fall against an iron fencepost, lost in those memories.

“In those memories I lived the life I should have had. I'd completed my studies, was awarded my doctorate and had gone to work with Billy at Narrabri where we made what would have been one of the greatest scientific discoveries of all time. It was a life that, through some cruel twist of fate, I'd been denied. Then it all passed, and I was left standing alone in that cold and empty street.”

The wave of memories is receding now. I pull myself upright against the fencepost and wipe the sweat from my brow. The street is still deserted and I start walking again. It's getting colder and I start to shiver.

I look up, and away in the distance everything is hazy and grey. It's becoming grainy too, like an old photograph.

Those memories of a time that never was are haunting me. Billy, killed in a house fire in Brisbane, and I never even met him, never knew him at all. I know now the root of my loneliness. He was supposed to have been my best

friend at school, my co-researcher in what would have been the greatest scientific discovery of all time, and in a way he was supposed to have been my twin brother. Emu and Dodo. But it all went horribly wrong, and now here I am, alone, at the end of it all.

History seems to have had a lot of trouble deciding on its course during my lifetime. Its final choice is hollow and empty, for me at any rate. All of our work, all of our dreams, all of our love, has come to nothing at the end. Maybe some day someone else, another Emu and another Dodo perhaps, will take up the challenge of subspace and make the breakthrough. Or maybe not.

The concrete pavement under my shoes feels softer now, and when I look down I see that I'm kicking up dust with every step. The cuffs of my trousers are getting covered with cement dust. When did I start wearing trousers instead of board shorts? I can't remember that either, and it scares me again.

The world is shrinking. Everything is grey and lifeless now. The concrete has turned completely to dust. I'm covered in dust. I think maybe I'm turning to dust myself. It's getting darker.

I stop walking and the darkness finally descends on me.

The orange glow surrounding us dimmed.

“But that wasn't the end. In the darkness there came to me many murmuring voices, speaking in a language I couldn't understand. There was coldness, then heat, then nothing. I walked around aimlessly but whichever way I turned there were just voices, murmuring voices. Time passed, but whether it was hours or years I couldn't tell.

“I began to see in my mind's eye a picture of time as a great river, but one whose course had split and gone, for a while, in the wrong direction. I thought if I could return to that point where the waters diverged I could set things right and make myself whole again. I grabbed hold of that thought and through sheer force of will brought it into being. The darkness around me receded into a dull predawn grey and I found myself in an empty showground surrounded by the stench of cattle.

“The sun rose bright and clear, and before long men began arriving to tend to their beasts. Someone flicked away a half-smoked cigarette and I pounced on it, suddenly aware of my craving for tobacco. I luxuriated in the smoke as more men came and went. Soon the gates were opened and crowds of people came milling through. I feasted on discarded food and washed it down with more discarded smokes.

“The day grew hot and the sky darkened. The crowd seemed to turn ugly, or maybe it was just me. Then, right in front of me, I saw myself! I was

eleven years old and sitting on the grass eating ice cream with a little Aboriginal boy, and my memories of that day came flooding back to me. This, I realised, was the moment when my river of time had first split. In my mind's eye I saw myself running out and embracing my younger self, the two of us joining and becoming one. I pushed my way through the crowd, calling out to you, but when you and Billy saw me you took fright and ran off. I tried to follow but you were quickly swallowed up by the crowd and I lost you. Then the sun came out again and I knew that my precious moment in time, when I could have put my life back on its true course, had passed. I left the showground, found a hotel and got drunk.

"I saw you again a few months later. You were with a mob of school children going into the museum. Two of my drinking mates were with me and I made up a story of how you'd robbed me when I was sleeping in the park, and together we entered the museum a safe distance behind you. We cornered you on the third floor where you'd become separated from the main group, but once again you escaped.

