



Call of the
Delphinidae

JEFF PAGES

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by

Jeff Pages



CALL OF THE DELPHINIDAE
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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. In 1995 he moved back to the Sydney region and now lives at Umina Beach on the northern shore of Broken Bay.

His first novel, *Barefoot Times*, was published in 2004, and with the completion of *Call of the Delphinidae* he's now working on a third book in the series. Further background information can be found on the series' website, **www.barefoottimes.net**.

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For my nephews Benjamin and Joshua

In memory of Rosalie Phillips

Part One ~ Mother of Necessity

Mary's Dream

“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 a small dark-skinned man walked slowly to the front of the chapel and stood alongside the coffin.

“Thank you all so much for coming,” he said softly. “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 would 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 of his kidding around there beat a heart of gold.

“I first met Aaron 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 sniffled and wiped a tear from his eye before continuing.

“But he had a weakness, and only his closest friends were truly aware of it. It began innocently enough during our first year at university. If we had a free afternoon, we would 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 that it was nothing more than his desire to make people laugh that ultimately led him into alcoholism. I blame myself for not realising that 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 that he could leap off and fly away, and I really don't think I want to know. I would 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 that I needed you, it is now."

He put his hands over his face and slowly made his way back to his seat.

My son is dead.

Mary woke, the dream still echoing inside her head. 'My son is dead,' she thought again. 'But how can I have a son?'

She opened her eyes, taking in the morning sunlight streaming into her room. "I'm going to be late for school again," she muttered as she pulled herself out of bed and dashed towards the bathroom.

"Don't be too long," her mother called out from the kitchen. "You'll be late for school again."

"I know," Mary said, grimacing as she closed the bathroom door behind her.

After the quickest shower in the history of the Empire, she emerged to find her friends Ron and Brian sitting at the kitchen table.

"You're late again so we ate your breakfast for you," Brian said.

"Yeah, we'll describe it to you on the way to school if you like," Ron added.

"Come on then, let's go," Mary said as she ushered her friends ahead of her and out the door. Outside it was already quite warm and would no doubt be very hot inside the classroom. Mary didn't like the heat.

"I had a strange dream last night," she said as they hurried down the road. "I was at a funeral, and the person in the coffin was my son."

“Your son?” Brian asked. “I didn’t know you had a son. Who’s the father?”

Mary froze in her step as she saw in her mind’s eye a tall heavily-built man grabbing hold of her and shaking her violently. She shivered in spite of the heat.

“Are you okay?” Brian asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said as she took hold of herself. “I, I don’t know who the father was, but he wasn’t very nice.”

“Was it Brett?” Ron asked.

“No, definitely not Brett,” Mary laughed, dispelling the last remnants of the fear that had engulfed her.

“Speaking of the brat,” Brian said, “I’ve heard rumours that his father was caught trying to infiltrate the Resistance up in Etford.”

“That’s a bit daft,” Mary said. “Surely everyone knows that Hal Farley works for the palace.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Maybe he was creating a diversion or something,” Ron said. “While everyone was jumping up and down about Farley perhaps someone else was sneaking in.”

“Could be,” Brian said.

“You know I’m thinking of joining the Resistance,” Ron said.

“What for?” Mary asked. “I mean, they’ve been trying to topple Morgoth for the last million years and so far haven’t got within a bull’s roar of him.”

“Well maybe I’m the one to make the difference. My dad said that the Dolphins think the emperor may fall very soon now.”

“Dolphins *Schmolphins*,” Brian said. “What would a fish know?”

“Dolphins aren’t fish, they’re...”

“Yeah, we know, they’re mammals. Surely, Ron, you don’t take all of this Dolphin-worshipping stuff seriously?”

“I don’t know. In church, it all sounds pretty convincing. You know the prophecy says it will be a young boy who finally destroys the emperor.”

“And I suppose you think you’re going to be that boy,” Brian said. Ron nodded, and he sighed.

“Why does the hero always have to be a boy?” Mary complained. “Why can’t it be a girl for once?”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to join the Resistance too?” Brian asked.

“No, I’m not that stupid. It’s just that sometimes, well, sometimes I wish I could be the one to get rid of him.”

“Maybe it was going to be your dead son,” Ron said.

“Well if it was, then he won’t be of much use if he’s already dead,” Brian said.

“Maybe it was,” Mary pondered, “and maybe the dream was a warning and I’m supposed to somehow prevent his death.” Brian sighed again.

* * *

“I was beginning to wonder if you three were going to grace us with your presence today,” Mr Tonkin said as Mary, Brian and Ron entered the classroom and made their way to their seats.

“I’m sorry sir, I overslept,” Mary said.

“Well perhaps you can make amends by answering the first question. We were discussing the history of the imperial palace, and I was about to ask if anyone knew what the building was originally used for.”

“I think it was the old Delphinidae temple,” Mary said.

“You think or you know?”

“Um, I think I know.”

“Very well, yes it was originally built by the Delphinidae in the early days of the settlement on Bluehaven,” Mr Tonkin explained. “Now can anyone tell me where Morgoth’s palace was before he came here?”

“On Meridian, sir,” Brett Farley said as he shot his hand into the air.

“That’s right of course, Brett. So why did he move?”

“Well it was because his son Martyn got kicked out of home and came here where he hitched up with Loria, the daughter of the Delphinidae High Priestess or something, and then when they had

a kid Morgoth came and executed them. Then to teach the Delphinidae a lesson he booted them out of their temple and made it his palace.”

“Your father has taught you well, Mr Farley,” the teacher said. “The Delphinidae fled in fear of their lives to the eastern side of the island and hid there in caves for many years. But, rather surprisingly, Morgoth left them alone and turned his attention elsewhere, and eventually they built their heavily-fortified new temple alongside the beach. There they have remained to this day under the leadership of the High Priestess who is a direct descendent, mother to daughter, of Martyn and Loria’s child.”

Ron put up his hand. “Sir, why didn’t Morgoth finish the Delphinidae off when he had the chance?”

“That’s a good question, and no-one’s really sure of the answer, but before he came to power Morgoth was a Delphinidae student and was considered a Dolphin-friend, so perhaps he couldn’t quite bring himself to killing them. Given his nature, though, that seems rather unlikely, and the more plausible explanation is that having his opposition out in the open where he could keep an eye on them was better in the long term than crushing them completely and having underground pockets of resistance grow up all over the place. If that was his reasoning then it has certainly paid off for, since the end of the War of the Barefooters, he has survived unscathed and virtually unchallenged for the last million years. Of course his organisational structure has no doubt played a large role in his ongoing survival.” Mr Tonkin pressed a button on his desk, causing a plan of the palace grounds to be projected onto the screen at the front of the classroom.

“Now the palace building itself is divided into two wings separated by the large open courtyard in the centre of the complex. The western half is his military headquarters and little, if anything, is known of what goes on in there. They say the security systems are so complex and interwoven that only Morgoth himself can pass unhindered through the labyrinth of passageways in his bunker. The western wall of the palace is right on the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea, and according to legend it was on the rocks

directly below where Martyn and Loria were bound and ultimately drowned by the incoming tide. Outside the northern wall is his infamous execution stadium, and I'm sure Brett will be delighted to give you all the gory details of its machinations outside of class. I'll just say that I hope none of you ever find yourselves in there.

"Now the eastern half of the palace is the administrative side, and that's where the Governor of Bluehaven and the Director of Justice have their bureaucracies. In chapter six of your textbooks you'll find a full description of the structure of these departments. The list of names of the chief bureaucrats is a little out of date, though, so as homework I want you to go to the palace website and find out who all the current office-bearers are." There was a collective groan from the class.

"Steady down," he said and the room quietened. "The reason I want you to do this is that you'll probably be meeting some of these people when we go on a tour of the palace next Monday."

There was stunned silence for a moment, but then the room began to buzz with excitement.

"We'll be leaving first thing on Monday morning and it's quite a long journey, so you might want to bring something to read, as well as some food and drink. The palace staff will be cooking a barbecue dinner for us and we'll be staying overnight in a nearby hostel. We should be back here about sunset on Tuesday. Now as you know, Morgoth is the last of the race of Barefooters, and it has been a long tradition that as a mark of respect no-one else walks barefoot within the palace grounds. So please bring some shoes with you." The class groaned again.

"This is the first time our school has been invited to tour the palace, so I want all of you to at least pretend to be civilised. That means no slingshots, Brett. And Mary, try to get here before the bus leaves."

* * *

The bus climbed slowly into the wooded highlands, having left the last of the valley's farmland behind. Boredom and hunger were

starting to make the passengers restless, but a refreshment stop at the timber town of Highcastle was coming up soon.

Mary had arrived at the school well before sunrise, a full hour earlier than any of her classmates had, and she'd sat waiting on the low stone fence, absent-mindedly doodling in the dust with her toes. This was the first time she'd travelled beyond the borders of Bringal Vale and her last two nights had been mostly sleepless with excitement. Her family grew vegetables on their small patch of land, bringing in enough income for them to eat fish most nights, and Mary's talent with the brush had developed sufficiently for her to have sold several paintings in recent months. But travel further than the range of a bicycle was mostly beyond their means and a trip to the palace was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

She woke suddenly as the bus came to a halt outside a café in the main street of Highcastle, having unexpectedly dozed off soon after they had entered the forest. Still feeling slightly disoriented, she got to her feet and joined Brian and Ron at one of the many tables outside the shop. A waitress appeared out of nowhere and they each ordered coffee and cake.

The sun was shining brightly although the air was a good deal cooler than it had been back at the school. The street was mostly deserted, but occasionally someone would cycle by and take a good long look at the bus and its load of school children.

"How much further do we have to go?" Ron asked.

"It's a long way yet," Mary said. "If my memory serves me correctly, Highcastle is only about a third of the way along the northern road, so we've probably got another five or six hours of travelling ahead of us."

"I don't know if I can stand it."

"Just go to sleep like Mary did," Brian said.

Before Ron could think of a suitable retort the waitress reappeared with their coffee and cake, and they ate and sipped in silence.

At the northern edge of town, the road headed steeply uphill. When the bus reached the top, it pulled off to the side and stopped in front of a stone tower some fifty metres in height.

“This is the tower that Highcastle was named after, and is the highest point on Dolphin Island,” Mr Tonkin said. “Any of you who would like to climb it may do so.” Within moments, the bus was empty.

The view from the top was like nothing Mary had seen before. Surrounding her in all directions was endless forest, but away in the distance to the west was a bluish haze that she thought must be the sea.

“They say that on a clear day those with good eyesight can see the ocean on the eastern side too,” Brian said.

“You mean over there where that ship is?” Ron asked. Mary looked hard in the direction he was pointing, then realised she’d been had and poked him in the ribs.

She turned her gaze to the north, trying to pick out where the road was and perhaps catch a glimpse of their destination, but beyond a few hundred metres, all she could see was forest.

* * *

Soon after their lunch break at the town of Fornost the forest began to thin and before long, they were travelling along a rocky barren ridgeline. The sea was now clearly visible on both sides, drawing closer the further north they went. They came at last to a spur to the left which the road followed down towards the coast.

It was mid afternoon when they caught their first glimpse of the palace towers. They were now travelling through rich farmland on the coastal flats, and ahead of them and slightly to the left loomed a dark menacing structure that appeared to be incongruously large. The excitement the students had been experiencing up until now gave way to a feeling of apprehension and unease.

The palace guards stepped forward to meet them as they alighted from the bus. Mr Tonkin spoke to one of them for a moment before turning back to the students.

“Okay everyone, time to put those shoes on.”

Mary pulled her backpack off, unzipped it and stared open-mouthed at the empty space inside.

“Sir, excuse me,” she said. “I, um, I seem to have forgotten my shoes.”

“Well, I suppose I should have expected as much from you,” Mr Tonkin said, and then turned back to the other students. “Did anyone bring a spare pair of shoes that Mary can borrow?”

There being no response, he stepped over to the guard and consulted with him.

“It looks like it’s not going to be too much of a problem, Mary,” he said when he returned. “The shoe thing is just a custom, not a law, and provided you don’t draw attention to your bare feet you should be okay.”

The guard waved them through the gate and into a dark stone passageway. Once everyone was inside they halted and the doors closed behind them. The floor was icy cold on Mary’s soles and she shivered a little.

“We’ve been told to wait here,” Mr Tonkin said, “and someone from the Education Directorate will be down to meet us shortly.” A few minutes later, a tall balding man in a dark suit came through a side door.

“Welcome, all of you,” he said. “I’m Paul Tenderman, Under-Secretary to the Director of Education. This afternoon I will give you a tour of the administrative side of the palace before handing you over to the Director of Justice who will show you some of the finer points of our legal system. Follow me.”

He led them through a doorway and up a broad spiral staircase, and then when everyone had reached the top, he pulled open a set of doors in front of him. “This is the Administrative Council Chamber, and it’s where the Directors of each department meet to resolve any issues that might arise between them.”

They had entered at the top of the gallery, and on each side were row upon row of leather-upholstered seats. At the bottom of the chamber was a long table with seating on each side, and at the head of the table was an ornate chair, almost a throne.

“Come down to the front,” Mr Tenderman said. Everyone followed him onto the floor of the chamber. “The high seat belongs to the Governor of Bluehaven who is in charge of the entire administrative wing of the palace. On this side sit the Directors of Transport, Agriculture, Communications and Town Planning, while on the other side sit the Directors of Fisheries, Commerce, Delphinidae Relations and of course Education.”

Ron raised his hand. “Do you really have a Director of Delphinidae Relations?”

“Of course. We liaise closely with our friends on the eastern shore, and make sure their needs are well catered for.”

“But I thought the Delphinidae were your enemies?”

“That’s a popular misconception, young man. While it’s true that over the millennia there have been differences of opinion between His Highness and the Delphinidae, the relations now are quite cordial and open.”

“I see, thank you,” Ron said, shaking his head in confusion.

“Politics,” Brian whispered in his ear.

“Are there any other questions?” Mr Tenderman asked. “If not I’ll take you somewhere that I’m sure you’ll find very interesting.”

They entered a darkened room. Along the far wall was a huge electronic display showing in diagrammatic form the star systems of the Empire’s twelve principal worlds. In between were hundreds of coloured dots.

“This screen shows the location of every registered ship in the galaxy,” Mr Tenderman said. “From here we can keep track of all transport movements and make sure that if anything out of the ordinary happens it can be dealt with quickly and efficiently.”

He drew a laser pointer from his pocket and flashed it at one of the dots on the screen. A window opened beside it showing the full details of the ship, its cargo, its point of origin and destination.

“There are identical control stations on each of the principal worlds,” he said proudly. “The whole system works to ensure that goods and people are moved about quickly, efficiently and above all safely.”

One of the dots suddenly began flashing and a beeper sounded somewhere in the room. A controller stepped forward and flashed his pointer at the dot, then spoke quickly into his headset. A few moments later, he returned to his desk and picked up a telephone, and then once he’d finished his call he turned to the students.

“You arrived at just the right time. A freighter on its way to Sontar has had a malfunction in its subspace propulsion system and is requesting assistance. I’ve advised Sontar control and they’ll be dispatching a maintenance crew shortly.”

“Well boys and girls, there you have it, real life drama unfolding before your very eyes,” Mr Tenderman said. “I bet you didn’t expect to see anything like this, did you?”

Brian turned to Mary and rolled his eyes. She tried not to giggle.

“Come now,” Mr Tenderman said, “and I’ll show you my own department, the one you are all no doubt most eager to see. I refer of course to the Directorate of Education.” This time Mary did giggle.

They’d reached the end of the corridor when another man came running towards them and spoke briefly to Mr Tenderman.

“There’s been a slight change of plan,” he said. “You’re all to go out into the courtyard now where there’s a special treat awaiting you.”

The courtyard was square and about a hundred metres across, with a stone pathway running down the centre and well-manicured lawns on either side. At the southern end, a huge ornate doorway stood atop a broad flight of steps, and the class gathered at its base.

A single trumpet sounded a fanfare as the doors opened and a man dressed in tight red trousers, a black jacket and a white ruffled shirt stepped forward. Beside him was shrivelled old man wearing

only a pair of billowing white trousers. Mary caught a glimpse of his eyes and her heart froze.

“Who’s the old geezer?” Ron whispered.

“Shut up if you want to live to see another day,” Brian whispered back, the fear in his voice clearly evident.

“Citizens of the Empire, pray be upstanding for His Highness Morgoth the Enlightened, Supreme Ruler of the Universe,” the man in the red trousers cried out.

“Praise the Enlightened One,” the class responded in unison as they’d been indoctrinated to do since birth.

“Thank you, children of Bluehaven, and welcome to my home,” the old man said in a voice that was strong and loud. “I trust you are finding your visit enjoyable and interesting, and if you have any questions at all please don’t hesitate to ask. If anyone gives you any trouble, just tell them they’ll have me to deal with.”

The students were unsure whether they were supposed to laugh, but a few chuckles escaped.

“Children have always had a special place in my heart, for it is with our children that the future of the Empire lies. I know you have probably heard some very bad things about me, and some of them might even be true, but trust me when I say that I have always had the galaxy’s best interests at heart. The education and well-being of our children is absolutely vital, far more important than the latest star destroyer or planet imploder.” He smiled, implying another jest, and a few more chuckles came forth.

“Seriously, though, I want to implore you all to take full advantage of everything our education system has to offer, so that when you go forth into the wider world as adults you will be able to contribute as much as your skills allow to the enrichment of all our lives. As I have said, our future is in your hands.”

His eyes scanned back and forth across the students as he spoke, until they came to rest upon Mary. His expression darkened.

“Young lady,” he said, “do you mock me with your bare feet?”

“No, I’m so sorry, I forgot to bring my shoes,” she said, bowing her head.

“Come to me,” Morgoth commanded, and she stepped forward and climbed the steps. Her heart was pounding and she was afraid she was going to faint, but she finally reached the top and Morgoth placed his hand on her shoulder. It was frigid.

“You are an elf wench, but an honest one,” he said as he removed his hand. “Tell me, what is your name?”

“Mary, your Highness.”

“Thank you Mary, you may step down.” She bowed and turned, but in dashing back down the steps, she tripped over her own feet and fell. Ron came forward to help her up.

“Very noble indeed, young man,” Morgoth said. “What is your name?”

“Ron, sir, um, your Highness, I’m sorry.”

“That’s perfectly all right, young Ron. Take good care of Mary for me, won’t you?”

“I will sir, your Highness, thank you.”

“Go now,” Morgoth said, “and enjoy the remainder of your visit. I believe refreshments are about to be served at the far end of the courtyard.” With that, he turned and walked back through the doors which closed behind him.

“Are you okay?” Brian asked Mary as they made their way down to the trestle tables that had been set up at the far end of the courtyard.

“Yes, just a bit shaken, that’s all.”

“What did he do to you?”

“I think he probed my mind or something. It was creepy.”

“Come on, get this into you,” he said as he handed her a cup of tea. She accepted it, took a few sips and smiled.

* * *

Mary couldn’t sleep. She tossed and turned for ages, but every time she closed her eyes, she could see Morgoth’s face looking down on her. Eventually she drifted off, though, finding herself again in the chapel attending her son’s funeral, only this time it

was Morgoth instead of the priest standing behind the pulpit. Alongside him stood a dark-haired boy who looked to be about seven years of age.

“Your son is dead, Mary,” Morgoth said as he placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder, “and now my grandson here is mine!”
Mary screamed...

Morgoth woke. He was sure he’d heard a woman screaming, or perhaps it was just part of the dream. He’d been dreaming about that girl, the one with the bare feet, but he couldn’t remember now what it had been about, only that it had unsettled him badly. He reached over and pressed a button alongside his bed.

“Farley, there was a girl named Mary who attended the palace today with the group from your son’s school. I want you to find her and bring her back here for interrogation,” he said.

“Your will, my Lord,” a sleepy-sounding Hal Farley said in reply.

Morgoth rolled over and returned to sleep, dreaming happily of star destroyers and planet imploders.

Mary woke, the scream choked in her throat. Outside the sky was just beginning to lighten to a pre-dawn grey. She crept out of bed and made her way to the bathroom at the end of the corridor, trying carefully not to wake any of the others.

* * *

It was late afternoon when the bus pulled up outside the school. Mary had dozed fitfully for most of the way back, but now she was wide awake. When she stepped onto the footpath she noticed Hal Farley with two other men standing in front of her, but she assumed he was there to meet Brett and didn’t think any more of it until he spoke to her.

“Mary Anderson, on order from Morgoth the Enlightened, you are under arrest and will be taken to the watch-house where you

will be kept overnight and then transported to the Imperial Palace at first light tomorrow. Come with me please.”

The two men moved to each side of her, taking hold of her arms, and then escorted her to a waiting van and loaded her roughly into the back.