"I went back to my old habits of odd bits of work and much drink. Three years passed, and then I happened to see a story in the newspaper about a rash of UFO sightings over Narrabri. The reporter had interviewed the senior researcher at the AusScience telescope there, a scientist named Michael Thorpe. My father! I knew that in the life I'd known I'd never gone to Narrabri, in fact we'd all moved to Sydney at about the time this was happening, so I figured out that I had to be in a different branch of my river of time now. That gave me renewed hope so I hitched a ride to Narrabri and waited for you to show yourself. I didn't have long to wait.

"It was early afternoon on a Sunday when I saw you and a tall blonde boy walking off into the countryside, and I followed along at a safe distance. There was something that struck me as odd, though, and then I realised what it was. You were wearing shoes, something which as a fourteen-year-old I'd never done outside of school. A shiver ran up my spine and I lost all the confidence I'd had that I'd be able to merge with you and make things right again. You were an abomination, a mockery of my true self, and I knew then that I had to kill you.

"I waited for the right opportunity, and eventually the tall boy went off to take a leak and you were left alone. I snuck up behind you and grabbed you, meaning to drag you off into the bushes and strangle you before the other boy returned. But I was too slow and, armed with a heavy tree branch, he caught me from behind and attacked with a ferocity that took me totally by surprise. I fell to the ground but he kept hitting me until the darkness came and swallowed me again.

“I was back in the dark with the murmuring voices and sank into a deep despair. At one point a thought came to me that what this place needed was the sound of bagpipes playing something mournful, and before I knew it I had a set of pipes in my lap. I found the mouthpiece and started blowing, and discovered to my surprise I could actually play. After that I discovered I couldn’t stop. Time stretched out to infinity and my music swept me away into oblivion.

“Then suddenly the murmuring voices were gone. It was like when there’s a motor running but you don’t notice it until it stops. I called out but all I could hear was the echo of my own voice. Even the ghosts of this dark void had deserted me, it seemed. I played for a while but without an audience my music seemed pointless. I put aside the pipes and let my thoughts drift away.

“Eventually I began to wander around, and realised this place had structure. I guess the physicist in me wasn’t quite dead after all. I found I could navigate from the echoes of my own footfalls and gradually over time a map began to develop in my mind. I also found that in my isolation I was developing new powers. I could generate this orange light that surrounds us, and I could move objects about simply by concentrating my mind on them.

“Occasionally I saw glowing creatures that looked a little like dolphins flying around in here, but they always gave me a wide berth and our paths never crossed. There were also Neanderthal-looking ape-men and a few times they tried to attack me, but I used my new-found powers to fend them off. I found I could consume their spirits by touching them and that made me stronger still.

“So I was very much lord of my domain when these two interlopers happened along,” he said, pointing now to Jason and Damon who were still lying motionless at his feet. “They were glowing brightly with tendrils of light trailing back behind them, and I could hear their voices in my mind. They were clearly seeking each other, and after their minds touched I showed myself to them. You can imagine my surprise when they recognised me! Then suddenly I realised they thought I was you, so I quickly subdued them and brought them here to my chamber, hoping to lure you to me. And now here you are.”

“What is it you want of me?” I asked.

“Why Peter, I’d have thought it obvious,” he chuckled. “I want to consume you to make myself whole again. In return I’ll release these two trespassers into the care of your friend here, who I expect will escort them with due haste from my domain and never return. So, what do you think, is it a fair deal?”

“You’re mad!” Billy cried and sprang forward at him, but Pedro raised his finger and Billy’s feet went out from under him. He fell heavily to the floor, then slowly sat up shaking his head in bewilderment.

I looked down at the prone forms of Jason and Damon and my heart went out to them. They were here because of me, and if to save them I’d have to forfeit my life, then my life would be forfeit. I stepped forward towards Pedro.

“Release them and I’ll do as you ask.”

“No, Peter, you can’t!” Billy protested, but he made no further attempt to intervene.

Pedro placed a hand on each of his captives and they began to stir. He nodded to Billy who came forward and took them in his arms. I moved up alongside Pedro.

“Thank you,” I said. “Now do what you will and get it over with.”