Brian and Ron saw what was happening and called out after them, but to no avail.

“Quick, we have to go and tell her parents what’s happened,” Brian said, and they sprinted off down the road.

When they turned the corner into Mary’s street they stopped dead in their tracks, for where her house had been was now just a burnt-out shell.

“Oh no!” cried Ron. “It can’t be, it just can’t be happening.”

“Mr Anderson, Mrs Anderson!” Brian called as they ran down to the remains of the house, but it was futile, the block was deserted. They walked down the back to where the vegetable garden had been, but it had all been dug up and destroyed. It was as if no-one had ever lived there.

In despair they parted and began walking off to their respective homes, but then Brian turned and said, “Come around to my place tonight after dinner.”

Ron looked up at him and smiled grimly.

The Fugitives

“Mum, Dad, Mary’s been arrested!” Brian called out as he ran into the house. All the way home a fear had been growing in him that his parents may have disappeared along with Mary’s, and for a terrifying moment, there was no reply to his call.

“We know, honey, it’s been all over the news this afternoon,” his mother said as she came in through the back door and wrapped her arms around him. “Who’d have thought Mary would have done a thing like that.”

“Like what?” Brian asked.

“Killed her parents and burnt the house down.”

“But she couldn’t have, she’s been with us on the excursion for the last two days.”

“She must have done it before she left yesterday morning,” Brian’s father said as he also came in from the back yard.

“But, but that’s not possible either,” Brian said. “Ron and I went round to her place yesterday morning to make sure she wouldn’t be late and miss the bus, but her parents said she’d gone nice and early, and sure enough she was waiting at the school when we got there. It couldn’t have been her.”

“Hmm,” his father said as he scratched his chin. “I dare say you’re right.”

“We have to rescue her!” Brian cried.

“Settle down and have your dinner, and I’ll make a few calls and see what I can find out,” his father said.

Brian sat down at the kitchen table and tried to eat, but he wasn’t hungry and ended up just shuffling his food around on the plate. Eventually his mother took it away from him and held him on her lap.

“Don’t fret, honey, they’ll let her go as soon as they figure out she couldn’t have done it,” she said.

“But they won’t. Morgoth got upset with her because she forgot her shoes, and now he’s, he’s...”

“Shush, honey, shush, it’s going to be fine.”

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Brian’s father said before anyone else could move. A moment later, he escorted Ron into the living room. He looked ashen and kept running his hands through his hair.

“Did you see the news?” he asked. Brian nodded as he stood and walked over to him. “What’s going on, Brian? What’s happening?”

“Let’s go for a walk, boys,” Brian’s father said and led them out the door before anyone could ask where they were going.

“Mary couldn’t have done any of this,” Ron said as they walked out into the street and headed down towards the river.

“You’re right and I believe you,” Brian’s father said. “They’ve got her in the watch-house, haven’t they?”

“Yeah, they took her there as soon as we got off the bus, and they’ll be taking her to Morgoth first thing tomorrow.”

“Good,” Brian’s father said and both boys stopped and stared at him. “What I mean is, there’s never been much of a crime problem here in Bringal Vale and the old watch-house has really only ever been used to keep the occasional drunk off the streets. Now when I was a lad there used to be a loose stone in the wall, and if you knew the trick, well, anyway as far as I know it’s never been repaired but we’ll soon find out, won’t we?”

“We’re breaking her out?” Ron asked.

“Shush, Ron. We don’t want the whole town to know, not yet anyway.”

“What are you going to do once we’ve got her out?” Brian asked. “She can’t really stay at our place because that’d be the first place they’ll look once they discover her missing.”

“No, we’re taking her to the park in Overland Street where your uncle Stephen will be waiting, and he’ll take her with him back to Etford. He’s a member of the Resistance, did you know?”

“No I didn’t,” Brian said, his spirits lifting. “You’ve got it all organised then.”

“I hope so, I really do.”

The night was cool and the light mist rolling in from the river had thickened as they approached the watch-house. There was a light burning in the front room but the rest of the building was dark. Everything was quiet as they slipped around the side and made their way to the back of the building where the cells were.

“If my memory serves me correctly, the loose stone was around about here,” Brian’s father whispered. He got down on his hands and knees and began feeling his way along the wall.

“Yes, this is it here,” he eventually said. “Come on, boys, give me a hand.”

He twisted a smaller stone to the right and removed it, which then released the larger stone that the boys began to drag out.

“Mind your feet,” Brian said as Ron almost crushed his toes under the stone as it slipped out.

“Is that you, Brian?” Mary whispered as she poked her head through the hole in the wall.

“Can you squeeze through?” Brian asked.

“Give me your hand,” Brian’s father said, and with a little assistance, Mary was soon free of the cell.

“Right, let’s get that stone back in place and then we can be off,” he said, and with a little help the boys managed to manoeuvre it back into place and lock it in with the smaller stone.

“And just what do think you’re doing?” said a voice from the corner of the building as a powerful flashlight illuminated them.

“Run for it!” Brian’s father said, and Mary, Brian and Ron took off into the night while he grappled with the holder of the flashlight.

They reached the park with no sign of pursuit, and saw a car nestled in amongst the trees. As they approached, a man stepped out and began walking towards them.

“Uncle Stephen!” Brian called out and ran forward to meet him.

“Keep the noise down,” Stephen said. “Where’s your father?”

“Probably locked up by now,” Brian said. “The gaoler caught us just as we were about to go but Dad held him off while we escaped.”

“Shit! Well there’s nothing we can do about it now. I’ll take the three of you back to my place and we can sort out what we’re going to do with you in the morning.”

* * *

“Would you like something to eat?” Stephen asked as they seated themselves around his kitchen table.

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Brian said. “I didn’t have any dinner, what with everything that was going on.”

“I’ve got some pizza here if you’d like that,” Stephen said.

“Sounds good to me,” Brian said.

“Me too!” said Ron.

“And me,” Mary added.

“Right then, it should be ready in about half an hour,” Stephen said. “The bathroom’s down the end of the hall if you want to freshen up.”

“Are you really a member of the Resistance?” Ron asked him.

“Yes, although I only joined a few weeks ago. Little did I know then that I’d be harbouring fugitives from the law so quickly.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to overthrow Morgoth any time soon?”

“That’s pretty unlikely, really. About the most we can expect to achieve is to help people like you who are trying to escape from his minions.”

“Where can we go?” Mary asked.

“Oh, there’s lots of safe places for people on the run. There are a few here on Bluehaven, such as the Delphinidae temple, but it’s probably safer in the longer term to go off-world. Sontar is a popular choice for many who want to escape the attention of the Enlightened One, as no-one asks any questions there as long as you put in a fair day’s work on the farms.”

“That seems a bit drastic,” Ron said.

“You obviously don’t realise the predicament the three of you are in. Mary’s escape will be all across the news channels tomorrow and Morgoth’s people won’t rest now until they have you all locked away or, more likely, killed.” Ron turned pale.

“Look, don’t worry yourselves too much about that tonight,” Stephen added. “I have contacts and I’ll make sure you’re all taken care of, I promise.”

Ron woke in the early hours of the morning with a full bladder. He slipped out of bed and crept down the corridor to the bathroom. He was about to flush the toilet when he heard voices coming from outside the open window.

“So that’s the deal, okay?” Stephen was saying. “You get the girl, and my nephew and his muddle-headed mate go free.”

“Yes, you have my word. Once I get the girl to Morgoth the rest of you can do whatever you bloody-well like.”

Ron dashed back to the bedroom and woke his friends.

“Your uncle’s sold us out to Farley,” he whispered. “We have to get out of here!”

“Are you sure?” Brian asked.

“They’re outside now. Quick, get that window open and we’ll sneak out the back.”

“I’ll show him who’s muddle-headed,” Ron muttered as they climbed over the back fence and slipped away into the bushland.

“What?” Brian whispered.

“Never mind.”

“Which way do we go?” Mary asked.

“We’ll head down through the bush to the river,” Brian said, “and, um, I guess they’ll probably expect us to make for the coast so we’ll go upstream instead.”

“Good thinking, boss,” Ron said, now beaming with excitement.

When they reached the river Brian broke a few branches to make it look like they were going towards the coast and then,

making sure not to leave any footprints, they headed upstream. They could hear much shouting and cursing behind them, but the voices soon diminished as their pursuers took the bait and headed west.

The going alongside the river was easy under the moonlight and they had covered some ten kilometres by the time the sky began to lighten.

“Do you have any plan figured out?” Ron asked.

“Not really,” Brian said. “What about you, Mary?”

“I’m not sure, but we’ll need to find somewhere safe where we can lie low for a while. How well do you know this part of the countryside?”

“I’ve done a bit of bushwalking with Uncle Stephen over the years so I have a rough idea of the lay of the land, but I really don’t know of anywhere we can hide out.”

“I still can’t believe your uncle sold us out,” Ron said.

“I’ve been thinking about that, and I reckon Farley has my father in custody and was threatening to harm him if Stephen didn’t co-operate,” Brian said.

“I think you’re right,” Mary said. “This is all my own damn stupid fault.” She turned away from the boys and placed her hands over her face.

“No it’s not,” Ron said. “If anyone’s at fault, it’s Morgoth. Why that shrivelled up thing hasn’t died of old age long before now is beyond me.”

Mary laughed, then sniffled, then laughed again. Ron and Brian looked at each other and smiled.

“Come on, let’s get moving,” Brian said.

* * *

Morgoth was furious. Before him stood Hal Farley and alongside him, quivering on his knees was the gaoler from the watch-house.

“You – let – them – escape!” Morgoth bellowed, and the gaoler wet himself. “Where is the boy’s father?”

“He’s here, my Lord, being prepared for the execution stadium tomorrow,” Farley said.

“Release him, and put this miserable excuse for a halfwit in his place. Now get out of my sight.”

“Your will, my Lord.”

* * *

They’d been walking for about an hour since sunrise when they rounded a bend in the river and came upon a bridge.

“Do you know what road this is?” Ron asked.

“I think it’s the road to the spaceport,” Brian said.

Mary stood staring at it for a while, scratching her chin.

“I think we should head there,” she eventually said. “What your uncle said was right, if I’m going to find sanctuary I’ll probably have to go off-world to somewhere like Sontar.”

“But you can’t just wander into the terminal and jump on the next flight,” Brian said. “You need money for that, and lots of it.”

“Maybe we can rob a bank along the way,” Ron suggested.

“Yeah, we could do that I suppose,” Mary said.

“Hang on, I was only joking.”

“Many a truth is said in jest,” Brian said, “but I think robbing a bank might just land us in more hot water than we really want to be in right now.”

“Let’s start walking in that direction anyway,” Mary said. “I’m sure one of us will think of something by the time we get there.”

“How far is it?” Ron asked, mindful of how tender the soles of his feet were becoming.

“Not far, about a hundred kilometres if my memory serves me correctly,” Brian said. Ron grimaced.

The sound of an approaching vehicle broke the silence. Had it been earlier in the day they would have hidden until it had passed, but by now all three were footsore and weary, and the chance of hitching a ride outweighed the risk of being captured.

“Where are you heading?” the driver asked.

“The spaceport,” Mary said.

“Climb in then,” he said. “I’m Eric, by the way.”

“Thanks, Eric, we really appreciate this,” Brian said.

“So, what are the three of you doing wandering around out here in the middle of nowhere?” Eric finally asked after his curiosity could no longer be contained. “You’re not those runaways that have been all over the news, are you?”

“You’re not going to turn us in, are you?” Ron asked before Brian or Mary could say that they weren’t.

“Of course not,” Eric said. “I hate the empire as much as anyone. I take it you’re going off-world then?”

“I’d like to get to Sontar,” Mary said.

“Sontar, huh? Well it looks like you might just have hitched a ride with the right person. I own a small farm there and I’m actually on my way to do the quarterly reports. I’ll take you with me if you like.”

“That’d be great!” Mary said. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You can start by telling me what really happened to put you in Morgoth’s black books.”

“This is my ship,” Eric said proudly as the spaceport attendant drove it out of the hangar. “It’s a beauty, don’t you think?”

“Very nice,” Brian said. “I bet this must have cost you a pretty penny.”

“Yeah, and with the way the farm’s going I’ll probably die of old age before it’s paid off, but really I don’t know how I’d get by without it now.”

“Well I guess this is it,” Mary said, turning to Brian and Ron. “Thanks for breaking me out and coming with me this far. Take care, both of you.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked. “We’re coming too, aren’t we? Aren’t we, Brian?”

“I don’t know what choice we have,” Brian said. “Morgoth will probably string us up and eat our guts for breakfast if he catches us now that you’ve escaped.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Mary said.

“Brian’s right,” Eric said. “The two of you wouldn’t stand a chance if you stayed here. Now come on, get on board before someone sees you and puts two and two together.”

“QX-374, you have clearance to depart,” the controller finally said, ending a tense few moments as they waited on the tarmac. “Have a nice trip, Eric, and give my regards to Michelle.”

“Thanks Roger, I will,” Eric said in as cheerful a voice as he could muster, and engaged the real-space propulsion.

The small ship rose rapidly while the three passengers sat glued to the window, watching, most likely for the last time, as their home world shrank beneath them. Then in a flash of blue light, it was gone and they were cruising through subspace.

“It’ll take us three hours to get there,” Eric said. “Come on through to the galley and I’ll see what I have in the way of food.”

“What are your plans once we reach Sontar?” Eric said between mouthfuls.

“I don’t really know,” Mary said. “I suppose I thought I’d try to get work on a farm or something.”

“The harvest is coming up and I could do with some able-bodied help on my farm, if you’d like that. I can’t pay any more than the standard rates, but I’ll throw in accommodation and meals for you. Michelle’s a very good cook.”

“That sounds excellent,” Brian said. “What do you think, Mary?”

“Yeah, great,” Mary said, but with less enthusiasm. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help thinking about my parents’ little vegetable garden.”

“I’m really sorry, Mary,” Eric said. “But look, you don’t know for certain that they’re dead. I mean they might just be held captive somewhere. When I get back to Bluehaven I’ll make some discreet enquiries and see what I can find out for you, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks. Um, Eric, why are you doing all this for us?”

“Ten years ago my son was killed by Morgoth. It was some trivial offence, something to do with incomplete paperwork, but

Morgoth decided to set an example of him and had him burnt to death in that dreadful execution stadium of his.”

“That’s awful,” Mary said. “I’m so sorry for you, Eric, so sorry.”

“Thanks. It’s all in the past now, but any chance I get to put a spanner in that monster’s works, well, nothing gives me greater pleasure.”

“The Dolphins say his days are numbered,” Ron piped in.

“They’ve been saying that for thousands of years,” Eric said. “No, he’ll die when he’s ready and not a day before, I reckon, but if it happens during my lifetime I’ll be the first in line to dance on his grave.”

“And I’ll be right behind you,” Ron said. “I promise.”

It was night when they landed outside Eric’s farmhouse on Sontar. Mary had wondered how they were going to get through customs and immigration, but to her surprise, there were no official checks on arriving ships. Eric explained that, in Morgoth’s eyes, the Sontarese could do whatever they liked provided they kept supplying the galaxy with food and clothing.

“He obviously has more important things on his mind, like chasing school children across the galaxy,” he said. “Now come on in and I’ll introduce you to Michelle. She practically runs the farm single-handed for me.”

Michelle was a short stocky woman of middle age with dark hair and an olive complexion. She’d been working for Eric for something like twenty years but had never spoken of her life before that. Eric didn’t even know which planet she’d been born on, only that it obviously wasn’t Bluehaven.

“I’ll get the rooms ready for your guests,” she said after the introductions were made. “There’s some cake in the kitchen if you want to help yourselves.”

“Sometimes I think she’s too efficient,” Eric said. “Come on through and I’ll make you some hot chocolate, and then tomorrow I’ll give you the grand tour.”

The morning was warm and sunny as Eric led them outside. The farmhouse was on the top of a small hill and surrounding it in all directions was an ocean of lush green crops.

“Our main produce here is maize and corn,” he said. “We had good rains in spring and early summer, and this hot dry weather now is ideal for us. Barring any unforeseen disasters we should have a bumper crop this season.”

“When will the harvesting begin?” Mary asked.

“If this weather holds, and the forecasts all say that it should, we ought to be able to start in about a month. Come, I’ll take you around the back to our machinery shed and show you the harvesters.”

Eric led them around to a large metal-clad building. The door was open and as they approached, a tall, wiry dark-skinned man emerged and walked towards them.

“This is Boris, our mechanic cum handyman,” Eric said. “Boris, meet Mary, Brian and Ron who’ll be helping out with the harvest this year.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Boris said as he shook hands with each of them.

“Boris also acts as my overseer during the harvest so I’m sure you’ll get to know each other very well by the time we’re done.”

The four harvesting machines in the shed were bright and shiny and looked eager to get out amongst the crops. Painted an iridescent yellow, each consisted of a central cabin with extendable cutting arms on either side, giving Ron the impression of giant locusts about to take flight.

“They’ve all had their servicing done and are ready to go as soon as Michelle gives the word,” Boris said proudly.

“I can see they’re in fine nick,” Eric said as he walked down to the far end of the building. He pulled open a door, revealing an elderly but serviceable-looking truck.

“Jump up on the back and I’ll take you for a bit of a tour of the property,” he said.

They followed a winding road down the hillside through fields of corn, and then as they approached the river they emerged into a small orchard of fruit trees.

“These are quanga trees,” Eric said once he’d parked the truck on the river bank. “The fruit ripens in late spring and is particularly tasty. It’s very popular with the classier resorts on Shimmel and fetches a good price, giving us some much-needed income away from harvest time.”

“They’re a beautiful-looking tree,” Mary observed.

“Yes, they are,” Eric said. “My father originally established the orchard when he took over the farm from my grandfather. A lot of people laughed at him at the time, but history has proven him right. Come now, I’ll show you another little surprise.”

He drove them across a wooden bridge spanning the river, and up and over the next rise, revealing a small vineyard.

“This was my creation when I took over from Dad,” Eric said proudly. He picked a small bunch of grapes and handed a few to each of them.

Ron sniffed his, and then gingerly placed one in his mouth. As he chewed his look of apprehension changed to a broad grin. “These are very tasty,” he said as he popped the rest into his mouth.

“I’ll let you sample the wine we produce at dinner tonight,” Eric said. “Then tomorrow I might start you off picking this year’s vintage.”

“Sounds good to me,” Brian said.

They climbed back onto the truck and Eric drove on past the vineyard to the fence that marked the boundary of the farm. Ron jumped down and opened the gate for them.

“I’ll take you into Golding, which is the nearest town to us,” Eric said. “It’s about twenty kilometres down the road to the right. We can get some lunch there and then you can have a look around.” He drove through the gate, and Ron quickly closed it behind them and scampered back onto the truck before there was any chance of him being left behind.

The road followed the river northward to the coast, with Golding located right at its mouth. It was a small town, comparable in size to Bringal Vale, but it had a good variety of shops and services and on the seaward side was a very nice-looking ocean beach.

“If you’re into surfing at all feel free to grab the truck and come down here during your time off,” Eric said as they walked out onto the sand. “I often wish I had more time to do that myself. The water’s nice and warm at this time of year so go on in if you like. I’ll wander across the road and get us some takeaway.”

“Last one in’s a rotten egg!” Ron shouted as he sprinted down the sand and dived under a wave, with Brian and Mary close behind. Eric grabbed their discarded clothing and secured it in the truck, then went off in search of food.

It was late when they returned to the farmhouse and Michelle was about to send out a search party. Dinner had been ready half an hour ago, she complained as she ushered them into the dining room. The news was playing on the television as they sat down to eat.

They’d spent most of the afternoon exploring the shops in Golding. Ron’s face had lit up when he discovered a Delphinidae chapel nestled incongruously between a fast food franchise and a bar, and he’d gone in to talk to the Priestess while the others continued with their shopping spree.

“You’re right about this wine,” Ron said as he took another sip. “It really brings out the flavour and essence of the fruit. My father always says you can tell a good wine from...”

“Hush!” Mary yelled as she grabbed the remote control and turned the volume up.

“In breaking news on the Anderson family tragedy in Bringal Vale, there are reports coming through that an arrest has been made. We cross now to our reporter at the Palace.”

“Thank you Anne. I have with me Palace spokesman Hal Farley. Hal, what can you tell me about these latest rumours?”

“Earlier today the Watch-house Superintendent from Bringal Vale was brought in for questioning and he has now been charged with setting the fire that destroyed the Anderson house.”

“How extraordinary. Is there any word on the fate of the Andersons themselves or the missing children?”

“Yes, the Andersons were being held captive in a remote farmhouse on the outskirts of Bringal Vale and are now being questioned. We’ve had reports that the runaway children may have fled off-world but this has not yet been confirmed. We are making every effort to locate them and reunite them with their families.”