He placed his hand on my forehead and I felt a tingling sensation begin to build throughout me. My vision began to sparkle and I could hear a crackling noise in my ears. I felt myself losing consciousness, but at the final moment I heard, very faintly, a voice from the distant past.

“Quick, Peter, it’s another cusp,” Billy yelled. “Maybe we can stop it though. Take my hands and look into my eyes.”

Then my vision cleared and I found myself transported back to a beach near Cairns.

There was a humid breeze blowing in off a slightly choppy sea. About fifty metres away a man was walking towards us, and as he drew closer I realised it was Todd Myers. Then from out of the dunes Andrew Schilling came running towards him, and I knew we were about to witness Todd’s murder. I tried to call out to him but I had no voice.

Billy ran out crying ‘Emu!’ and tried to tackle Andrew, but he was bigger and stronger and easily fended him off. Then I ran at him from behind, crying ‘Dodo!’, and managed to get hold of his shirt tail. He spun around and tried to grab me but I danced out of his reach.

“You’re Dodo?” he yelled at me. “All this time you were right under my nose and I didn’t know it. Shit! I could have finished you off back at that stupid school in Narrabri and this whole stinking mess would have been cleaned up then and there.”

“Oh well,” he went on, but now in a calmer voice. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll just take you out now.”

He pulled out a large knife and charged at me. I ran, and he ran after me. He was bigger, stronger and faster, and would have most certainly caught me except Billy, who was still sprawled out on the sand, reached up and got a finger on the toe of his boot as he went past, and he tripped.

With a sickening thud his head struck a rock that was all but buried in the sand. I turned around and watched, horrified, as he tried to stand up but then collapsed back onto the sand with green blood streaming from a head wound. Then, as the light dimmed ever so slightly, the colour faded out of him and he turned to dust.

I looked up and saw Todd walking past, unaware anything had happened on the beach in front of him. We'd saved him! I turned back towards Billy but he was gone.

That was the moment when Pedro's branch of the river had begun, I realised, and so did Pedro. Billy and I had saved Todd's life, but in doing so we'd changed the course of history and stolen Pedro's future. I felt his hatred of me rising as my whole body was wracked with what seemed like thousands of electric shocks. I was almost gone, but as the last of my consciousness faded away I heard, very faintly, another familiar voice.

"*Let go of him!*" someone was shouting from far away. Pedro broke contact with me and the pain dissolved into an eerie feeling of numbness. Very groggily I turned in the direction of the voice.

Out of the gloom behind us came Jim Hamilton, at first as the old man I'd recently met on Eridani but then, as I watched in amazement, transforming into the fourteen year old boy I'd once known on Earth. In his hand was a tree branch and he raised it above his head as he marched towards us.

Pedro stared at him in disbelief and then held his hands up over his head, trying to shield himself.

"Stay away from me, you devil!" he cried as he cowered before him, but Jim slowed his approach and lowered the branch to his side. He was smiling.

"I won't hurt you now," he said, relaxing his stance. "I'm here to help you, Pedro, whether you believe me or not. You think you're here in this dark and miserable place because of Peter, but you're wrong. It's your hatred that's trapped you here, and it will keep you here for all eternity if you allow it. Release it, let it go and set yourself free."

Pedro looked up at him, his expression wavering in confusion.

"There's a better place," Jim said. "Come, Pedro, come with me into the light."

As he spoke a column of brilliant white light slowly spread out from the wall of the chamber.

“Your suffering is over now. Come with me, Pedro, come into the light.”

“No, you lie!” Pedro screamed. “The light will destroy me.” He stood and started moving towards me again.

“Wait Pedro,” Billy said. “You and Peter were still one when Elko planted his seed of remembrance in us, so you should be able to remember the other time line, the one where Jim was your friend. He saved you once from yourself, and now he’s offering to help you again.”

“No, that can’t be! That Peter was an abomination, he was, he was, no he couldn’t have been me, could he?”