“I take it then that all charges against the girl have now been dropped.”

“Of course. If she or her friends are watching this broadcast, I would ask her to call me here at the Palace and we’ll arrange to get her back to her parents as quickly as possible.”

“That’s fantastic news!” Brian said, jumping up and down with excitement. “I bet you can’t wait to get home now, Mary.”

“I, I just can’t believe it!” Mary said with tears rolling down her cheeks. “After all this it’s, it’s finally over, and Mum and Dad are alive and okay. Do you mind if I make that phone call?”

“Not at all,” said Eric.

Ron, however, was staring at the screen, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. “I wouldn’t be too hasty to make that call just yet,” he said. “I think it might be a trap.”

“What do you mean?” Mary asked.

“Morgoth wants you for something. That’s how this all started, remember? I don’t think he’s given up just because of the arrest of that gaoler.”

“Ron’s right,” Eric said. “Look, make that call and let your parents know you’re okay, but use the phone in my office. It has a scrambler on it and they won’t be able to trace it.”

* * *

“You were right, my Lord,” Farley said as he knelt before Morgoth. “The girl has just called in.”

“Have you traced it?” Morgoth asked, his face beaming with anticipation.

“No, my Lord, she was using a scrambled phone. We have ascertained that the call came from Sontar, but we can’t locate it any more precisely than that.”

“Accursed wench!” Morgoth bellowed. “Send the fleet to Sontar and place a blockade on all subspace flights into or out of that system. Find her!”

“Yes, my Lord.”

* * *

The grape-picking went exceptionally well. The weather remained warm and sunny and each day, after they’d picked their quota, they would jump in the truck and head for the beach at Golding.

The grapes were crushed using the traditional method, and a competition soon developed to see whose feet would be stained the most. Michelle was to be the judge, and when the last of the grapes had been reduced to pulp, she declared Mary the winner. Brian and Ron both thought there was some favouritism going on as their feet were clearly darker, but they accepted the verdict in good humour.

Eric departed for Bluehaven soon afterwards, saying he wouldn’t be back for a few months, and then Boris took the threesome under his wing and taught them how to use the harvesters. The serious work had begun.

It had been a bad week for Mary. On Monday, the weather had abruptly changed as the temperature plummeted and heavy rain clouds moved in from the sea. The harvesters, temperamental beasts at the best of times, started clogging up on the wet foliage and then on Tuesday morning one of them became bogged in the mud at the bottom of the hill. Boris told them that they’d have to

do the rest of the harvest by hand and gave them each a heavy scythe to use.

Ron, it seemed, was something of a mud lark and was having a great time frolicking about in the rain in just his swimming trunks and wielding his scythe like a madman, but Mary and Brian had donned the thick oilskins Michelle had given them and were making heavy weather of it. Brian in particular, was having trouble keeping his footing in the slippery conditions, and after falling over three times in quick succession, he suggested they should drive down to Golding and buy some gumboots.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ron said. “Being forced to put shoes on in Morgoth’s palace is one thing, but it’s a Delphinidae tradition since time immemorial that the people of Bluehaven have always gone barefoot. You’re talking sacrilege, Brian.”

“Oh for Loria’s sake, will you stop it with that Delphinidae nonsense, Ron,” Brian moaned. “We’re not on Bluehaven any more, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Don’t you use the Blessed Mother’s name in vain!” Ron cried.

“I think Brian’s right,” Mary said. “We need something on our feet in this weather.”

Ron was completely taken aback. “Mary, I thought you’d be on my side in this, I mean after what happened in Morgoth’s palace, I mean you of all people.”

“I didn’t mean to leave my shoes behind that day, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she said. “It was an accident, an oversight. Why can’t you just grow up a little, Ron?”

“I, I, what do you mean?” Ron stammered, then turned and ran off into the corn. Mary went after him, but Brian just muttered to himself and went to find the truck.

He returned an hour later with two pairs of gumboots and gave one set to Mary. She went to put them on, but an unexpected feeling of revulsion came over her and she just couldn’t bring herself to put her feet into them.

“I’m sorry, Brian, but really, you know, I think maybe Ron was right after all,” she said.

“I told you so,” Ron said, and Brian exploded. He began throwing wild punches at him, but Ron, being lighter and more nimble, easily ducked under them and head-butted Brian in the stomach, winding him. They both fell to the ground and were wrestling furiously in the mud when Boris came running down.

“What the hell is going on here?” he roared. Brian and Ron disentangled themselves and gingerly stood up.

“You two can put in an extra hour’s work tonight for that. Don’t let me catch you doing anything like that again or there’ll be hell to pay, I promise you. And put some boots on, for goodness sake. Crazy bloody elves!”

Brian pulled on his oilskins and gumboots, Ron picked up his scythe and went back to work, still wearing just his swimming trunks in spite of the deepening cold, and Mary started to sneeze.

She slept fitfully that night, and throughout the following morning her fever worsened. At lunch time she tried to eat but couldn’t force anything down, and then when she went to stand, the world sparkled into blackness and she fell in a dead faint.

Brian and Ron managed to carry her back to the farmhouse and put her into bed. Michelle came in and placed her hand on her forehead.

“She’s running a good fever,” she said. “I’ll make her some broth.”

“But she needs medicine,” Brian said. “Is there a doctor anywhere nearby?”

“There are no doctors on Sontar,” Michelle said. “This is a world of peasants and slaves, ruled by off-world lords, and if anyone falls ill or dies they can be easily replaced.”

“That’s disgusting,” Ron said.

“That’s the way it is, and how it will always be,” Michelle said. “We are not all as privileged as the spoiled little children of Bluehaven.” With that, she left the room.

Mary couldn’t keep Michelle’s broth down, and her fever continued to worsen as the afternoon wore on.

“She needs help,” Brian muttered.

“We should take her to the chapel in Golding,” Ron said. “The Delphinidae priestesses are supposed to have healing powers.”

Not being able to think of anything better, Brian reluctantly agreed and went to bring the truck around to the front door.

The Priestess gave Mary a herbal potion to drink. “This will slow the fever a little, but I’m afraid it won’t cure it,” she said. “We really need to get her to the temple on Bluehaven. I’ll see if I can arrange transport.”

She left the room, but returned a few minutes later with a gloomy expression on her face.

“The emperor has thrown up a blockade around Sontar and we can’t get ships in or out,” she said.

“Why can’t that monster just leave us alone?” Ron moaned.

“What do you mean?” the Priestess asked. “Oh, you’re not those three runaways that everyone’s looking for, are you?”

Brian nodded but said nothing.

“Come with me then,” she said. “We have another way of getting you to Bluehaven.”

The Priestess led them down a flight of stairs and into the basement of the chapel. She moved aside a curtain and some panelling, revealing a doorway filled with a shimmering light.

“There’s another realm we call Sheol that spans the entire universe,” she said. “It’s a dangerous place but there are Dolphins who inhabit it and can carry people across if they’re in great need. I’ll ask them to take you to the temple, so just step through here and wait for them to come to you.”

Ron and Brian helped Mary through the doorway and into a blackness filled with murmuring voices.

“It’s freezing in here,” Brian said.

“No it’s not,” said Ron, who was still wearing only swimming trunks. “Well, maybe a little.”

The coldness gradually changed into intense heat, and soon that faded away to a feeling of nothingness. Mary felt dizzy, but then the fever engulfed her and she remembered no more.

The Acolytes

Mary woke in unfamiliar surroundings, cocooned between clean white sheets in a warm and comfortable bed. Above her a fan slowly turned, while from beyond the room came the comforting sounds of people going about their daily chores.

During her fever-induced dreams, she had again found herself in the chapel with Morgoth and his grandson.

“Your son is dead,” Morgoth had said, “and now my grandson here is mine!”

This time she didn’t scream, but instead the boy spoke to her.

“I’m sorry, Mary, but there’s no other way.”

“No wait, Mark, there is,” she said. “Listen to me.”

But before she could say any more a curl of smoke began to rise from the casket and it exploded in flame.

She thought she had woken then, but in what must have been another dream she was riding on the back of a Dolphin, through a darkness so black it froze her heart. Then the darkness disappeared and she was flying over a beautiful harbour city. She swept down past a metal bridge that spanned the water in a single elegant arch and flew south over warehouses and freight terminals, then over houses and apartment buildings as she came closer to the sea. The Dolphin set her down on the roof of what she took to be an inn, and spoke inside her head. *“Bear witness, and when the time comes, remember.”* With that, the Dolphin vanished.

Before her stood an elderly dark-skinned man arguing with a young man whose mop of blonde hair covered his face. As he turned, the breeze blew it aside, revealing his bright blue Elvish eyes. Their minds touched, and she realised this man was her son.

“All right, Elko, I’ll do it,” he said to the older man in a language she didn’t know but yet could understand, “but if this goes wrong and I die I’ll come back and haunt you.”

“I’m sure you would too, but don’t worry, I’ve got it all worked out.”

Her son took a mouthful of amber liquid from the glass he was holding, but instead of swallowing, he swirled it in his mouth and spat it back into the glass. Then he splashed a little over his face and shirt, put the glass down and waited as the old man went back inside the building.

A few moments later, another man came running out onto the roof.

“What are you doing out here, Aaron?” he called.

“I am a Jedi, really,” Aaron slurred with an alcohol-affected voice, and yet when their minds had touched moments earlier he had been completely sober. “Just watch this.”

He ran towards the edge of the roof and leapt off.

Mary looked over the side and saw him sprawled on the ground, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. The old man was leaning over him, checking his vital signs, but then he slowly stood and shook his head to the crowd that had gathered around. He pulled a device from his pocket and spoke into it, and a few minutes later a vehicle with flashing lights arrived and men in white uniforms took her son away.

* * *

“How are you feeling?” asked the young woman who was leaning over her.

“Thirsty, I’m very thirsty,” Mary whispered.

“Here, sip this, but very slowly,” she said, handing her a glass of water.

“It’s good to have you back with us again,” Ron said as he and Brian stepped into the room. Ron was wearing white shorts with a green trim, the uniform of a Delphinidae acolyte.

“You’ve joined the Order, I see,” Mary said.

“Yes, while watching them helping you I heard my calling.”

“I’m pleased for you, Ron. I know it’s been what you’ve really wanted all along. What about you, Brian?”

“Me? No, I’m going back home with my parents this afternoon. I wanted to wait until you were okay, but I really need to get back to school.”

“I understand, Brian. Thanks for everything you’ve done for me. I’ll be forever in your debt.” She sat up and waved him forward, then hugged him and kissed him on the nose. “Take care and keep in touch.”

“You’re not coming back to Bringal Vale?” Brian asked.

“No, I’ll be staying here for now at least. I think the Dolphins have plans for me.”

“You’re getting as bad as Ron.”

“You’re probably right, and maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Ron blushed, and then walked over to the bedside and gave Mary a hug.

Ron and Mary were seated amongst the group of about a dozen other acolytes as High Priestess Loral walked in. She was wearing the plain white gown that designated her standing within the Order and was clearly heavy with child. It was widely rumoured that her successor would be born within the month.

“I welcome you all to the Order,” she began. “You are each here in answer to your own personal calling, and the Order places no demands or restrictions on you, only that your actions may not cause harm to the Dolphins, the Order or any of its members. Although I hope you will find our classes interesting and worthwhile, you are under no obligation to attend and there are no formal examinations to sit or assignments to complete. Advancement within the Order is at the sole discretion of the Dolphins. My door, and that of Reverend Mother Lorate, is always open if you have any questions or problems that you would like to discuss with us in private, and there is also our informal Friday night discussion group which you are all most welcome to attend.

“I will begin today with a brief history of the Order. When the first settlers from Meridian arrived on Bluehaven they had with them two children, Damien and his sister Lorna. The children were befriended by the Dolphins, and learned to communicate with them. The Dolphins learned much from them about worlds beyond the sea, and when the children reached adulthood, they were each given gifts. Damien, who wanted to be an explorer of the universe, was given the ability to extract energy from subspace, giving him a greatly extended life, a resistance to extremes of temperature and the ability to heal himself and others of injury and disease. Lorna, who had expressed a wish to learn more from the Dolphins and to teach others in their ways, was given the power of telepathic empathy, and this has been passed down from generation to generation until now all of the Bluehaven people carry a little of her gift.

“It has been frequently argued that Damien’s gift was by far the greater of the two, but there are equally convincing arguments that it was really the other way around. Certainly it is acknowledged that Lorna’s gift, and the Delphinidae Order that she established, has persisted until this day whereas Damien’s gift, save for Morgoth, disappeared with the last of the Barefooters and that even then, their powers were a corruption of the original. For myself, I view both gifts of equal value.

“After subspace was discovered and other worlds colonised, disputes arose and the galaxy was plunged into war. Damien, who returned from his explorations to aid the casualties, was captured by the military and had his DNA dissected to discover the secret to his gift. A virus was created to implant this modified DNA into soldiers to create a super-army, but those who received it soon died a terrible death. The offspring of those infected with the virus survived, however, and became the race of Barefooters, so-named because the ability to use subspace energy for metabolism carried with it a side-effect that made it impossible for them to wear shoes or anything more than a minimal amount of clothing.

“The Barefooters, being virtually immortal, quickly ended the wars and brought five thousand years of peace to the galaxy.

Eventually, they became corrupted by their own power, however, and the society they ruled fell into decay. Then a young Barefooter named Morgoth came to Bluehaven and became Damien's star pupil. Together they overthrew the ruling elite and breathed new life into the galaxy, but the reprieve was short-lived as Morgoth fell victim to the very lust for power that he had originally fought so hard against.

"He became estranged from his sons Martyn and Gallad. Martyn was exiled and fled to Bluehaven where he met and fell in love with Loria, daughter of the High Priestess. Loria bore him a daughter, but when Morgoth found out he had Martyn and Loria executed. Their daughter was hidden by the Delphinidae monks and survived, her line continuing to this very day. I am a direct descendent, mother to daughter, of that child.

"Morgoth, in his rage, took over the old Delphinidae temple on the western side of the island, making it his palace, and those who fled re-established the Order here. Gallad and his followers regrouped on Meridian and formed a last alliance against Morgoth in what became known as the War of the Barefooters. In the end, though, Gallad was forced to flee from the galaxy and Meridian was almost destroyed before being placed in a time freeze. Nothing more has been heard of Gallad and his people and it must be presumed that they all perished, lost and far from home.

"Since then an uneasy truce has existed between the Imperials and the Delphinidae. We keep mostly to ourselves, learning from the Dolphins and teaching those who come to us. We have no army, save for the Temple guards, and Morgoth could easily destroy us if he wished, but he realises that to do so would destabilise his empire, possibly beyond redemption, and so he is content to tolerate us and even assist us with supplies and services. The essential message of the Dolphins' teachings though is of tolerance and co-operation, and in this we are the antithesis of Morgoth's empire.

"Still, the Dolphins speak of hope and predict that some day, possibly sooner than we think, Morgoth's rule will be brought to an end by a child from a distant world. There is a priestess named

Maleena who is frozen in time on board the space station orbiting Meridian, awaiting the arrival of that child, and she alone knows the secret codes needed to release that planet from the freeze.

“I will give you now a list of references that you may wish to follow up if you are interested in learning more about our history. For example, Damien’s journals from the War of the Barefooters have been preserved and translated into the common tongue, and much can be learned of the early days from them.

“So, are there any questions?”

Ron raised his hand. “You said that, according to the prophecy, our saviour will be a child from a distant world.”

“That’s correct.”

“I guess that means it won’t be me then.”

“Not unless you were born on Huntress.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Does that mean the saviour will come from Huntress then?” another student asked.

“No, not necessarily. I only said Huntress because it’s our most distant world, and that’s the interpretation most scholars place on the prophecy. I’m not convinced, though, and my own feeling is that he’ll come from somewhere much further away.”

“Like the galaxy that Gallad and the Barefooters fled to?” Mary asked.

“Yes, that’s my interpretation,” Loral said. Mary shuddered, as if a goose had just walked over her grave.

“So, what did you think?” Mary asked.

“I think she’s very pregnant,” Ron said.

“About the stuff she was telling us, silly.”

“I guess I really don’t envy the kid who’s supposed to come along and knock off Morgoth.”

“You’re not disappointed it’s not you?”

“Not any more.”

“Do you think Morgoth knows about the prophecy?”

“He’s bound to, but I bet he doesn’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“Megalomaniacs like him never do. They think they’re invincible until someone who doesn’t know any better comes along and proves them wrong.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Say, do you want to go for a swim?”

“Don’t I always?”

As Mary pulled her acolyte’s gown off over her head, Ron found himself staring at her naked form and immediately turned away.

“Are you sure we’re allowed to go skinny-dipping here?” he asked.

“Yeah, everyone does. Get your shorts off and come on in.”

He looked around to make sure the beach was deserted, then nervously pulled off his shorts and ran as quickly as he could into the water.

* * *

They lay stretched out on the sand, letting the warm breeze and late afternoon sunshine dry them off.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ron,” Mary said.

“Me too.”

Ron closed his eyes in thought and then, arriving at a decision that would change the rest of his life, reached over and gently took hold of her hand. For the slightest moment, she flinched, but then she relaxed and squeezed his hand in return. They lay there in silence until the sun had set and the stars came out.

One of those stars was much brighter than the others, bright enough to cast a weak shadow on a moonless night, and around that star orbited the planet Meridian.

“I can’t look at that star now without thinking about what happened there,” Mary said.

“Yeah, I know. I wonder what became of the people when the planet was frozen in time. Are they just in suspended animation and will wake up as if nothing has changed when the time freeze ends, or are they aware of what’s happened and trapped in some sort of limbo?”

“I don’t know. When we sleep we dream, so have they been dreaming for the last million years?”

“When we went into that dark place called Sheol there were lots of murmuring voices. Do you think they could be their spirits?”

“Could be, I suppose.”

“We have to do something to help them.”

“Your heart’s in the right place, Ron, but...”

“No buts, Mary. Too many people have been saying ‘but’ for far too long, and the end result is that a million years on, Meridian is still frozen and Morgoth is still ruling the galaxy. Now maybe we have to wait until that kid comes along to knock him off, but at the very least we have to be ready to help him and get things moving in the right direction once Morgoth is gone.”

“You’re right of course, my love,” Mary said as she leaned over and kissed him, “but before we can save the galaxy we’d better go and have some dinner.”

Ron stretched out on his bed but was too excited to sleep. Finally, he gave up tossing and turning, and went out to the library. He quickly buried himself in a book on the War of the Barefooters and the last days of Meridian, reading with detached horror of the atrocities inflicted on the people of that world by Morgoth and his forces.

Eventually his eyelids drooped as the book slipped from his hands and fell to the floor, and...

...he was walking with Mary and their son on a bright sunny day. They were filled with happiness and joy, but as the sky began to darken, there came a deep rumbling from beneath the ground. Suddenly he and the boy were thrown to one side while Mary was thrown to the other as a deep fissure opened between them.

“Quick, Mary, jump across before it gets too wide!” he cried.

She stood and took a few steps towards the growing chasm, but faltered.

“I can’t, Ron, it’s too far!”

Ron fell to his knees and cried as the gap widened and Mary disappeared into the darkness, but then a hand fell on his shoulder.

“It’s all right, Ron,” Brian said. “She’s gone and now only your son stands in our way.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked.

“Give me the boy, Ron, he has to die. Can’t you see that?”

“No! No, you can’t have him Brian! Leave us alone!”

“Give him the boy, Ron,” Morgoth said as he emerged from the darkness and stood behind Brian. “Give him the boy, Ron, give him the boy, give him the boy, Ron, boy, Ron, Ron...”

“Ron?” Mary asked, shaking him awake.

“Huh? What? Where am I?”

Mary led him back to her room and into her bed. In the hours before dawn, they made love, and in their union the man who would ultimately lead the Delphinidae to freedom was conceived.

* * *

Ron and Mary were woken by the ringing of the bells in the tower. It had been a month since they’d started sleeping together and they’d planned on seeing the High Priestess that morning to seek permission to marry. They ran outside and joined the throng of people standing around in the courtyard.

“What’s going on?” Mary asked Joanne, one of her classmates.

“It’s High Priestess Loral.”

“What’s happened, is she okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. She gave birth to a daughter this morning.”

“Have they given her a name yet?” Ron asked.

“Yes, she’s to be called Lorett.”

“Why do the High Priestesses all have similar names?” he asked.

“It’s a tradition that goes right back to Loria,” Mary explained. “They always give their daughter a similar-sounding name for good luck, I suppose.”

“The first-born daughter becomes High Priestess when she marries, is that right?” Ron asked.

“Yes, that’s right, or upon the death of the High Priestess if her daughter is unmarried. There are various other contingency clauses to deal with the High Priestess dying without producing a daughter, but they’ve never needed to be put into practice.”

“You’re right of course; the succession has been an unbroken line since Loria. It’s pretty amazing when you think about it.”

“Almost impossible you’d think.”

There was feasting and dancing all morning, and in the afternoon Loral emerged holding Lorett in her arms and made her way down into the sea with the aid of her consort Arthur.

“What are they doing?” Ron asked.

“It’s for the Dolphins to meet the new baby and give her their blessing,” Mary said. As they watched, a pod of Dolphins appeared around them and each came forward in turn to inspect the infant.

“Baby Lorett has been acknowledged by the Dolphins as the true and rightful heir to the High Priestess,” Arthur proclaimed as they stepped from the sea. Aides swarmed around them and wrapped them in towels as they made their way back up to the temple, then the bells began ringing and more food and drink appeared.

“Um, Ron?” Mary asked, thinking this was as good a time as any. He was well fed and had drunk his fair share of wine, and so was unlikely to scream and run away before she could stop him.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Um, I think I might be, well, pregnant,” she stammered.

“Yeah, I thought you might be,” he said, grinning. “I was wondering when you’d actually come out and say something.”

“You monster!” she said, poking him in the ribs. “You could have made it a whole lot easier for me if you’d said something.”

“I wasn’t really sure and I thought you’d go bananas if I said anything and you weren’t.”

“Yeah, I probably would’ve. You don’t mind, do you? I mean about becoming a father?”

“Mind? No, it’s fantastic, it’s what I’ve always wanted.” He took hold of her gently and kissed her. “We should try to see the High Priestess about getting married as soon as she’s back on deck.”

“I’m sorry, but I am unable to approve your wedding at this time,” High Priestess Loral said. “As you know, marriages within the Order require the approval of the Dolphins, and while that is usually just a formality, they have requested that in your case any decision be held off until the mid-summer festival.”

“You’ve already spoken to them about us?” Mary asked.

“Yes, I’ve been expecting you to come to me for some weeks now. I am aware that you are carrying a child, Mary, and I assure you that you will have your answer well before the birth.”

“Is our current, um, sleeping arrangement acceptable?” Ron asked.

“Yes, of course, Ron. I’m so happy that you have both found love in each other, and I’m sure everything will be fine come the festival. For now just consider yourselves married in all but name and enjoy each other’s company as much as you can.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” Mary said, and they both bowed and left the room.

* * *

Mary was engrossed in the book she was reading, and jumped as a hand fell on her shoulder. She turned, expecting it to be Ron, but it wasn’t.

“How are you, Mary?”

“Brian! What are you doing here?”

“School finished for the year last week, so I thought I’d come up north and see how you and Ron were getting on,” he said, taking note of her now quite obvious pregnancy. “I assume Ron’s the father.”

“Yes, he is. We wanted to marry earlier but the High Priestess won’t allow it until after the festival.”

“Well let me know as soon as you find out what’s happening, and I’ll make sure I’m here.”

“I’m sure Ron will want you to be Best Man anyway.”

“So how are you, Mary? Are you holding up okay?”

“Yes, everything’s fine with me and the baby. It’s going to be a boy, they say.”

“Have you decided on a name yet?”

“No, it’s supposed to be bad luck to choose a name before the baby’s actually born.”

“I thought you might have decided to call him Aaron after all those dreams you had.”

“I’m not sure, honestly. Anyway, let’s go and find Ron. I know he’ll be delighted to see you.”

“Brian, what are you doing here?” Ron exclaimed.

“I thought I’d better come and check up on you two, but obviously I’m about eight months too late.”

“You’re not jealous or anything, are you?”

“Not at all, I always thought you and Mary would eventually come together. I mean it, Ron, I couldn’t be happier for you both.”

“In that case you can be Best Man at the wedding, if the Dolphins allow it that is.” Ron’s expression darkened a little as he spoke.

“I’m sure there’ll be no problem. It’s just a formality, that’s all.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So how’s everything back in Bringal Vale?”

“Oh, boring as ever,” Brian said. “My parents send their regards to you both, by the way.”

“So what are your plans for next year?” Mary asked.

“That’s my other bit of news. I’ve been accepted into the College of Law on Cornipus.”

“That’s wonderful, Brian,” Mary said. “What made you decide to study law?”

“Well after what we saw of our legal system earlier this year, I thought I’d try to do something about it. When I’m Director of Justice I’ll make sure nothing like that can ever happen again.”

“Good on you, Brian,” Ron said. “By then Mary and I will have overthrown Morgoth so you should have no trouble at all.”

Early the next morning Ron took Brian bushwalking up to the ridge west of the temple. Mary decided not to join them in view of her condition and instead said that she’d prepare something special for lunch.

“Have you heard anything from Eric?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, he called in a few weeks ago,” Brian said. “He said Boris and Michelle managed to get the rest of the harvest in and they received a good price this year, so everything’s rosy. He said he’d send us some quanga fruit in time for the mid-summer festivities.”

“I’m looking forward to trying it. It’s good to hear everything’s going well for him. To be honest I really wouldn’t mind going back to work on his farm some day.”

“I think I’ll pass. The grape-picking was fun but I guess I’m not cut out for harvesting corn in the rain and mud.”

They reached the highest point of the ridge and paused to take in the view of the western side of the island. Inevitably their gaze was drawn towards Morgoth’s palace.

“That place looks evil even from this far away,” Ron said.

“Yeah, it certainly dominates the landscape.”

“Some day, I swear, it’s going to be reduced to rubble.”

“I guess so, although just getting rid of the landlord would be enough for me.”

Ron turned towards his friend and his expression darkened.

“Brian, I want you to promise that you’ll never harm my son.”

“What?”

“I had a dream, and in it you and Morgoth wanted to take our son and kill him.”

“It was just a dream, Ron. Surely you know I’d never do a thing like that.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry Brian. I guess I’m just nervous with the baby almost due.”

“No worries, mate. I understand completely, but, hey, it’s me, and I’m not about to turn into a child-molesting monster.”

“No, it was silly and I’m an idiot for even mentioning it.”

“My uncle always thought you were a bit of a muddle-head.”

“I know,” Ron laughed. “Come on, let’s get moving and out of sight of that place.”

* * *

It was mid-morning on the day of the mid-summer festival and all the acolytes were lined up on the beach awaiting their interview with the Dolphins. Some would be elevated to the priesthood while others might be asked to spend another year as an acolyte or even to leave the Order altogether.

Ron and Mary entered the water and swam out to where the Dolphins were waiting.

“We’ve been expecting you both,” one of them spoke telepathically inside their heads. *“We understand you are carrying a child, Mary, and that you and Ron wish to marry. Is that correct?”*

“Yes,” Mary said.

“For now we would ask you to wait, and to return to us when the baby is born. You are to be offered a choice, and it will be easier for you to decide then.

“You have both shown strong commitment to your studies and the Order, and we are pleased at least to be able to elevate you to Priest and Priestess respectively. The High Priestess will assign you to your duties.”

“What was all that about being offered a choice?” Ron asked after they had returned to the beach.

“I have no idea, and I really don’t like any of this. I don’t know why they can’t just let us marry and be done with it,” Mary said.

“There will be high stakes resting on your decision,” the High Priestess said from behind them, “and the Dolphins have good reasons for asking you to wait.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” Mary said.

“Anyway, allow me to congratulate both of you on your elevation to the priesthood,” Loral said as she handed each their amulet, a tiny dolphin cast in silver and suspended on a fine silver chain. “Your duties between now and the birth of your child will be confined to the Temple, and I think I might begin by putting you to work in the library. Our cataloguing does seem to be falling behind our acquisitions.”

Before they could say any more she turned and walked over to another of the acolytes.

“How did we get ourselves into all this?” Ron asked. Mary just shook her head and sighed.

Three weeks later the baby was born. He was on the smallish side and it was an easy delivery for Mary, and both were pronounced to be in good health by the attending physicians. Ron, however, had fainted and struck his head when he fell, suffering a mild concussion.

When everyone was ready, they walked down the sand and into the water, this time escorted by Loral and Arthur. Mary held the baby against her chest, protecting him from the small waves as they passed through the breakers to where the Dolphins were waiting.

Each Dolphin approached the baby and then they conferred for a few moments.

“We offer our congratulations to both of you and thank you for your patience. Have you thought of a name for the child?”

Mary hesitated, trying to reach a decision, before finally speaking. “Last year I had several dreams in which I had a son named Aaron. The dreams were, let me say, less than pleasant. Are we to give him that name?”

“No, this child is not the one in your dreams. Do you have another name that you might choose?”

Mary breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes, I would like to name him Kevin.”

“Are you in agreement with this name, Ron?”

“Yes, I am.”

“In that case, we accept your choice of name. May your life be long and fulfilling, Kevin of the Delphinidae.”

“What about the question of our marriage?” Mary asked. “You said last time that we would have to make a choice about something.”

“Ah yes, you do indeed have a choice to make. If you wish, you may now proceed with your marriage and spend your days either within the Order or without. You can expect to lead long and healthy lives together; however should you choose that path, we will lose all hope of freeing this galaxy from Morgoth for the foreseeable future.

“The other option for you to consider is perilous and we must warn you that the chance of success is slim. If you decide to aid us, you will be parted, perhaps forever, and the Temple will be unable to help you.

“The descendants of the Barefooters are awakening to their heritage in the distant galaxy to which they fled. Mary, you will need to travel to that galaxy and a planet named Earth, where you will wed a native of that world and bear him a son whose name shall be Aaron. There he will become the guardian of Jason who will in turn be the father of a boy named Mark. It is Mark of whom the prophecies speak, the one who, with Aaron’s help, will bring about the downfall of Morgoth.”

Mary gasped, and Ron took a firm hold of her to prevent her from falling over in the water.

“You don’t have to decide now, as we’re sure you’ll want to discuss this both between yourselves and with Loral, but be aware that time is short and every delay adds to the risks that you’ll face.

“Go now, and may the choice you make be the right one.”

“So what do you think?” Mary asked once they’d returned to the sand.

“I say we should take option one, get married and settle down somewhere with our son,” Ron said.

“Are you serious? What happened to my ‘no buts’ Ron? Nine months ago you were saying that everyone should do their bit to get rid of Morgoth, and now that we’re given our chance you’re turning your back on it?”

“We have a child now, that’s the difference. Even the Dolphins said there was only a slim chance of their plan working. Are you really telling me you want to go off to some primitive planet in another galaxy somewhere, marry someone you don’t even know and have his kid?”

“Of course I don’t want to. What I want is to spend the rest of my life with you, Kevin and any more children we might have, but I don’t know if I could live with myself if I turned my back on the chance to help rid the galaxy of Morgoth.”

“So you’ll be going then, I take it,” Ron said, trying to sound aggrieved but not succeeding.

“I have to, Ron. As much as I love you and little Kevin, I can’t just turn my back on my destiny. Remember those dreams I had? I know now what they meant. That boy Mark will come to Meridian whether I do this or not, but if Aaron’s not with him, Morgoth will seduce him and turn him to his own ends. And Aaron won’t even exist if I don’t go.”

“Oh Mary,” Ron said, but words failed him then and he could no longer hold back the flood of tears. Mary took hold of him and folded herself around him.

“Whatever happens, Ron, I’ll always love you,” she whispered, and then her tears began to flow as well.

A Parting of the Ways

The spaceport was bustling with travellers as Mary, Ron and Brian made their way to the check-in counter. Ron glanced nervously about, looking for any imperial presence. He hadn't wanted Mary to leave the protection of the Temple but she'd insisted on coming, so in the end they'd compromised and brought along four Delphinidae guardsmen for her protection.

Brian reached the front of the queue and handed his booking details and passport to the attendant while Ron helped load his baggage onto the scales.

"Have you been to Cornipus before?" the attendant asked.

"No, this will be my first trip off-world, actually," Brian said. As their journey to Sontar had been undocumented he had no intention of mentioning it.

"Well be prepared for something totally unlike anything you've ever seen. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time there. They say the colleges on Cornipus are the best in the galaxy."

"So I've heard. I've been looking forward to it ever since I was notified of my scholarship."

"I hope your studies go well for you. Right, here's your boarding pass, and your flight will be leaving from gate four. Boarding will be at ten-thirty but make sure you're in the gate lounge at least fifteen minutes before then, in case there are any last minute changes."

The gate lounge was already well filled with travellers when they arrived.

"It looks like you're going to have a full ship," Mary said.

"Yeah, luckily it's only a short trip," Brian said. "I've heard there's not much leg room on these modern cruisers."

"They don't call them the cattle cruisers for nothing," Ron said.

“I guess I can’t really complain as the scholarship is paying for the flight.”

“Speaking of the scholarship, have you any idea of what your accommodation will be like?”

“Pretty basic, I think. It’s a shared room in Billington Hall, but they reckon the beds are comfortable and the food’s pretty good, so I can’t complain.”

“My Dad was in Billington and he said things got pretty rowdy at times,” Ron said. “There were three ale houses all within walking distance and they were well patronised by the residents.”

“Now don’t you go spending all your time drinking and carrying on, and let your studies slip,” Mary said.

“Yes mother.”

“I’m serious, Brian. You’ve been given a wonderful opportunity to do something good with your life and you don’t want to squander it.”

“Hey, it’s me, remember?”

“Sorry, I guess I’ve become used to having to nag Ron all the time,” she said.

Before Ron could respond, the chimes sounded and the attendant announced that boarding would commence shortly.

“Good luck, Brian, and keep in touch, okay?” Ron said.

“I will. Now take good care of little Kevin or you’ll have me to answer to when I get back.”

Mary glanced at Ron before turning back to Brian and giving him a hug and a kiss on the nose. “Now go and do Bringal Vale proud,” she said.

“I hope everything goes well for you too, Mary,” Brian said. He hugged her again, and then picked up his backpack and joined the queue at the gate.

Brian squeezed himself into his seat. Next to him was a fat salesman from Hazler, who insisted on telling him his life story before lift-off.

“Then there was the time I was selling refrigerators on Frizian...” he droned on. “Everyone in the office thought I had no

hope, but I showed them all. You should've seen the look on Fitzwig's face when I came back with a full order book. He..."

Brian was spared the story of whatever Fitzwig had done as the flight attendant's voice boomed out of the overhead speakers. *"Welcome aboard Imperial Aerospace's flight 704 to Cornipus, Shimmel and Hazler. Everything is in readiness for our departure so would you please make sure all of your carry-on luggage is secured in the overhead lockers or under the seat in front of you. On behalf of our flight crew I thank you for choosing Imperial and hope you have an enjoyable flight."*

Before the salesman could start up again the hum of the real-space engines began building, and a few moments later they were climbing out of the atmosphere and into the subspace transfer orbit.

"Good morning, this is Captain Armstrong and with me on the flight deck today is First Officer Blake. Our transit time through subspace to Cornipus will be approximately forty minutes. Our flight crew will be serving a light refreshment as soon as we make the jump, so sit back, relax and enjoy the trip."

It was raining heavily when Brian walked out of the terminal building in the Shingle City spaceport on Cornipus, and he was soaked through by the time he found the bus to the college. One of his bags had been lost in transit as well, but he'd been assured this was a common occurrence and that it should turn up in a week or two.

The bus trip seemed to take forever, winding at first through narrow streets surrounded by warehouses and shipping terminals, and then passing through endless residential areas and huge retail districts. Finally they crossed a broad river on an ornate suspension bridge and entered the grounds of the College of Law.

Billington Hall looked cold and gloomy under the grey skies, but inside it was warm and cosy and Brian's spirits lifted a little. His room was on the third floor, and offered a nice view across the playing fields to the river and the mist-shrouded mountains

beyond. He pulled off his wet clothing and made himself a cup of hot chocolate before starting to unpack.

“Damn,” he said to himself as he realised that most of his clothes were in the lost bag. He rummaged through his surviving bag and eventually found a pair of shorts and a pullover that had seen better days, and put them on just as a knock came on the door and his room-mate entered.

“Hi, I’m Joshua,” he said.

“I’m Brian,” Brian said as he shook his hand.

“Say, you’re an Elf, aren’t you?” Joshua asked. Brian cringed but tried not to show it.

“Yes, I’m from Bluehaven.”

“I’m a Cornipean, from Benzania on the other side of the planet. Have you ever been there?”

“No, this is my first time off-world,” Brian lied.

“Well I hope you like it here. The weather’s not always this bad.”

“That’s good to know. Would you like some hot chocolate? I’ve just made some.”

“Yeah, thanks Brian.”

While Joshua sipped his chocolate, Brian flicked on the terminal and began composing an e-mail.

‘Dear Ron and Mary,

So far so bad. On the flight here I had a fat salesman sitting next to me who wouldn’t stop talking the whole time, then when I arrived it turned out one of my bags hadn’t. They reckon this happens all the time and I should get it in a week or two.

The weather here is cold and wet – you’d love it Ron! Of course, all my warm clothes were in the lost bag. At least the accommodation is nice with a good view across the river to the mountains. My room-mate’s name is Joshua and in spite of being Cornipean he seems pleasant enough. I just need to stop him from calling us Elves.

After lunch I’ll be going for a wander around the campus. I hope I don’t get too lost!

Thanks for coming to the space port to see me off – I hope you made it back okay without any imperial entanglements.

I'll send you another e-mail once I'm settled in.

Best wishes,

Brian.'

* * *

“They lost one of Brian’s bags,” Ron said as he finished reading the e-mail.

“That’s so typical,” Mary said. “Everyone says the civil space lines are going down the tube as a result of Morgoth putting more and more resources into the military. I bet *his* bags never go missing.”

“The baggage handler responsible would be executed on the spot if they did.”

“I’m sure he would be. I don’t suppose you have any old clothes that you could send to Brian to tide him over?”

“No, I’ve never really been bothered much by cold or rain and anything warm I did have would probably be too small for him now.”

“Never mind, it’d probably get lost in transit anyway. I’m sure he’ll be able to buy something over there to keep him warm until they find his bag.”

“Yeah, it’ll probably turn up the day after he’s spent a fortune on new clothes.”

“I’m sure it will.”

* * *

Mary was woken by the baby’s crying and climbed wearily out of bed.

“Ooh, you’re a bit wet, Kevin,” she said as she started to change him.

Many weeks had slipped by since the Dolphins had spoken of their plans for her. At the time she made her decision, she’d felt fully in control of herself, and yet she found that, when push came

to shove, she couldn't quite bring herself to leave. There was always some little excuse as to why she couldn't go until *next week*, and she was starting to think that maybe too many *next week's* were slipping by. With those thoughts, she climbed back into bed and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

"Time is running short," the boy Mark was saying in her dream, "and if you don't come soon, Aaron will be born too late to be in the same school year as my father. You must come as soon as you can."

"But what about my baby?" Mary asked.

"Ron is perfectly capable of looking after Kevin, particularly with all the help he'll have from the people around him in the temple. You must come as soon as you can, or it will all be in vain."

She woke just as the sky was beginning to lighten, and resolved that before this day was out she'd be on her way to Earth.

Ron said nothing after she'd told him of her decision, but just sat looking at his feet.

"Say something, Ron," she said.

"What can I say? You have to go, I accept that, and I guess whether it's today, tomorrow or next week really makes no difference. I, I'm going to miss you, always."

She hugged and kissed him, then took him by the hand and led him to High Priestess Loral's office.

"Please come in," Loral said as she opened the door. As they entered, a man who had been seated at her desk stood to greet them.

"Mary and Ron, this is Andrew Haverfield, a Delphinidae monk who works in the Great Library on Cornipus," Loral said.

"I'm pleased to meet you both," Andrew said. "Loral has told me of your calling, and in fact that's the reason I'm here."

"I have to go today," Mary said.

"Yes, I know," Loral said, "but before you do, Andrew has something to tell you that may ease both your hearts a little."

“There was an archivist in the Library, a man named Frank Halliday, whose life work had been tracing the descendants of the race of Barefooters. Frank himself was such a descendant, although, like all others that are known of in this galaxy, his bloodline had been greatly diluted and little of the original Barefooter powers remained other than a somewhat extended lifespan. A hundred years ago he received a tip from the Dolphins that there might be descendants of Gallad’s people still living in the distant galaxy to which they’d fled. He travelled with them through Sheol to a planet called Earth and nothing more was heard of him, until last week this message arrived.”

Andrew handed Mary and Ron a letter, and they began reading.