“Yes he was,” Jim said, “and still is. The boy I knew and loved is just as much you as he is Peter. Come with me now, my friend, and let me save you again.”

Pedro stood staring at him for what seemed an age, then lowered his head and sighed.

“Come, Pedro,” Jim said softly as he reached out to him and took him by the arm. Pedro raised his head again, looked him in the eye and nodded. Together they stepped forward, but then Jim turned back towards us.

“Go now, my friends, and do not return to this realm. Sheol is no place for the living.”

With that they turned and walked into the light. It swelled and surrounded them, glittering and sparkling throughout, and then it, and they, were gone.

“What happened?” Jason muttered, sounding like he was just waking up from a long sleep.

“I’ll tell you later once we’re home again,” Billy said.

“How do we get back?”

“I can feel the pull of my physical body from where it’s lying next to the portal,” Damon said. “You should be able to feel yours too.”

Jason stared into the darkness for a while and then said that, yes, he could.

“Excellent. If you like I’ll take Peter with me and you can take your father.”

Damon pushed me ahead of him through the invisible portal and a moment later I was standing in the shrine beneath the temple on Bluehaven. His body was lying at my feet, but as I looked down he stirred and pulled himself upright. There was a collective sigh of relief from the assembled crowd of temple staff, and a moment later Billy’s voice blared over the radio.

“We’re both okay at this end,” I said back to him. “How about you and Jason?”

“We’re both fine. I guess we should close the portals now.”

“Yes, and dismantle them as quickly as possible.”

About fifteen minutes later there was another call from Billy.

“I’ve just had some rather sad news from Eridani. Jim Hamilton passed away a short while ago. I’m sorry, Peter.”

“He was a hero, Billy,” I said with the slightest hint of waver in my voice, “just as great a hero as Elko or Gallad, in his own way.”

“That he was,” Billy said, and before I knew it I was sitting on the floor with tears streaming down my face. Damon sat alongside me with his arm around my shoulders, trying his best to ease my pain.

Curtain Call

I was sitting in the living room at Billy and Julia's place, and in my hand was a letter that had just arrived from the Eridanian Ambassador's office in Sydney.

Dearest Friends of Eridani,

Jimmac Tulee, late esteemed member of the Eridanian High Council, requested in his Last Will and Testament that Eridanian Awards of Valour be presented to the following people for their services to the Galaxy. They are:

Thomas and Sarah Collins

Billy and Julia Collins

Jason and Jennifer Collins

Mark and Lorina Collins

Todd and Elissi Myers

Aaron and Maleena Smith

Christopher Smith

Peter Thorpe

The Council has, after due consideration, agreed to this request and I have been asked to consult with you as to a suitable date for the presentation ceremony. I would be most pleased if you could contact this office at your earliest convenience.

"Who's Jimmac Tulee?" Julia asked.

"It must be Jim Hamilton's Eridanian name," I began to say, but the shock of sudden recollection almost stopped me in my tracks.

"Everyone, please welcome three new fellow sufferers," Mr Fitzwilliam says, taking our forms from us. "Class, meet James Hamilton, Sarah Fields

and Peter Thorpe. James, Sarah, Peter, meet your cellmates, I mean classmates.”

There’s gentle applause from the group of about 25 students.

“James, or do you prefer Jim?” he asks.

“Um, Jim actually,” Jim Hamilton squeaks and then coughs.

“Okay, Jim Actually, you can sit next to David, second row across on the right.” David waves his hand and Jim walks over and sits down, carefully managing not to trip over his own feet.

“No wonder he almost tripped over his own feet,” I mumbled to myself.

“What?” Julia said.

I explained about Mr Fitzwilliam calling him Jim Actually, and how that must have sounded almost exactly like his real Eridanian name.

“He must have thought his cover had been blown on the very first day of his assignment,” I said.

“Maybe it was,” Billy said.

“What do you mean?”

“Remember what Mr Fitzwilliam said to you a week or so later, after he’d told you about Matthew?”