‘When I arrived on this world my searching led me to a continent in the southern hemisphere called Australia, where I found a tribe of indigenous people who carried traces of the Barefooter genes. For many years I studied them, obtaining blood samples from as many families as I could, and made a startling discovery. Firstly, it appeared as if each family carried a different part of the gene, as if the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle had been spread out amongst them. This in itself was nothing remarkable, however I found that in each successive generation the pieces were becoming more and more concentrated in fewer and fewer families, and this has been continuing until now in the current generation there’s a young man named Billy Collins carrying a full twenty-five percent of the Barefooter genes. He has already made quite a name for himself as this world’s discoverer of subspace, and he has recently married. By devious, and no doubt highly illegal, means I obtained a sample of his wife’s blood, and she is also carrying another quarter of the Barefooter genes, although in her it is in a recessive form so there is no outward indication of this.

I have just learnt that they are expecting the birth of their first child in about seven month’s time. Should that child be found to carry fifty percent of the Barefooter genes, and I have no doubt this will prove to be the case, then it will be reasonable to assume

that in the next generation we will see the first full-blooded Barefooter in almost a million years. The question I must pose is - will that child be the one to fulfil the Dolphins' prophecy?

I understand from my Dolphin contacts that a young Priestess from Bluehaven will be arriving here shortly to play her part in the prophecy, and I am willing to offer my assistance to her if need be. However, there are clearly forces at work that I do not understand, and I am most reluctant to interfere in any way that may jeopardise the events that are unfolding. Already there has been one death that I consider myself to be at least indirectly responsible for, and I do not wish to have any further blood on my hands.

Please advise me of anything you would like me to do at this point in time, and I will do my best to assist.

*Your most humble servant,
Frank Halliday.'*

Ron looked up at Andrew and Loral, then down at the letter and back up at them again.

"You can't imagine what a relief it is for me to know that there'll be someone Mary can go to if she needs help," he said.

"How will I contact this man?" Mary asked.

"I've asked him to be waiting for you upon your arrival on Earth," Andrew said.

"Thank you so much for doing this," Mary said.

"Unless you have any further questions, I'd like you to come with me now," Loral said as she rose from her chair.

She led them across the courtyard, down a flight of stairs and into a chamber lit with bluish light from high stained glass windows. In the centre was a statue of two Dolphins on either side of a young woman.

"The Shrine of Loria," Loral said as overhead spotlights came on. Ron and Mary both knelt before the statue. "Come through to the anteroom."

They entered a spacious office to the right where Arthur, Loral's consort, was working at his desk.

"Ah, so you're ready to be on your way at last," he said as he stood to greet them.

"Yes," Mary said and turned one last time to embrace Ron and the baby.

"Take care of yourself, my love," Ron whispered.

Arthur reached under his desk and pressed a hidden button. Behind him, a panel slid aside, revealing a doorway filled with a dull shimmering light.

"You may pass through here into Sheol, where a Dolphin will be waiting to carry you on your way," Arthur said.

Mary kissed Ron and Kevin one last time, and then after hugging Loral and Arthur she stepped forward and passed through the light.

Ron felt hollowed out and drained, while a large part of him wanted to just run forward into the shimmering light and follow her. Indeed, it took an enormous amount of willpower to stop himself from doing precisely that. He sighed as the panel slid back across the doorway and, with tears rolling freely down his cheeks, turned to face Loral and Arthur.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Loral said, hugging him briefly before leading him back through the shrine and out into the sunshine. Waiting for them at the top of the stairs were Eric and two of Mary's acolyte friends.

"She's gone?" Eric asked, and Ron nodded.

"I'm so sorry for you and your son, Ron. Look, the harvest is coming up and I've just recruited Joanne and Megan here to help out this year, so if you'd like to join us, well, it might help take your mind off things."

Ron looked back at Loral who nodded her approval.

"Yes, I think I just might," he said.

The farmhouse looked exactly as it had a year ago as Michelle welcomed Ron and the baby with a big hug.

“He’s going to grow up into a big strong fellow and achieve great things, Ron, mark my words,” she said.

“If he takes after his mother he certainly will,” Ron said.

“Has there been any word?”

“No, not yet. It’s a long way, even through Sheol, so she’s probably not even there yet.”

“She’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

Ron nodded. “So how’s Boris?”

“Fighting fit and itching to take charge of the harvest.”

“Eric tells me it’s been another good growing season.”

“Yes, we’ve certainly been blessed again. Let’s hope the rains hold off until after the harvest this year.”

“What, and spoil all my fun?”

“Yes, Boris still goes on about ‘that crazy Elf in the swimming trunks’,” Michelle laughed. “Why don’t you show your friends around the farm while I get the baby settled in?”

“Okay then,” he said, turning to Joanne and Megan. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to Boris.”

The first day of grape-picking had gone well and there was plenty of daylight left when Ron, Joanne and Megan arrived at the beach in Golding. Before hitting the water, Ron called in at the Delphinidae chapel.

“I’m glad you came today,” the Priestess said as he entered. “The Dolphins have left a message for you saying that Mary was delivered safely to Earth.”

“Did they say if someone was there to meet her?”

“No, but I doubt if they’d know, since you can’t see out through the portals and the Dolphins won’t emerge from Sheol onto land.”

“Yes, of course. Thanks for letting me know.”

* * *

Filled with trepidation, Hal Farley approached the door to Morgoth’s throne room. In the months after his master had sensed something in the girl Mary Anderson, Morgoth had grown

increasingly paranoid, often muttering about some prophecy that had predicted his demise. Of late, though, he seemed to have put that all behind him and was mostly back to his old self. Farley feared that the news he carried might set him off again, but he also knew that if he held back he would be putting his own life in grave peril.

“I have news of Mary Anderson, my Lord,” he said as he knelt before the throne. “She was seen at the spaceport, farewelling one of the two boys she ran off with.”

“Has she been apprehended?”

“No, my Lord, there were four Delphinidae guards with her and our operative couldn’t risk it. It looks like she’s taken refuge in their temple.”

“I want you to place an agent inside the temple and bring her to me.”

“Yes, my Lord, but there’s more. Our operative reported that she was holding a baby, and he thought the other boy with her was the father.”

“Bring them both here,” Morgoth said, “and kill the child.”

* * *

The harvest had gone well and the rainy season had held off until almost all the crops were in. Eric had returned to complete the paperwork and they were just sitting down to dinner when the telephone in his office rang. He returned a few minutes later with a grim expression on his face.

“That was Loral,” he said, “and she had some disturbing news. An imperial operative has been uncovered amongst the new recruits, and in the interrogation she revealed that her role was to bring you and Mary to Morgoth, and to kill Kevin.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what it is Morgoth sensed about Mary, but it seems he hasn’t given up. Loral wants you and Kevin to remain here for now. She’s working on a new assignment for you and will communicate further through the Priestess in Golding.”

“I’m relieved now that Mary’s out of his reach,” Ron said.

“Yes,” Eric said, but he personally doubted if the distance between Bluehaven and Earth would be any barrier to Morgoth should he learn that that’s where she’d gone.

“I’ve just received some wonderful news from Bluehaven,” the Priestess in Golding said. “Loral has approved our proposal for a Delphinidae school and hospice here, and you and I are to start organising the construction immediately.”

“That’s great,” Ron said. “How far advanced was the planning in your proposal?”

“We basically have everything lined up, including land and contractors, and we can start things moving as soon as the funding comes through. That should happen in a couple of days.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“I’d like you to supervise the contractors and make sure they have everything they need. If there are any problems that you can’t handle yourself refer them back to me. I’ll give you a copy of the detailed proposal and you can read through it all while we’re waiting.”

“Excellent. Things are starting to get a bit quiet on the farm now that the harvest is in, so it’ll be good to have something to get my teeth into.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Is there any word from the Dolphins about Mary?”

“No, nothing I’m afraid, but don’t worry, I’ll let you know the minute I hear anything.”

“Thanks.”

* * *

Mary stepped through the portal and found herself at the back of a cave. The only light was the glow from the portal itself, but after many hours of travelling through Sheol on the back of a Dolphin her eyes had adjusted to the dark. She carefully made her way forward, eventually emerging into daylight and finding herself

at the bottom of a dry gully. She looked around, expecting to see Frank Halliday waiting somewhere nearby.

“Mr Halliday, are you there?” she called, but there was no answer.

After waiting for some time, she thought she’d better try to at least find water, so she started walking along the creek bed. Before long, the gully flattened out and she soon came across an old wooden bridge. Parked next to it was a vehicle and she quickly made her way towards it.

The vehicle was unoccupied, but as she approached she heard a noise from the bushes behind her and turned.

The man who was walking towards her spoke in a language that was unfamiliar to her, but she instinctively put Lorna’s gift to work and extracted the meaning from his words.

“What do we have here?” he’d asked.

“Are you Mr Halliday?” she responded hesitantly as her mouth learned to mould itself to the language.

“Don’t know anyone named Halliday,” he said. “As far as I know I’m the only one for miles around here.”

“He was supposed to meet me here.”

“Well I ain’t seen no-one other than you. My, but ain’t you a pretty one?”

Something about the way he was speaking unsettled her and she gently probed his mind. What she saw froze her with fear.

“You are the timid little bunny rabbit, aren’t you? Well, I can soon fix that.”

He stepped forward, grabbed her by the arms and thrust her around against the vehicle.

“Hey, you’ve lost your shoes,” he said. “Did you know that?”

“I don’t wear shoes.”

“Well let’s see what else you don’t wear,” he said as he grabbed her gown and tried to pull it off her.

For an instant, Mary struggled in blind panic, but then her training as a Delphinidae Priestess took hold and she calmed herself, touching his mind again and waiting for just the right

moment. It came, as she knew it would, and with all her strength, she kicked backwards and drove her foot into his groin.

“You bitch!” he screamed as he fell backwards in pain, while Mary took off and ran towards the bridge.

She turned to see if he was following her, but as she did, her foot caught the edge of a raised plank and she fell. Within moments, he was on top of her, screaming at her and slapping her repeatedly across the face. Again, she steadied herself and waited for the moment, then drove her knee into his stomach.

“I’ll kill you, you bitch!” he screamed as his hands closed around her throat.

She struggled to free herself, but without air, her strength rapidly waned. As her consciousness floated away, she thought she could hear the sound of an approaching vehicle, but then the darkness swallowed her and she heard no more.

Part Two ~ Father of Despair

Bobby's Birthday

Bobby Smith cringed as his friends began singing *Happy Birthday*, then took a deep breath and blew out the eighteen candles that adorned the top of his cake. His father handed him a jug of beer.

“Here, you can legally drink this stuff now,” he said.

Bobby looked at it, as if it was the first time he'd ever seen beer in his life (it wasn't), then raised the jug in a toast to his family and friends, took another deep breath and attempted to down it in one go.

“Down, down, down!” his friends chanted and then cheered as he completed the feat. He wiped the froth from his mouth and stared blankly into space for a few moments.

For just an instant Madeleine saw the look in her son's eyes that she knew all too well from her husband. Terry was still a good man, she thought, and certainly not violent like some she had known, but he had grown, well, too fond of his beer. Now she feared her son might be about to follow in his footsteps.

“Earth to Bobby, come in,” Graham was saying, snapping him out of his trance. The look in his eye was gone, and now Madeleine wasn't even sure if she'd seen it. “Come on, mate, cut the cake.”

Madeleine and Terry had known each other since they were kids and it came as no surprise when they'd married at the age of seventeen. Bobby had been conceived on their wedding night, and their first five years together had been bliss. Then, in the same year that Bobby started school, the economy had taken a nose-dive and Terry found himself out of work. Bored at home, he ironically joined the Narrabri Workers' Club and did his bit to keep their bar

profitable. To put it bluntly, he became a drunk, but a happy drunk nonetheless.

It was one of his drinking mates who eventually found him a new job, and on most days he only had two or three beers and wasn't too bad. But those times when he came staggering home, talking so loudly she was sure the whole neighbourhood could hear, well that's when she wondered what had become of the man she had married.

In his first few years of school Bobby had been the quiet one, slow to make friends and easy prey for the bullies. Terry had tried to interest him in sports like cricket and soccer, but while he tried his best to please his father, it was clear his heart just wasn't in it. Instead, he'd be daydreaming about stars and galaxies and spacemen. But then Graham MacDonald turned up in his class and everything changed.

In the space of a few short weeks, Graham went from being the new boy to becoming the chief organiser of the extracurricular activities that caused so much mischief and mayhem around the sleepy little town of Narrabri. It's not that he was really a bad influence, Madeleine mused, but it was more a case of over-exuberance and a lack of thought for the consequences that gained the 'MacDonald gang' such a bad reputation.

The only time they'd been in any serious trouble had been their run-in with Tom Collins, the Aboriginal head of the AusScience radio telescope on the outskirts of town. One Sunday afternoon Graham, Bobby and their mates had cut a hole in the perimeter fence, climbed onto one of the dishes and painted a bright yellow face on it. Tom had caught them red-handed (or should it be yellow-handed?) and gave them a tongue-lashing so severe that Bobby wet himself. The police were called, but after a lot of negotiation between the boys' parents and the AusScience heavies, no charges were laid.

Since then Bobby had developed a dislike for Aboriginals in general and the Collins family in particular. The recent media frenzy following their discovery of something called 'subspace' had upset him considerably, for it was incongruous to him that the

breakthrough in space exploration he'd longed for so much had been made by his most hated enemy.

"That bastard Collins has been on the news again today," Graham was saying, snapping Madeleine out of her reverie. "Something about them making contact with aliens."

"Bullshit," Bobby said.

"No, seriously, he was going on about how they're part of a galactic community and want Earth to become a member."

"No way," Bobby said. "We should shoot the little green bastards on sight if you ask me."

"Hear, hear!" said Terry. "We don't want no space empire telling us what to do. Next thing we know Darth Vader will be here flashing his light sabre at everyone."

"You'd better go and find Yoda and start your Jedi training then, Bobby," Graham said, causing Bobby to blush.

"There's supposed to be a special announcement by the Prime Minister at eight o'clock tonight," another of Bobby's friends said.

"Today marks a defining moment in the history of mankind," the Prime Minister was saying in his address to the nation. "Recently two young Australian scientists, Dr Billy Collins and Dr Peter Thorpe, distinguished themselves with their discovery of subspace, opening up the prospect of fast, low cost space travel. In the course of their further investigations they have been contacted by a representative of another world, a planet they call Eridani. The Eridanians themselves claim to represent a galactic community of several hundred worlds, and they will be sending a delegation to Earth in about a month's time to formally invite us to become a part of that community.

"I want to assure all of you that my government will not be rushing into any agreements with the Eridanians or their galactic community, and indeed the Eridanians have indicated that their delegation will be spending at least a year here to lay the groundwork for any possible treaties and joint ventures. We will

not act until such time as we are fully convinced that it is in the best interests of Australia to do so.

“Notwithstanding those concerns, we do realise that this opportunity offers the potential for rapid advancement in fields such as medical research and technology, and I have asked my Science Minister to consult with the Eridanians with a view to forming a joint Earth-Eridani scientific exchange foundation. With the initial contact having been made in this country, and with the great scientific talent we have within our AusScience framework, we are well-placed to move ahead of the rest of the world in this area.

“My government is committed to playing a key role in facilitating the initial process of building contact and trust with the Eridanians, and to that end we are providing full diplomatic support for Dr Collins and Dr Thorpe in their appearance before the General Assembly of the United Nations next week. I’m sure all Australians will join with me in wishing them every success in their endeavour.”

“I can’t believe they’re using taxpayer dollars to send those two geeks to the U.N.,” Bobby said. “I certainly won’t be voting for that lot come the next election.”

“The trouble is,” Terry mused, “no matter who you vote for you’ll always wind up with a politician, and this nonsense is just the sort of thing politicians of all persuasions go for.”

As if to prove his point, the leader of the Opposition was now on the television saying he fully endorsed the Prime Minister’s position on what was a matter of such high national importance.

“The whole country’s going to the dogs if you ask me,” Bobby said.

“Come on, the pair of you,” Madeleine said. “Don’t be such misery-guts, we’re supposed to be celebrating Bobby’s birthday.”

“You’re right, honey,” Terry said. “Get us another beer.”

Madeleine turned towards the refrigerator, sighing to herself.

The weekend arrived, and so did the hordes of tourists. Bobby was in the supermarket battling with the crowds as he tried to do the weekly shopping for his parents, when he heard a familiar voice.

“Bobby, long time no see!”

“Richard! Good to see you. How’s everything in the Hardcastle clan?”

“Fine, yeah, really good. I started law at Armidale this year, following in Matthew’s footsteps. I’m just down for the weekend, to see what all the fuss is about I guess.”

“You and a million others by the look of it. I hear Matthew’s now a senior partner at that law firm here, what’s it called?”

“Nightingale and Pritchard. Yeah, old Mr Nightingale retired last year and Matt was promoted as everyone shuffled up the chain of command. I’m hoping I might be able to join them after I graduate. So what are you doing with yourself, Bobby? Did you get into any of the universities?”

“No, I’m working at the Gunnedah colliery and doing industrial electronics at the technical college in the evenings. The colliery is going through a major upgrade at the moment and there’s lots of interesting stuff happening.”

“Good for you. Say, are you doing anything for lunch?”

“Nup.”

“Dad’s cooking a barbecue, so why don’t you come round and join us?”

“Yeah, that’d be good. Thanks.”

“I’ll just make sure it’s okay,” Richard said as he whipped out his phone.

“Yeah, everything’s sweet. Just turn up at around twelve or twelve thirty.”

“Great, I’ll see you then.”

“Bobby?” Matthew said as he answered the knock on the door. “The last time I saw you, you were knee-high to a grasshopper. How’s it going?”

“Good, Matt. I bumped into your brother in the supermarket this morning and he invited me around.”

“Yeah, Richard said you were coming. I guess you two haven’t seen much of each other since he was selected into the private school.”

“No, we kind of went our separate ways, I guess.”

“It happens to all of us. Come on through, and help yourself to a beer.”

Bobby did.

“Good to see you again, Bobby,” William Hardcastle said as he shook his hand. “I see Matt’s fixed you up with a drink. Richard tells me you’re now working at the colliery.”

“Yeah, I’m installing the computer systems for the plant upgrade they’re doing.”

“You’ll have been watching all the news of this Eridanian business no doubt. If I recall correctly, you were mad keen on space stuff when you were a kid.”

“Yeah, but I’ve grown out of that now,” Bobby lied. “I’m not sure it’s a good thing to be letting these aliens come and tell us what to do.”

“I think you’re wrong, Bobby,” Matthew said. “Billy’s been telling me all about his meeting with them, and he’s convinced everything’s quite genuine and above board. Don’t let Hollywood’s ideas of alien invaders cloud your judgement.”

“Or your father’s prejudices,” William added. “I’ve known Terry for many years and he’s always been suspicious of anything new or different.”

“You know Billy Collins?” Bobby asked Matthew.

“Yeah, Billy and I were at school together. He’s a bit weird, but he’s got a heart of gold and is absolutely brilliant when it comes to all this subspace stuff. I’ll introduce you to him when he gets back from overseas if you like.”

Bobby was bristling inside. “Yeah, that’d be good,” he managed to say while keeping a straight face. He downed the rest of his beer in three large gulps.

“I’ll get you another one,” Matt said and dashed back inside the house.

“I think these steaks are just about ready,” William said. “Grab a plate and help yourself.”

With food on his plate and another beer in his hand, Bobby soon calmed down. He sat back and enjoyed his meal, while other members of the Hardcastle family chatted about long-lost relations and the scandalous deeds of the South Australian branch of the family. His thoughts wandered back to his primary school days when Richard was his best friend, back before the coming of Graham MacDonald. Life was simpler then, it seemed in hindsight.

“Hey Bobby,” Richard said, “there’s an AusScience exhibit down at the town hall with heaps of stuff about the Eridanians. If you’re not in any hurry to get away, what say we go down there after lunch and take a look?”

Not wishing to offend his friend, Bobby said he’d tag along, while a secret part of him thought it might actually prove interesting. Perhaps it would be good if he didn’t let his dislike of the Collins family cloud what had otherwise turned out to be a very pleasant day.

“Can I get you another beer?” William asked him.

“No, I’m fine thanks.”

“Here, I’ll get you some dessert instead,” Mrs Hardcastle said and he nodded in genuine anticipation, remembering from years gone by how wonderful her desserts were. He wasn’t disappointed.

Bobby was rapt. There were charts showing where Eridani’s star was in the night sky, heaps of photos of the planet, its towns, countryside and people, and an audio-visual presentation by the Eridani representatives explaining their history and objectives. He was particularly interested in the posters describing their subspace star ships.

“Do you know what they use as a power source?” he asked Richard.

“I dunno,” Richard said. Science had never been his pet subject.

“That’s a very good question,” said a voice from behind him, and he turned to find himself face to face with Tom Collins. His bladder suddenly felt very full.