“I’ve noticed you and that other new boy, the shy one, have become friends. That’s good I think. Yes, I believe it is.”

“I think he must have known who Jim was,” I said. “Didn’t Tom once say that Mr Fitzwilliam had something to do with Frank Halliday?”

“I think perhaps he did,” Billy said.

* * *

“I don’t think I can go through with this,” Jennifer said again.

The fourteen of us named in the letter were standing naked in the wings of the amphitheatre on Eridani, waiting to be led out onto the stage.

“Keep your eyes fixed on the floor in front of you and don’t look at the audience,” Norrie said. “Focus your mind on what the Councillors are saying and you’ll be fine.”

The ceremonial gong sounded as we were led out in single file and presented to the gathered crowd. One by one the five senior members of the Eridanian Council stepped forward and told of our deeds, making us sound far more heroic and noble than I’m sure we ever were. Then at long last the robes of honour were brought out and the Councillors dressed us in them. Medallions were hung around our necks and then we all joined hands and

smiled up at the crowd. A great cheering erupted from them and I blushed. Tom stepped forward to the microphone.

“As the eldest of this, my extended family, it falls to me to respond to the kind words of your Council. On behalf of us all, I thank you for the great honour you have bestowed upon us. There is one, however, who is far more deserving of this award than any of us. His name was Elko, and it saddens me greatly that he’s not here to receive such an award. He was the guardian of the spirits of Raphus and Dromaius that the Emu and Dodo people carried down through the millennia, and was truly tireless in his work to bring peace and prosperity to the galaxy.

“Elko, this is for you,” he said as he held his medallion high. The crowd cheered.

“There’s also another deserving of honour, one who has just recently been taken from us. Councillor Jimmac, known to us as Jim Hamilton, played a small but nonetheless vital role in protecting Peter as a child and then, at the very end of his life, came to his rescue again. Without his selfless devotion the outcome for us may well have been very different.”

The crowd cheered again in affirmation.

“History has run its course and we have emerged, mostly unscathed, by the grace of everyone around us. We are honoured that we’ve been given the opportunity to play such a part in life’s great drama, and thankful we got through it all without stuffing up too badly. There were many others who helped and encouraged us along the way, and this award belongs just as much to them as to us. Thank you, one and all.”

We were escorted down from the stage by the five Councillors and then the feasting began.

Soon after we returned from Eridani the official opening of the Delphinidae College at Coolum Beach took place. Kevin and Loretta came from Bluehaven in their golden shuttle and Loretta, as Reverend Mother, performed the consecration ceremony with Damon, Brother of the Delphinidae, at her side.

“I have one final announcement to make,” Loretta said at the end of the formal proceedings. “In the wake of recent events Kevin and I made representations to the government on Meridian, and they’ve agreed to donate an intergalactic shuttle to the Temple for the express use of Damon and his staff. The shipyards have already begun construction and you can expect delivery here in about three months time.”

Damon's face lit up like a Christmas tree and he leapt at her and hugged her, much to the shock of the temple aides. Lorina and Mark quickly joined in as well.

After the ceremony Loretta, Kevin, Mark, Lorina and Damon swam out into the sea where the Dolphins were waiting to greet them, and then as the sun set they returned to the shore and another round of feasting began.

* * *

It is dusk, and I'm standing with Billy and Julia at the water's edge, watching in silence as the natural world around us prepares for the night. Old age is upon us now, but thus far Father Time has been kind to us. Even so, I know that soon a day will come when we'll no longer be together. Yet I do not fear that day, for something happened during the final moments of my alter ego, Pedro, which has given my spirit great joy and hope. I haven't mentioned this to anyone before now as I couldn't find the courage to express what I had seen, but perhaps now I can.

"Billy?"

He turns his head towards me, smiling the way he did on that very first morning in Mr Fitzwilliam's English class.

"When Pedro went into the light, I thought, well, for just a moment I thought I saw my parents embracing and welcoming him. Do you think that's possible?"

"I saw them too," he whispers.

Peter Thorpe