“They extract energy from subspace itself,” Tom explained, ignoring Bobby’s very obvious discomfort. “Stars leak energy into subspace from the fusion reactions that are happening in their cores, and that energy can be readily tapped into at very little cost. Now that we know how it’s done, it will soon become our principal energy source here on Earth, which will be a good thing if we want to seriously do something about the greenhouse problem.”

“So what will happen to the coal industry?” Bobby asked nervously.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s days are numbered. The oil industry too, although we’ll still need some for lubricants and the manufacture of plastics.” With that, Tom turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Bobby was stunned, for if Tom was right, both he and Graham would soon be out of work.

“I’m sorry, Richard, I’m going to have to go. I promised Mum I’d do something for her this afternoon and I almost forgot.”

“Yeah, sure, no worries Bobby. We’ll have to get together again sometime soon.”

“Yep, for sure,” Bobby said as he pushed his way through the crowd and headed for the door.

“See, I told you those Eridanians were bad news,” Graham said as Bobby told him about the imminent demise of their workplace.

“We have to do something,” Bobby said.

“Of course, and we will. Now shut up for a minute and let me think.”

Bobby turned away and began doodling absent-mindedly with his toe in the dust. He looked down and saw he’d drawn a surprisingly good sketch of a dolphin. A chill ran up his spine and he shuddered.

“Right, this is what we do,” Graham said. “For starters we’re going to trash that exhibit in the town hall tonight.”

“But what will that achieve?”

“It’ll show those Eridanians and their supporters that at least some in the community are unhappy with what they’re doing, that’s what.”

“I suppose so,” Bobby said, “but do you think they’re going to turn tail and run just because of that?”

“Of course not, but we have to start somewhere, and we’ll keep on disrupting them until they do go.”

“I guess so,” Bobby said, still not sounding convinced.

“Look, do you want to save your job or don’t you?”

“Okay already, I’m in.”

“Good decision, Bobby. I’ll pick you up from your place at midnight tonight.”

The town hall was shrouded in mist when they arrived at half past twelve. The whole business district of Narrabri was deserted and Bobby’s spirits lifted a little.

“The lock on the side door of the hall doesn’t latch properly,” Graham said, “so we should have no trouble getting in that way. Follow me.”

They crept along the side of the building, Bobby glancing about nervously for anyone who might see them. They were both wearing black jeans and black pullovers, but the building was painted white so in hindsight that probably wasn’t such a good idea.

When they reached the door, Graham pulled a short length of plastic packing strip from his pocket and poked it through the gap between the double doors. He jiggled it for a few moments until there was a clunk from the inside and the door began to swing outwards.

The silence of the night was broken by the raucous scream of an alarm. Graham slammed the door shut and the two of them sprinted back to the safety of their car and drove without lights until they were several blocks away.

“Got any other bright ideas?” Bobby asked.

“How was I supposed to know they’d installed an alarm system?”

“Let’s go home, and just hope they didn’t have video surveillance as well.”

Graham was knocking on the front door of Bobby’s place at nine o’clock the next morning. Bobby, who’d just woken up and was still only in his boxer shorts, answered it.

“Put some clothes on and come with me,” Graham said. “I’ve got another idea.”

“Something tells me I’m going to regret this,” Bobby mumbled.

“Nonsense, this one’s a sure fire winner. Come on, let’s go.”

Bobby pulled on a pair of jeans and grabbed a pullover which he struggled into as he was dragged out to Graham’s car. As soon as the door closed, Graham took off and headed south out of town along the Newell Highway.

“Where are we going?” Bobby asked.

“On the radio this morning they were replaying an interview with Peter Thorpe, that’s Billy Collins’ sidekick. Anyway, he was saying that the Eridanians first met them next to a waterhole in the Pilliga. So I figure they must have a landing site set up there, and that’s what we’re going to find.”

“And what will we be doing when we find it?”

“Creating havoc as always, what do you think?”

“I should’ve known. Do you know where this waterhole is?”

“No, but it shouldn’t be too hard to find. Grab those maps on the back seat and start looking.”

“Me?”

“Well I don’t see anyone else in the car, do you?”

Bobby grabbed the maps and starting looking. The first thing he saw was just how big the Pilliga was, and then, when he looked more closely, he noticed that there were more than just a few waterholes marked.

“Um, there’s a lot of territory to search,” Bobby said. “Any thoughts on where we should start?”

“Pick the waterholes that are accessible by car from the highway. That should do to begin with.”

“Okay. Um, it looks like the first one’s on a track to the right, let me see, about thirty kilometres from where we are now.”

The track was in a rather poor state of repair and Graham’s driving didn’t exactly inspire Bobby with confidence that they’d survive this day unscathed. Eventually, though, they reached the waterhole and began scouting around.

“I can’t see anything here,” Bobby said.

“Nah, and there’s probably not enough cleared space for them to be able to land their ships anyway. See if you can find another waterhole that’s a bit more out in the open.”

“Roger, roger.”

They’d checked out half a dozen waterholes by the time the sun reached its zenith, without any sign of an alien landing site. Bobby was beginning to wish he’d stayed in bed.

“It must be nearly lunch time. Did you bring any food?” he asked.

“No, I forgot. You don’t need lunch anyway.”

“I haven’t even had breakfast yet.”

“Well you have to suffer a little if you want to be in the Resistance. Now find us another waterhole.”

Bobby scoured the maps and found something east of the highway that looked like a good prospect. Graham turned the car around and took off in a cloud of dust.

They missed the track on their first attempt and had to double back before they found it. It was by far the worst of any they had driven down so far, and in some places, the undergrowth encroached so much that it scraped on both sides of the car at once. The track wound its way in a roughly south-easterly direction, and occasionally Bobby caught a glimpse of the ranges a little bit further to the east.

They came over a rise and descended to a small wooden bridge spanning a dry creek bed. There was a rusty four-wheel-drive parked just before the bridge, and then Bobby saw what was happening on the bridge itself and yelled for Graham to stop. All four wheels locked up as Graham hit the brakes and the car spun through 180 degrees before coming to a stop just centimetres from a tree.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Bobby cried as he leapt out and ran towards the man crouching on the bridge who was clearly trying to strangle the woman lying beneath him. Graham, who thought Bobby might very well get himself killed if he tried to take on the attacker alone, took a deep breath and jumped from the car, following along behind his friend and trying to look as tough as he could.

The strangler looked up when he heard Bobby cry out, then released the woman and ran off into the scrub. Bobby and Graham reached her a few moments later.

“Oh shit,” Bobby said. “She’s not breathing.”

“She’s still got a pulse,” Graham said. “How’s your mouth-to-mouth?”

“I guess I’m about to find out.” He sealed his lips over the woman’s mouth and began blowing.

He was almost exhausted when she suddenly convulsed and drew in a breath of her own. A few moments later, she drew another one, then settled down into regular breathing.

Soon she began to stir, then slowly opened her eyes and took in the concerned look of Bobby hovering over her. She sighed with relief.

“We’d better take her to the hospital,” Graham said. “Help me to get her over to the car.”

Bobby snapped out of the trance he’d unknowingly slipped into, shook his head to clear it, and helped her to stand.

“Just take it nice and easy,” he said.

“Thank you,” she whispered hoarsely.

“I’m Bobby, Bobby Smith.”

“I’m Mary Anderson.”

“Best if you try not to speak just now, Mary.”

She turned to look at him, and once more, he was captivated by the blueness of her eyes.

Mary looked up from her hospital bed as a middle-aged man entered the room. She cringed, thinking he was another doctor and worried that eventually one of them would figure out that she wasn't a native of this world.

“Mary Anderson?” he asked.

“Yes, that's me.”

“I'm so glad I found you. I'm Frank Halliday.”

“I was expecting to meet you at the portal,” she said, not sure whether she should be pleased or angry.

“I know, and I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. If I can offer any excuse at all, it was due to a mix-up on my part as to the date of your arrival. Put simply, you were a day earlier than I expected.”

Mary said nothing.

“I can understand how you feel, and I'll do what I can to make it up to you,” he said. “For a start, there are some practical matters I can help you with, such as accommodation and a plausible explanation of how you came to be wandering alone out in the wilderness.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking that perhaps you might have been hitch-hiking to Narrabri to visit me, your uncle. When the authorities get around to asking you about your attacker, tell them he offered you a ride but then drove off into the bush and tried to rape you.”

“Yes, I'd been wondering how I was going to explain my presence here, but fortunately no-one's asked yet. Somehow I don't think saying I came from another galaxy on the back of a dolphin would wash with these people.”

“Probably not,” Halliday chuckled. “On the subject of accommodation, I have a guest room in my house which you are welcome to use for as long as you wish.”

“Thank you, I’m sure I’ll take you up on that when they release me from this place.”

“The doctors have told me you’re to be discharged today. They were pleased that your ‘uncle’ had turned up to claim you.”

The door opened and Bobby poked his head in. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were with someone,” he said.

“No, come on in, Bobby,” Mary said. “This is my uncle, Frank Halliday. Uncle, meet Bobby Smith, the boy who rescued me from my attacker.”

“I’m very pleased to meet with you, Bobby,” Frank said. “I’m, we’re both, deeply indebted to you.”

Bobby blushed. “It was nothing, really. The attacker fled as soon as he saw me and Graham.”

“Well you were very brave nonetheless,” Mary said.

“Your voice is sounding a lot better this morning,” Bobby said, changing the subject. “Do you know how much longer they’ll be keeping you in here?”

“According to my uncle, I’m being released today.”

“That’s great! Um, is there anywhere I’ll be able to contact you, that is, um, if you’d like me to?”

“Of course, I’d be delighted. I’ll be staying at my uncle’s place.”

“Here, take my card,” Frank said. “Why don’t you join us for dinner tonight, if you don’t have any other plans?”

“Yes, I will. Thanks.”

Morgoth's Rage

Hal Farley stepped into the throne room and knelt before his master. The news he had wouldn't please him, and Hal feared he might not survive this day unscathed. Morgoth's paranoia had returned with a vengeance since he'd reported the sighting of the girl at the spaceport, and more bad news might just tip him over the edge.

"Arise, my friend," Morgoth commanded. "I trust you bring me good tidings?"

"Not as yet, my Lord. Our agent in the Delphinidae temple reported that the girl has disappeared, and that the boy and child left soon afterwards with a man and two acolytes and haven't been seen since."

"Does she know who the man was?"

"No, my Lord."

"Well do you think you could find out? Do I have to spell everything out for you in minute detail?"

"Of course not, my Lord. My people are already trying to locate him."

"Leave no stone unturned. I want them found, quickly!"

"Yes, my Lord." Farley turned to leave, but Morgoth called him back.

"Do not fail me again, Hal."

* * *

Ron looked up as the Priestess walked into the room that had become his office. He'd been going through a stack of quotations from contractors working on the school and hospice. Construction had started a week earlier on an old farming property near

Golding. The buildings were to be disguised as grain storage sheds, with underground chambers that could be used as hiding places in the event of imperial raids. On Sontar nothing could be taken for granted.

“I have news for you,” the Priestess said. “Frank Halliday has reported that Mary arrived on Earth and is currently residing with him in a town called Narrabri. She is in good health and adapting well to life on that world. He said she’s particularly fascinated by the great variety of animals found there, and the custom amongst the natives of having some of them as pets.”

Ron smiled. “When Mary was ten she came across a book about the animals of the galaxy, and begged her parents to get her a Cornipean bunyip. She was unable to understand about quarantine regulations and why they couldn’t be brought to Bluehaven, and cried for days about it.”

“I attended university on Cornipus and my room-mate had a bunyip,” the Priestess said. “I can tell you they’re not all they’re cracked up to be. The smell, you just wouldn’t believe it.”

“Really? One of my friends is studying law there so I’d better warn him, which reminds me, I meant to send him an e-mail about a week ago and completely forgot about it.”

“That’s understandable, what with everything that’s been going on.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Did Mr Halliday have anything more to say?”

The Priestess looked at him with eyes that said she could neither lie to him nor tell him the truth.

“Please tell me,” Ron said. “I have to know.”

“Very well. He said there is a young man who, well, helped Mary when she first arrived on Earth, and they have been seeing a lot of each other. He thinks he might be the one that Mary, um, well the one who is to father her child. I’m sorry, Ron.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“If it’s any consolation, Frank said he seems like a decent and honourable man.”

“I see, that’s, that’s good to know. Yes, I’m sure it is. Excuse me, please.”

Ron hurried from the room and entered the chapel’s shrine, where he knelt before the statue of Loria. The Priestess stood for a moment in the doorway, watching as he wept, then turned away.

* * *

Hal Farley looked up as one of his subordinates entered the room.

“Sir, I think we’ve identified the man.”

“Which man, Hoskins?”

“The one who took the boy and child from the Delphinidae temple.”

“Good work.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Does he have a name?”

“Oh, sorry, yes of course, it’s Eric Chandler. He has a residence in Bringal Vale and also owns a farm on Sontar.”

“Sontar, now that’s very interesting,” Farley said as he stroked his chin. “Yes, the pieces are starting to fall into place now. Please, continue.”

“We checked the residence in Bringal Vale but there was no-one at home, so we were about to contact the police on Sontar.”

“No, don’t do that just yet. I think I might just pay a visit there personally. Have my ship prepared as soon as you can, and I want six of your best men armed and ready to come with me.”

“Very good, sir.”

Farley’s ship emerged from subspace and into the transfer orbit around Sontar.

“*Welcome to Sontar, Commander,*” the controller said. “*There’s a freighter just leaving but as soon as it’s away you have clearance for your descent.*”

“Thank you,” Farley said. “Have there been any unexpected departures in the past six hours?”

“No sir, the only ships out have been three regular freight services, and all reported no passengers on board.”

“Excellent. Keep the surveillance going until we have our prisoners.”

“As you wish, Commander.”

It was an hour before dawn when Farley’s ship touched down on the Chandler farm. The local police had been stationed on all the roads leading out, so there was no chance of escape for Chandler or the boy. Farley smiled to himself as he imagined what Morgoth’s reaction would be when he brought them in, then ordered his men to surround the house as he stepped up to the front door.

An elderly man in a stained yellow nightshirt appeared in response to Farley’s pounding. “What do you want at this time of night?”

“I am Commander Farley of the Imperial Guard and I have a warrant for the arrest of Eric Chandler and Ron Simmons. Would you bring them to me please, or do I have to come in and get them myself?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, there’s no-one here but me. Search the place if you want, but you won’t find anybody.”

Farley pushed the old man aside, knocking him to the ground, and stormed into the house. He ordered his men to search every room, but it was, as the old man had said, empty.

“Where are they?” Farley shouted as he held the old man up against the wall.

“How many times do I have to tell you, there’s no-one named Chandler or Simmons, or anyone else for that matter, living here. I’ve been running this farm by myself ever since my wife died ten years ago.”

“The registered owner of this land is Eric Chandler, is it not?” Farley asked.

“No, it’s not. This land has been in my family for six generations. I’ve never heard of anyone named Chandler. Come inside and I can show you the title deeds if you don’t believe me.”

The Director of the Sontar Land Titles Office leant back in his chair. “There would appear to be an inconsistency in our database, Commander.”

“An *inconsistency*? More like gross incompetency if you ask me. Just what sort of an organisation are you running here?”

“A very efficient one, by all accounts. I have no idea how anything like this could have happened. It is most irregular.”

“Your execution will be most irregular if you can’t provide some answers for me.”

“Well I never! If you can’t keep a civil tongue in your mouth, Commander Farley, I’ll have to ask you to leave my office.”

Farley drew his weapon and almost brought the Director’s promising career to an untimely end, before realising he still had a better chance of finding Chandler and the boy if this man remained alive a little longer.

“You will tell me where Chandler’s farm really is by the time I get back, or I will use this, I promise you.” He stormed from the room before the Director could respond.

* * *

Eric reached over and answered the phone on its first ring.

“There’s been a terribly rude man named Farley in my office this morning and he’s looking for you, Eric.”

“Farley, you say. Was he an Imperial Guardsman from Bluehaven?”

“That’s what he claimed he was.”

“Thank you, James. Once again you’ve saved my neck.”

“Any time, my friend, any time.”

Eric hung up and went to find Ron and the baby.

* * *

“What do we do now, sir?”

“Shut up and let me think, Hoskins,” Farley said. “I’m sure they’re still on Sontar, but where?”

“It’s a big planet, sir, and unless we have something more to go on, but hang on, what about his ship?”

“His ship?”

“The records on Bluehaven showed that Chandler owned a ship, and we have its transponder code.”

“Of course! Get me Sontar Control on the line.”

“The ship is on the ground about thirty kilometres south-west of Golding, Commander. I’m sending through the exact co-ordinates now.”

“Thank you. I think you’ve just saved my life,” Farley said. “Hoskins, take us there as quick as you can.”

“Just a moment, Commander, it looks like that ship is taking off. From where you are, you should be able to intercept it when it enters the transfer orbit.”

“We’re onto it now. Thanks again.”

“My pleasure. You can buy me a drink when it’s all over.”

“I’ve locked onto the ship’s transponder, sir,” Hoskins said. “We’ve got them right where we want them.”

“Let’s hope so. I’m growing very weary of this chase, and the Enlightened One won’t be at all pleased if we come back empty handed again.”

“Don’t worry, sir, they won’t... what the hell?”

“What’s happened?”

“They’ve jumped to subspace from inside the atmosphere. They’re crazy!”

“Well don’t just sit there with your tongue wagging, Hoskins, follow them!”

“Yes sir, sorry. I’m locking onto their trajectory now.”

“Any idea of where they’re headed?”

“It doesn’t make much sense. They’re going directly away from the core of the galaxy, but there are no known civilised worlds in that direction.”

“Well, just stay on their tail and we’ll find out soon enough.”

The chase had been going for almost twelve hours, with no change of course or speed by Eric’s ship.

“Any indication yet as to where they might be heading?” Farley asked.

“No, but the outer rim of the galaxy is largely unexplored,” Hoskins said. “Do you think the Delphinidae might have a secret base out here somewhere?”

“Yes, that’s precisely what I’ve been thinking,” Farley lied. The idea of a secret base had never occurred to him, but the more he pondered it the more he liked it. He could easily imagine the praise and rewards he would be receiving when he reported its existence to Morgoth, but the wailing of an alarm interrupted his imagined glory.

“Sir, we’re going to have to pull off,” Hoskins said.

“No, stay with them,” Farley said.

“But sir...”

“No buts, Hoskins. If we lose them we’ll be dead meat anyway, so I don’t care if this ship’s about to turn itself inside out or whatever it is it’s trying to do.”

Before Hoskins could respond, there was a flash of blue light from outside the ship and the alarm cut off.

“Why have we dropped out of subspace, Hoskins?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you. We’ve just passed out of the subspace shell.”

“The subspace what?”

“The normal subspace we use is bounded by the galaxy’s gravitational well. Chandler’s ship was heading directly away from the galactic core, and we’ve both just popped out through the edge and dropped back to real-space. There’s an intergalactic subspace, but to enter that requires quite different technology, which we don’t have on our ship.”

“What about their ship? Would they have had that technology?”

“Unlikely, sir. It’s much more complex and a good deal more expensive. In the whole galaxy there are probably only a dozen ships that are capable of intergalactic travel.”

“Are you still receiving their transponder signal?”

“The transponder uses subspace radio so that doesn’t work out here, but we might be able to find them with our real-space radar.”

“Then do it, you fool!”

“Of course, sir,” Hoskins mumbled as he set about scanning their immediate vicinity. “I have them, sir. They’re about five hundred kilometres ahead of us, and they’re not moving.”

“Good. Engage the real-space engines and get this over with.”

Farley gave his space suit a final check before activating the air lock pumps. They had manoeuvred into a position alongside Eric’s ship, but so far, all attempts at contacting its occupants had failed. As much as he disliked space walking, Farley had no option but to lead a boarding party.

The outer hatch opened and he took a deep breath before propelling himself across the gap between the ships. Below him, looking very small and far away, was his galaxy. He closed his eyes as his stomach constricted and concentrated on his breathing. Throwing up inside a space suit was not only embarrassing for an officer of his ranking, but downright dangerous as well.

He activated the magnetic latches on his hands and feet and prepared for impact as the ship loomed towards him. Before his stomach had time to revolt, he was spread-eagled across the hull. After steadying himself, he crept towards the hatch and pressed the release button. To his surprise, it opened.

“Well I’ll be damned,” he said. “I was sure we’d have to cut our way in.”

Farley and his two assistants squeezed into the ship’s airlock and waited for it to pressurise. As the inner hatch opened, they prepared themselves for a confrontation that never came.

“Search the ship,” Farley commanded, but he was beginning to get an uneasy feeling about this and wanted nothing more than to

turn and run. He waited impatiently in the air lock, fidgeting, while his men scoured the vessel.

“There’s no-one on board, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir, it’s been on autopilot the whole way from Sontar.”

“Damn. Okay, let’s get out of here.”

“Take us back to Sontar, Hoskins,” Farley said after returning to his ship.

“Um, that might be a problem, sir.”

“Don’t you think I have enough problems already? What is it this time?”

“We’ve been drifting away from the galaxy at quite a substantial speed, and our real-space engines would need to burn for about six hours to turn us around and get us back within the subspace shell. We simply don’t have enough fuel on board for that.”

Farley pounded his fist into the console and then grimaced from the pain in his hand.

“Are you all right, sir?” Hoskins asked. “You haven’t broken anything, have you?”

“No, my hand’s okay,” he said as he rubbed it cautiously.

“I meant in the console. They’re rather fragile, you know.”

Farley glared at him, and if looks could kill, Hoskins would have been stone dead.

“Any idea of how to get out of this predicament?” Farley asked.

“Well there is the emergency beacon,” Hoskins said. “Should I activate it now?”

Farley sighed and stared out into the blackness of space for a few moments. “Yes, you might as well.”

The battle cruiser emerged from intergalactic subspace and hailed Farley’s ship.

“Well I’ll be, Hal Farley of all people. How did you manage to get yourself stranded out here?”

“Don’t ask,” Farley said.

“Do you think you can manoeuvre yourself into our hold, or do you want me to send a pilot across?”

“No, use your pilot to bring that other ship in, then get us back to Sontar as fast as you can.”

“Sorry, Hal, but you’re to be taken directly to Bluehaven.”

“On whose order?” Farley asked defiantly.

“The Enlightened One himself.”

Hal stared out into space again for a few moments before turning to Hoskins.

“Take us into their hold, and please, whatever you do, don’t hit the sides.”

* * *

As soon as they touched down Hal was escorted directly to Morgoth’s anteroom where he was kept waiting for over an hour. His mind kept cycling through all the possible outcomes of his debriefing and none were pleasant.

“His Highness will see you now,” Morgoth’s receptionist finally said, smiling warmly, and Hal took a deep breath as he prepared to meet his doom.

Morgoth sat upon his throne. Standing to his right was Hal’s son Brett, who smiled slightly as his father entered the room.

“Hal, so good of you to come,” Morgoth said. “I hope I haven’t interrupted your grand tour of the galaxy.”

“I’m sorry, my Lord,” Hal said as he knelt before the throne.

“Just what the hell did you think you were doing?” Morgoth roared.

“When the Chandler ship left Sontar I naturally assumed that he, the Simmons boy and his child were on board,” Hal explained.

“You didn’t become even the slightest bit suspicious when their ship just kept going straight out of the galaxy?”

“No, I thought there might be a secret Delphinidae base somewhere on the outer rim.”

“A secret base that I have been blissfully unaware of and which you, Hal, were going to expose. Am I right?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“In case you haven’t noticed yet, we do have a considerable military force at our disposal. Had you followed procedures, you would have sent an assault force to the farm where you believed Chandler and Simmons were hiding, and requested the fleet to intercept their ship. Instead you thought you’d try to play hero and do it all yourself. You deserve to be executed, do you realise that?”

“I do, my Lord, and place myself at your mercy.”

“You should know by now that I have no mercy, Hal. I want you to remember that I would’ve had you terminated right now if it were not that the execution of one of my most senior officers would only serve to encourage those who seek to undermine me. So, I am forced to find something else to do with you, and your son here has kindly offered a suggestion.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Hal said.

“I’m not sure you’ll want to be thanking me after you hear what I have in mind,” Morgoth chuckled. “Apparently some of the Delphinidae scholars believe the child in their prophecy will come from Huntress, so I’m sending you to that colony where you will take charge of the garrison and see if that girl Mary is hiding out there. Do you think you could do that?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“I understand there are now drugs to help people adapt to the toxic atmosphere of that planet, and the mortality rate of new inhabitants is a lot lower than it once was. I hope you will put the remainder of your life to good use.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

Morgoth gave him a pitying look, shook his head and turned to Hal’s son.

“Now, young Brett, I understand you want to join my service.”

“Yes sir. At school I, um, developed a talent for using my Elvish mind powers to obtain information that could be used against people. I feel I could put my skills to good use in your service, my Lord.”

“Indeed,” Morgoth said. “Perhaps you could begin by helping to unravel the mystery of Mary Anderson and Ron Simmons.”

“There was another boy who was always hanging around with them,” Brett said. “His name is Brian Lachlan and he’s now studying law on Cornipus. There’s another student there who, well let’s just say she owes me a favour, so I expect I should be able to extract some useful information from that source.”

“Excellent, young man, you may proceed along those lines. I will see that you are placed within my intelligence service, and you will have their full facilities at your disposal.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“So what do you think, Brett?” Hal asked once they were away from the throne room and out of earshot of any guards.

“You’re right, he’s completely paranoid about that prophecy and the girl Mary, and that makes him vulnerable.”

“Bide your time, son, and make sure you are well placed to act when he falls.”

* * *

Ron picked up his pen and a fresh piece of paper, and began once more to write. Beside him was a screwed-up pile of his earlier attempts. “Less is more,” he mumbled to himself.

My dearest Mary,

I’m glad to hear that you’ve settled in and are in good health. Kevin and I have been forced to leave Bluehaven to escape Morgoth’s agents, but we are safe for now. It’s high time to bring this regime to an end and you were right to do what you’re doing. Whatever you must do to fulfil your destiny, you have my blessing and full support.

I received an e-mail from Brian last night. He said his studies are going very well and he’s met a girl who’s apparently taken quite an interest in him. They’ll be doing the grand tour of Cornipus during the mid-semester break.

I helped Eric with the harvest again this year and we brought in a bumper crop, although the weather was a bit too warm and dry for my liking! Michelle and Boris send you their love.

Take care of yourself, and please, don't let any concerns for me hamper your mission. The best thing you can do for me and Kevin now is to succeed.

*With love, always,
Ron.*

Satisfied at last, he sealed the letter in an envelope and took it into the Priestess's chamber.

“Could you see that this is delivered to Frank Halliday, please?”

“Yes, I can do that, although it might take a little time. How are you feeling, Ron?”

“Much better now, thank you.”

“That's good. There's much work to be done here.”

A Summer of Bliss

Mary put down Ron's letter and sat staring out her window. It had been three months since she'd arrived on this world and her relationship with Bobby had steadily grown stronger. Every weekend he'd taken her out into the countryside, showing her some of the quaint little towns and spectacular natural scenery. At night, they would often camp under the stars, and she was now starting to recognise some of the constellations in Earth's alien sky.

One small group of stars in particular had caught her attention. Bobby said its common name was the Seven Sisters but it was really called the Pleiades Cluster and was made up of relatively young stars about four hundred light years away. Something about it made her feel a little uneasy, though, as if she had seen it before in her dreams, and on their last excursion, she'd spent much of the night trying not to look at it. Bobby had sensed something was wrong, but she'd been unable, or unwilling, to tell him.

The next morning, though, all that was forgotten as they walked barefoot through a magnificent valley with huge sandstone cliffs on either side. At noon, they'd swum naked in a deep waterhole and then made love under the hot November sun. It had been Bobby's first time, he'd explained nervously, but he was very gentle with her and when the climax came, they were both carried away into bliss.

And then Ron's letter had arrived.

There was a gentle knocking on her door.

"Are you ready?" Frank asked as she opened it.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said while trying to put the clumsy-looking shoes on her feet. She stumbled out of the house and into Frank’s car, and he drove them into town in silence.

The Narrabri courthouse was an imposing sandstone building with a bronze statue of a woman out the front.

“What’s that she’s holding?” Mary asked.

“It’s a set of scales,” Frank explained. “It symbolises what is supposed to be a balanced system of justice.”

“Compared to what passes for justice back home, I’m sure it’s very balanced,” Mary said.

Bobby was waiting for them in the car park. He was wearing a dark grey suit with a white shirt and a pale blue tie, and his hair had been neatly combed and parted. Mary almost didn’t recognise him.

“You know this is the first time I’ve seen you with shoes on,” he said.

“Ditto,” Mary said and they both laughed.

“Are you ready for the ordeal?” he asked.

“I guess so. I’m glad the police arrested the man who attacked me, of course, but having to relive the experience in front of the court is going to be difficult.”

“I know, and I wish you didn’t have to go through it all, but I’ll be right here with you, remember that.”

“Thanks, Bobby. I don’t know how I would have made it through the last few months without you.”

“I’ve also got a surprise for you when it’s over.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you; otherwise it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Come on, you two, we don’t want to be late,” Frank said.

“Bradley James Harrison, it is alleged that on the thirtieth day of September, two thousand and one, you unlawfully assaulted Miss Mary Anderson, occasioning grievous bodily harm,” the magistrate said. “How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, your honour.”

“Mr Harrison, perhaps you could give the court your account of what happened on the day in question,” the prosecutor began.

“I was out in the Pilliga setting my rabbit traps like I always do on Sundays, when I hear a noise like someone’s poking around my car. I dash back to the road and there’s this woman with no shoes on acting very suspiciously. I ask her what she’s doing and she asks me if I’m Frank somebody, which I’m not. She’s doing something with her dress and I think she’s taken something from my car, but when I ask her, she kicks me in the nuts and runs off. I get up and go after her but she trips on the bridge and falls down. I try to help her up and that’s when them two louts in the souped-up car turn up and start yelling at me. I don’t want no trouble so I take off into the bush. That’s all that happened, I swear.”

“Thank you, Mr Harrison. I call Miss Mary Anderson to the stand.”

Mary stepped forward and entered the witness box.

“Please state your full name for the court.”

“I am Mary Anderson.”

“Do you have a middle name?” the magistrate asked.

“No, your honour.”

“I see. Very well, you may proceed.”

“Mary, please tell the court what happened on the day in question,” the prosecutor said. Mary took a deep breath and shot a glance at Bobby. He smiled back at her.

“I was travelling by bus from my parents’ home in Melbourne to stay with my uncle, Frank Halliday, in Narrabri. We stopped in Dubbo and I got off the bus to stretch my legs, but I wandered into a shop and by the time I came out the bus had gone. I decided to try to hitch a ride to Narrabri, hoping I might be able to catch up with it there and collect my belongings, and Mr Harrison kindly offered me a ride.

“As we were travelling along the Newell Highway I was telling him about my interest in geology, and he said there was an unusual rock formation down one of the fire trails not far from where we were. He turned off the highway onto a very narrow track and we drove for about twenty minutes before coming to a small bridge.

We parked next to it and he told me to follow him into the bush. It was then that I became suspicious of his motives and asked him to take me back to the highway.

“He grabbed hold of me, threw me back against his vehicle, and tried to remove my dress.”

“May I present Exhibit A, the dress Miss Anderson was wearing on the day in question,” the prosecutor said as he handed the plastic bag containing the dress to the magistrate. “Please continue, Mary.”

“I managed to kick him in the groin and tried to escape back over the bridge, but I tripped and fell. Within moments, he was on top of me. In struggling, I kned him in the stomach and that’s when he started strangling me, all the time cursing and calling me a bitch. The last thing I recall is hearing the approach of another vehicle.”

“Thank you Miss Anderson. I have no further questions at this time.”

“Your witness, Mr Samuels,” the magistrate said to the defence barrister.

“Were you wearing shoes at the time of the alleged attack, Miss Anderson?” the barrister asked.

“No I wasn’t.”

“How do you explain that?”

“I left them on the bus.”

“So you were walking barefoot along the Newell Highway when my client supposedly picked you up.”

“Yes, I was. I go barefoot most of the time at home so my feet are quite tough.”

“I see. Now you say you had been travelling by bus from Melbourne and were left behind in Dubbo.”

“That’s right.”

“That’s interesting, because we’ve contacted all the bus companies and none of them have any record of you being a passenger.”

“The booking was made at the last minute, so perhaps it wasn’t recorded correctly.”

“They also have no record of anyone being left behind or of any unclaimed baggage on that day. How do you account for that?”

“As soon as my uncle heard what had happened to me he contacted another relative in Goondiwindi who intercepted the bus and collected my belongings. I guess the driver assumed everything was okay and didn’t report it.”

“Perhaps, although I would think it would be highly irregular. Now you say that Mr Harrison drove you out into the Pilliga and assaulted you.”

“That’s correct.”

“You didn’t encourage him at all, did you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Were you wearing any underwear?”

“I object!” the prosecutor shouted.

“Objection sustained,” the magistrate said. “Whether the witness was wearing underwear or not is irrelevant unless she was trying to undress herself, and your client has not given any indication that she was.”

“Very well, your honour. I have no further questions. My learned colleague may call his next witness.”

“Mr Robert Smith,” the prosecutor called, and Bobby stepped forward as Mary returned to her seat.

“Please state your full name for the court.”

“I am Robert Edward Smith.”

“Thank you. Could you tell the court what happened on the day in question?”

“My friend Graham MacDonald and I were driving down a fire trail in the Pilliga when we came to a bridge and saw Mr Harrison choking Miss Anderson. We leapt out and ran towards them, calling out, and Mr Harrison ran off into the bush. When I reached Miss Anderson she wasn’t breathing, but I applied mouth-to-mouth and managed to revive her. We then took her to the hospital.”

“Are you sure she was being strangled?”

“I’m positive. Anyway she wasn’t breathing and there were big bruises around her neck where he’d grabbed her.”

“You behaved very heroically, Mr Smith. I have no further questions.”

“Mr Smith, what were you and Mr MacDonald doing driving down that particular fire trail?” the defence barrister asked.

“We were looking for Eridanian landing sites.”

“What?”

“We’d heard that the first contact with the Eridanians had occurred near a waterhole in the Pilliga, and we were trying to find it, just out of curiosity.”

“It was very fortuitous that you happened upon the scene when you did, then.”

“Yes it was.”

“Thank you Mr Smith. I have no further questions.”

“You don’t wish to know if he was wearing his underwear?” the magistrate asked.

“No, your honour.” Mr Samuels blushed. There was some chuckling from the public gallery until the magistrate cleared his throat.

“Do you have any further witnesses?”

“I call Graham MacDonald to the stand,” the prosecutor said, and Graham strode up to the witness box. He was wearing a tweed jacket over a pink shirt with a navy blue tie, but Mary thought it only made him look sleazy, like the used bicycle salesman in Bringal Vale.

“Please state your full name for the court,” the prosecutor said.

“I am Graham Lancelot MacDonald.” It was the first time Bobby had heard Graham’s middle name and he almost burst out laughing. Mary shot him a questioning glance and he blushed.

“Mr MacDonald, could you give us your account of the events that took place on the thirtieth of September?”

“It was like Bobby said. I was driving down a dirt road in the Pilliga, trying to find that Eridanian landing site, when we came across this bloke trying to strangle a woman in the middle of a wooden bridge. When Bobby and I jumped out of the car he turned and ran into the bush, then Bobby applied mouth-to-mouth while I called an ambulance.”

“Is the man you saw attacking Miss Anderson here today?”

“Yes, it’s him,” Graham said, pointing at the defendant.

“Thank you Mr MacDonald. Your witness, Mr Samuels.”

“Mr MacDonald, this isn’t the first time you’ve had dealings with the law, is it?” Mr Samuels asked.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I’m referring to an incident involving yellow paint at the radio telescope a couple of years back.”

“Oh that. No charges were ever laid.”

“Thanks to your father’s well-connected friends, no doubt.”

“Objection, your honour!” the prosecutor shouted.

“Objection sustained. Mr MacDonald is a witness, not the defendant, Mr Samuels.”

“I am merely attempting to draw the court’s attention to Mr MacDonald’s past behaviour and place the voracity of his testimony in proper context.”

“I believe you’ve made your point,” the magistrate said. “You may continue.”

“Thank you, your honour. Now Mr MacDonald, are you sure it was my client whom you saw attacking Miss Anderson?”

“Yes, of course. We both got a good look at him, and I’d recognise him anywhere.”

“I see. I have no further questions, your honour.”

“You may step down,” the magistrate said.

“I would like to question the defendant now, if I may,” the prosecutor said.

“Mr Samuels?”

“Be my guest.”

“Mr Harrison, you have heard what the witnesses have had to say. Do you stand by your story that Miss Anderson approached you out in the middle of nowhere?”

“Yes, I do, because that’s what happened. She’s lying about me picking her up in Dubbo.”

“Yet you were in Dubbo earlier that day, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was getting my supplies. Is there any law against that?”

“No, of course not. Now how do you suppose Miss Anderson came to be wandering about barefoot in the middle of the bush?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s one of them Eridurians what’s been on the news the last few months. They’re always barefoot, they reckon.”

“I think the doctors at the hospital would have noticed if she was ‘Eridurian’, don’t you?”

“I suppose so. Well maybe she flew in from another galaxy on the back of a dolphin. How would I know? She didn’t tell me and I didn’t ask.”

“It just seems rather unlikely that she would be out there all alone and with no shoes or water or anything. Now you said that you were just trying to help her up after she fell on the bridge, when Mr Smith and Mr MacDonald arrived on the scene.”

“That’s right.”

“So how do you account for the bruise marks on her throat?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one of them hoodlums tried to strangle her after I’d shot through.”

“Again I think that rather unlikely, don’t you?”

“Not at all. They’re doing it all the time, them lot.”

“According to the medical report, the bruise marks match precisely the size of your fingers,” the prosecutor said as he handed the report, labelled Exhibit B, to the magistrate.

“I don’t know nothing about that.”

“Indeed you wouldn’t. I have no further questions, your honour.”

“Thank you. Mr Samuels, do you have anything further?”

“No, your honour.”

“In that case we will adjourn until two o’clock this afternoon.”

“You did great!” Bobby said as they were sitting in a café having lunch.

“Yes, it was a wonderful performance,” Frank said. “I expect the magistrate will have no difficulty in arriving at a guilty verdict.”

“What was that stuff about underwear all about?” Bobby asked.

“I have no idea,” Mary said.

“Were you wearing underwear that day?”

“Bobby, you can’t ask a lady questions like that,” Frank said.

“I’m sorry,” Bobby said. “Forget I asked, okay?”

“It’s forgotten already,” Mary said. “Does anyone want to order coffee?”

“Mr Harrison, I have given all the evidence presented this morning my most careful consideration,” the magistrate began. “As to whether you gave a ride to Miss Anderson or she happened upon you out in the bush I am unable to determine as it is merely your word against hers, but that really is irrelevant to the charges that you face. We have two witnesses who saw you attacking Miss Anderson, as well as her own testimony and the hospital report. I therefore find you guilty of assault occasioning grievous bodily harm.

“This is not the first time you have appeared before me, is it Mr Harrison?”

“No, your honour.”

“What is it, three or four times now?”

“Five actually.”

“Ah yes, of course. You seem to have an interest in assaulting young women, don’t you?”

“They asked for it, all of them.”

“Enough! This time, if it wasn’t for the heroic actions of Mr Smith and his friend, Miss Anderson would have died and you would have been facing a manslaughter charge. In view of your callous attitude and lack of remorse for your actions, I have no option but to sentence you to ten years imprisonment.”

“Now what’s that surprise you were going to give me,” Mary asked as they were walking down the steps of the courthouse.

“How would you like a two week holiday in Queensland?”

“I’d love it, but you can’t afford it, Bobby.”

“They had a raffle at work for a holiday for two in Coolum Beach, and I won.”

“That’s fantastic! When do we go?”

“How’s tomorrow sound?”

“Sound’s good to me. Come on, you’ll have to help me pack.”

* * *

The plane touched down at Brisbane airport. It had been the noisiest and most bumpy ride Mary had ever experienced, and she hoped the Earth governments would accept the Eridanian’s offer of subspace energy transducers and put an end to all these primitive combustion-powered engines.

Bobby hired a car at the terminal, with yet another internal combustion engine, and drove them north along the Bruce Highway, then onto the Sunshine Motorway to Pacific Paradise and up the coast through Yaroomba to Coolum Beach. When Mary caught her first glimpse of the sea she felt an unexpected pang of homesickness, reminding her again of the family she’d left behind on Bluehaven.

“Are you okay?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah, just the sight of the sea reminds me of a lost childhood.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. Life’s too short to dwell on regrets and things that might have been.”

Coolum Beach was everything Mary had imagined it to be, or so she thought as they pulled into the motel overlooking the water. Everything was green and lush in the warm humid air, while beyond the white sand the sunlight sparkled off a shimmering ocean. After unpacking, they went for a swim in the sea before wandering down to the town centre for dinner at a romantic Italian restaurant.

“I just can’t believe that anywhere could be as beautiful as this,” Mary said as she nibbled on a stick of herb bread.

“It’s quite a contrast to Narrabri, I’ll grant you that,” Bobby said.

“It’s not that I’ve got anything against Narrabri, but this place just feels, well, magical.”

“Yes, I can feel it too. There’s something special here, that’s for sure.”

Night fell as they enjoyed their meal, and afterwards they walked back along the moonlit beach as small waves lapped gently on the shore. With the cool sand squeaking under their feet and the light sea breeze tussling their hair, Bobby slowed and turned to face her.

“I couldn’t imagine anything more perfect than this,” he said.

“I wish this night could last forever.”

“Me too.”

There was a splash behind them and they both turned to face the water.

“Look, is that a dolphin?” Bobby asked.

“I think it is, yes, and there’s another one over there.”

There was more splashing and a third dolphin appeared.

“I think they want us to come in and join them,” Mary said.

They looked around to make sure they had the beach to themselves, then removed their clothing and dashed into the sea. The dolphins swam alongside them, nudging them into deeper water.

“The future of two galaxies hangs in the balance this night,” they whispered inside Mary’s head, and then, as Bobby gently took hold of her and the dolphins swam around them, they joined as one and made love.

For the first time in many months, Mary’s dream returned. She was back in the chapel, and alongside the coffin stood Morgoth and Mark.

“Your son is dead, Mary,” Morgoth said. “The die is cast, and the child you have conceived this night is doomed.”

“No, you’re wrong,” Mary said. “Destroy him, Mark.”

“Mary, I can’t,” Mark said, and then the coffin exploded in flames.

The dream shifted, and now she was back on the roof of the hotel she had seen during her fever the year before. Aaron took a mouthful of what she now knew to be beer, swirled it around in his mouth and spat it back into the glass.

“He’s not really drunk,” she said to herself. “It’s all an act. My son lives.”

The dream faded, and she slept soundly for the remainder of the night as the cells that would ultimately become Aaron began assembling themselves in her womb.

The two weeks passed as quickly as holidays always do. Throughout their last day, Bobby had been fidgety, and had disappeared off into the town for an hour just after lunch. They went back to the Italian restaurant for dinner but he seemed preoccupied throughout their meal.

“Um, Mary,” he said as they waited for dessert.

“Yes, Bobby,” Mary answered, hoping he might finally get whatever was bothering him off his chest.

“This has been a truly wonderful holiday, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it has. I’ve never been happier, and that’s the truth.”

“The months since we met have been the happiest time of my life, and I was wondering, well, I was wondering if you would consider marrying me.” He blushed and looked down at the tabletop, but Mary put her hand under his chin and lifted his head back up until he was forced to look into her eyes.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said, “but I suppose I can start by saying yes.”

“Did you say *yes*?”

“What’s wrong, are you going deaf all of a sudden?”

“No, it’s just that I... I’d been hoping so much you’d say *yes* that I’d convinced myself you wouldn’t.”

“I love you, Bobby, and I want to be with you, always.”

“Here, I’d better put this ring on your finger then.”

“So that’s what you’ve been up to all afternoon.”

“Yes, the jeweller wanted to show me his entire stock before letting me decide.”

“Well you’ve chosen well. It’s beautiful, Bobby.”

“Just like you, Mary.”

* * *

My dearest Ron,

Please don’t get upset, but last night Bobby proposed to me and I accepted. I said something to him about life being too short to dwell on regrets and things that might have been, but the thought was really meant for you. What we had was real, Ron, and nothing can ever take that away, but we must move on and deal with what life has given us. I love Bobby, and if my destiny is to spend the rest of my life with him, well I could imagine a whole lot of things worse.

What I’m trying to say is I don’t want you to sacrifice your future happiness pining for me. If someone else comes along then you must embrace her with all your heart.

But enough of my lecturing. I’m sure you’re coping perfectly well without me and don’t need to be told how to suck eggs. I suppose if the truth be known, I’m really just trying to clear my conscience. I want us to remain friends, though, and please keep writing and telling me how you, Kevin and Brian are getting along.

Your loving friend,

Mary.

She sealed the letter and took it to Frank Halliday.

“Have you told him you’re pregnant?” he asked.

“How do you know I’m pregnant? It’s only been two weeks since, we, um, since Bobby and I did it.”

“It’s my business to know such things. So, have you told him?”

“Well, no. I told him Bobby and I are engaged, and I thought that was enough for one letter.”

“You’re probably right. Look, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not sure if you noticed it, but during the court case that man Harrison said that, for all he knew, you might have come from another galaxy on the back of a dolphin.”

“Yes, I noticed. It took all of my self control not to yelp when he said that.”

“Your Delphinidae telepathy is radiating, and you inadvertently planted that image in his mind. You need to be careful.”

“I see, yes. I’m going to have to practise blocking my thoughts.”

“The last thing you want now is for Bobby to start seeing into your mind.”

“You’re right. Thanks for telling me.”

She started to leave the room but Frank called her back. “There’s something else I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“My business interests require that I travel to Eridani soon, so I’ve decided to leave right after your wedding. As my wedding gift, I’m giving you this house and its furnishings, as I’ll have no further need for them.”

“But Frank, you can’t go!”

“I’m afraid I must, but I’m sure you and Bobby will get along quite well without me. Perhaps our paths will cross again some day.”

“But how will I communicate with Bluehaven?”

“Come and I’ll show you.”

He led her into the kitchen and took a fillet of fish from the refrigerator. “A token of appreciation for the Dolphins,” he explained as he took her down into the cellar. “They are particularly fond of whiting.”

Behind the wine rack was a small recessed panel with a padlock on it. He unlocked and opened it, revealing a space filled with a dull shimmering light.

“A portal into Sheol!”

“Yes. Now whatever you do, don’t let Bobby find it. The Dolphins will leave any mail for you just on the other side, so you put your arm through, like this, and, well there’s nothing there this time. Just push any outgoing mail through along with the fish and the Dolphins will take care of the rest.”

He removed Mary’s letter from his pocket and pushed it and the whiting fillet into the portal, then closed and locked the door. “Remind me to give you the key before I leave.”

* * *

“Hey Bobby, that’s great news!” Graham said after Bobby had told him about his forthcoming wedding. “Who would have thought that you of all people would be getting married?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing really, only you just didn’t strike me as the marrying kind. Say, have you, um, you know, done it yet?”

“None of your business.”

“You have, haven’t you? Bobby Smith, you of all people.”

“All right then, yes, and it was the most wonderful experience I’ve ever had.”

“Good for you, mate.”

“So, will you be my Best Man?”

“Of course. I couldn’t let you have that wimp Richard Hardcastle as your Best Man, now could I?”

“Careful Graham, Richard and I are still friends, you know.”

“Sorry mate. Look, come on, we’ve got to have a drink to celebrate.”

“Um, I really should be getting back to Mary.”

“You’re not hen-pecked already, are you? Come on, just one beer. It won’t hurt you, will it?”

“All right then, but just one.”

“Bobby, where have you been?” Mary asked as she opened the door. “We were supposed to be seeing the marriage celebrant an hour ago.”

“I’m sorry, Mary. Graham insisted that we have a drink to celebrate, and when we got to the hotel there were a few other mates there, and well, you know how it is.”

“Come on, with any luck she might still be able to see us, and it might be best if I drive.”

“Whatever you say, Mary.”

“So, did you have any particular date in mind?” the celebrant asked. She had been about to close up for the day as Mary and Bobby came running in, but Mary gave her a pleading look and she relented.

“As soon as we can, really,” Bobby said.

“I’m fully booked until after Christmas, I’m afraid, but let me see, how does the nineteenth of January sound?”

“Excellent, thanks.”

“Good. That will be at ten o’clock. Please try not to be late.”

“We won’t, I promise,” Mary said.

* * *

“Bobby, I have something to tell you,” Mary said as they were walking to Graham’s place for his Christmas Eve barbecue and drinks.

“Yes?”

“I’m, well, I’m pregnant.”

Bobby stopped dead in his tracks. “You’re pregnant?”

“You know, carrying a child.”

“Woo-hoo!” he yelled as he leapt in the air, then smothered her with kisses and hugged her tightly.

“I was hoping you’d be pleased.”

“Pleased? I’m over the moon! This is the best Christmas present you could’ve given me. Wow! I can’t wait to tell Graham.”

“I’m sure he’ll be pleased to know,” Mary said, still trying to figure out why telling Graham should be his highest priority. She’d met Graham on several occasions, but something about him had rubbed her up the wrong way. He reminded her too much of Brett

Farley, she mused, and he seemed the sort of person who'd happily use everyone else to further his own ends. That thought made her realise she'd been doing pretty much the same thing with Bobby, and with that came a pang of guilt about Ron. For just a fleeting moment she had a vision of him sitting alone in a dark corner, a tear running down his cheek and little Kevin perched on his knee.

"What's wrong, Mary?" Bobby asked.

"Nothing, just a turkey walking over my grave."

"You mean goose."

"Yeah, whatever. Come on, we don't want to keep Graham waiting," she said as cheerfully as she could, then grabbed him by the hand and pulled him along down the road.

* * *

"Ouch," Ron said as he wiped the tear from his cheek. "That hurt."

"What's wrong?" the Priestess asked as she walked in carrying a bowl of soup.

"Kevin just kicked me in the, you know, the place that hurts."

"Ouch," she said. "Come on Kevin, dinner time."

Ron carried him over to the table and began feeding him the soup.

"Did you get that letter off to Mary?" he asked.

"Yes, the Dolphins have it now. She should get it well before her wedding day."

"Thanks, honey."

"No problem," she said and kissed him on the nose.

* * *

"Congratulations, mate!" Graham said, patting his friend on the back. "I'm sure it's going to be a boy and he'll grow up to captain Australia's cricket squad."

"Yes, I'm sure he will," Bobby said as he opened the can of beer Graham had just given him. "The British press will give him

heaps, then he'll score a century in his maiden test and single-handedly win the Ashes for us."

"Too right!" Graham said. "Now what can I get you to drink, Mary?"

"I'd better not have anything alcoholic," she said, patting her stomach.

"Of course, how silly of me. Look, I think there's some apple juice in the fridge, you know where it is. So Bobby, what do you think of that new spinner in the New South Wales team?"

Mary wandered back into the house, found the refrigerator and an empty apple juice bottle inside it, and poured herself a glass of water instead. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

Mary woke with a start. In her dream, she and Ron had been running through the bush on Bluehaven, chased by Bobby who was wielding a scythe. Outside her window, the sky was beginning to lighten.

"Good morning, Mary," Frank said as she came into the kitchen. "Are you ready for your big day?"

"To be honest, no. I had a terrible night last night. I suppose deep in my heart I'm still feeling guilty about Ron and the baby."

"Speaking of Ron, there's a letter from him that came in this morning," Frank said, handing her an envelope.

My dearest Mary,

I hope this reaches you before your wedding, and that the day is filled with joy and happiness for you.

You'll be pleased to know I've taken your advice to heart, and I'm now living with Hilda, the Delphinidae Priestess in Golding. We have become close friends over the past year, what with working together on the school and hospice, and we're thinking of marrying sometime soon. I'll let you know as soon as we've decided on a date.

Kevin turns one in a few weeks and Hilda and I will be giving him a small party with a few friends from around the district. I'll send you some photos with my next letter.

Brian received distinctions in all his end-of-year examinations and is over the moon. His girlfriend has taken him to the coastal resort town of Hemmingworth, which is about a hundred kilometres from the university, and they've been having a wonderful time even though it's been raining most days.

The harvest is coming up soon and I'll be helping Eric again, although it's been a bit too dry during the growing season and his crop will be well down on last year. The quanga price has gone through the roof, though, so he should be able to make up some of his losses with those.

As you can see, life for me is pretty good right now, so go and enjoy your wedding with a clear conscience.

*Best wishes,
Ron.*

She sat staring at the letter for a few moments, then folded it and placed it back inside the envelope.

"How is he?" Frank asked.

"Good, very good actually. He and the Priestess from Golding look like marrying. It's a great relief for me." It was not relief she was feeling, though, but jealousy, and right at that moment, she wanted more than anything to just run out the door screaming her head off.

"Here, get some breakfast into you. It'll make you feel better."

"Thanks, Frank."

The limousine pulled up at the Narrabri Function Centre. Frank leapt out, dashed around to the other side and helped Mary out of the vehicle, while at the same instant the brass band struck up *Here Comes the Bride*. He escorted her up the pathway to the gazebo where the celebrant, Bobby and Graham were waiting. When

Bobby saw her he positively beamed, and that was enough to snap her out of her melancholy mood.

“In this day and age, as we move into a new millennium and reach out to the stars in ways unthought of even six months ago, some may say that marriage is nothing more than a legal agreement between two people to live under the same roof and share their resources,” the celebrant began. “But nothing could be further from the truth. Marriage is a lifelong commitment, not to be entered into lightly or to be terminated at a whim. It is a commitment to make another person an extension of yourself, and to support that person in every way, not just in the good times but through the bad times as well.

“When you’ve been in this business as long as I have you develop a knack for picking the winners, and I could tell when Bobby and Mary first came to see me that they were deeply in love and committed to each other. Although young in years, they both have a mature attitude to life and I’m sure their marriage will be a success.

“So, to start the ball rolling, if there is anyone present here today who knows why these two should not be joined in matrimony, let him speak now or forever hold his peace.”

Bobby glanced around nervously, but no-one spoke out.

“Robert Edward Smith, do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, to honour and to cherish, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, until death do you part?”

“I do,” Bobby loudly proclaimed.

“Do you, Mary Anderson, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, to honour and to cherish, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, until death do you part?”

Mary, in trying to put it out of her mind, couldn’t stop thinking about Ron marrying Hilda, and then panicked for a wild moment when she couldn’t remember what he looked like. Once more having to suppress the urge to scream, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and steadied herself.

“I do,” she finally said when she realised everyone was staring at her.

The celebrant turned to Graham. “The rings, please.” He fumbled in his pocket for a few moments before handing over the two gold bands.

“With this ring I thee wed,” Bobby said as he placed a ring on Mary’s finger, and Mary repeated the ritual.

“Robert and Mary, I declare thee husband and wife,” the celebrant said, and they kissed. Mary sighed inwardly, wondering yet again if she’d done the right thing.

The Slippery Slope

“Hey Bobby, have you heard?” Graham asked.

“Heard what?”

“Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe will be addressing a meeting on Saturday night at the town hall.”

“So?”

“So this is our chance to cause some serious mischief.”

“You mean get ourselves arrested.”

“No, of course not, no-one will be able to pin anything on us.”

“You’re mad, you know.”

“I know, but your job’s on the line just as much as mine is. Are you with me or not, Bobby?”

“All right then. What do you have in mind?”

The hall was about three quarters full when they arrived. Mary had been rather surprised when Bobby had suggested coming, as she knew he wasn’t in favour of the Eridanians or Billy Collins in particular. He’d been fidgety all evening, though, and when she discovered that Graham would be accompanying them she began to suspect they might be plotting something disruptive.

A hush fell over the crowd and everyone turned to the back of the hall where an Aboriginal man was walking in, hand in hand with a very pregnant Anglo-Saxon woman.

“Billy Collins and his wife Julia,” Bobby whispered. “She looks like she’s about to drop her bundle at any moment.”

Mary didn’t really hear him, though, as her Delphinidae senses had been overwhelmed by the powerful aura surrounding Billy. She remembered now that Frank Halliday had said he was a one-quarter Barefooter, and she noticed then that his feet were indeed

bare. A finely-dressed man whom Mary took to be the mayor was greeting him.

Behind them stood another barefoot man, Peter Thorpe. For a moment Mary sensed something in him too, but then it was gone. *'The hidden one,'* was the thought that flashed through her mind, but she didn't know what it meant.

The mayor escorted Billy and Peter onto the stage while Julia came and sat alongside Mary. They nodded politely to each other.

"When's your child due?" Julia asked.

"In about four months," Mary said. "Yours looks pretty close to full term."

"Yes, the doctor reckons about two weeks. I'm Julia, by the way, Julia Collins."

"I'm Mary Anderson, oops, I mean Mary Smith. I'm still not quite used to married life yet!"

"Yes, it does take a bit of getting used to. I've been married to Billy for almost a year now, and I still occasionally find myself using my maiden name."

At that moment, the mayor tapped the microphone, putting an end to any further conversation.

"It's good to see so many of you here on this cold night," he began. "I'm sure our guest speaker needs no introduction, as over the past year he has become Narrabri's most famous son. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Dr Billy Collins."

There was enthusiastic applause, and even Bobby and Graham were clapping. Mary knew then that they were up to something.

"Thank you for your warm welcome," Billy began. "A lot has happened over the last eight months since Peter Thorpe and I first met with the Eridanians, with much of that going on behind the scenes and out of the public gaze.

"It will be some time yet before any formal diplomatic agreements are in place, and there will be plenty of opportunity for political debate in coming months, however tonight I want to concentrate on what's been happening on the scientific and medical front. Three months ago, we sent a small team of scientists and doctors to Eridani to begin laying the groundwork in these two

particularly important areas. Mostly this has involved the painstaking work of matching up our units of measurement and methods of notation. At a basic level, these are things like mathematical symbols and expressions, the designation of chemical structures and reactions, and so forth. This is all very tedious and slow, but it is essential if either world is to benefit from cooperation in these areas.

“We have also been working closely with the governments on Earth and Eridani to see what our priorities should be. Although these are still early days, there seems to be general agreement here that the deployment of subspace energy transducers should be high on the list, for the sooner we can reduce or eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels the better our chances will be of halting the greenhouse effect before too much permanent damage is done. To this end I am pleased to announce tonight that a local Narrabri company, Unlimited Energy Pty Ltd, is about to begin production of a domestic subspace power unit that can provide all the electricity requirements for a typical household. Raymond Marshall will be demonstrating a prototype later tonight for those who are interested.

“On the medical side, our top priority at this time is to ensure as best we can that there are no diseases on either world that can affect the inhabitants of the other. In this respect, we are fortunate that, at a cellular level, there are subtle but important differences between Earth and Eridani biology that would appear to make this sort of cross-contamination unlikely, but further research is required before we can be certain of this.

“There are also working groups being set up to study those diseases on each world that are at present untreatable, with the hope that cures may be readily found from the experience of the other world. Already there are promising signs of progress in the treatment of a range of respiratory illnesses, including asthma and the common cold.

“There are many challenges that lie ahead, and there will inevitably be some who are disadvantaged as a result. These are not insurmountable hurdles, though, if we proceed in a careful and

considered manner, and we're hopeful that such disruptions will be short term and kept to a minimum."

Graham stood and waved his arm.

"A question? Yes?"

"What about the coal industry?" he asked.

"That industry does present a problem," Billy said, "as the deployment of subspace energy transducers will pretty much eliminate the demand for coal. The new job opportunities in the manufacture and installation of transducers will offset the losses to a degree, and I understand that the government is currently looking at this issue."

"Sounds like a cop-out to me."

"No, not at all. Come and see me after the meeting and I'll get your details so I can follow it up for you. Are there any other questions at this point?"

An elderly man at the front of the hall raised his hand. "I hear there are concerns about radiation from your energy transducers. Are they safe?"

"The transducers are purely receivers; they don't generate any radiation at all. Yes, they're quite safe."

There were conflicting reports of what happened next. To Mary it seemed there was a flash of light and a muffled explosion from near the front of the hall, to the right of the stage, and then the room almost instantly filled with smoke. Within moments, there was a stampede of people heading for the single door at the back, with a smaller group trying unsuccessfully to escape through the side door at the front. It had been padlocked following an attempted break-in some months earlier, the inquest was told, and their report was highly critical of Narrabri Council on this matter.

Then came an ear-piercing scream from right beside Mary, and she turned to see Julia slumping to the floor, a stain slowly spreading over the front of her clothing. She clutched at her stomach, moaning.

"Her baby's coming!" Mary said as she grabbed hold of Bobby. "Help me get her outside, and Graham, call an ambulance."

Graham whipped out his phone and made the call. By the time Mary and Bobby had her upright, most of the crowd had escaped, and they eased her towards the door.

Julia just made it outside and into the fresh air when the contractions started up in earnest, and Mary and Bobby eased her down onto the steps. She groaned in agony, her brow dripping with sweat, while the ambulance fought its way into the car park against the tide of fleeing citizens. As it pulled up amidst a crowd of curious onlookers, Jason Collins, the penultimate link in the chain that would defeat Morgoth, was born.

* * *

Mary was preparing dinner when she heard the front door slam and Bobby come stomping down the hallway. Of late, he had taken to wearing his steel-capped work boots inside the house, and the coal dust stains on the carpet were multiplying. Mary, who still thought of it as Frank's house, felt a wave of depression washing over her as she took in what had become of his once pristine environment.

"Graham's been arrested!" Bobby said as he thumped his fist on the bench top. A plate, which had been balanced too close to the edge, fell and shattered on the slate tiles, but he didn't seem to notice. "We were drinking at the hotel after work when no less than four policemen came in and took him. He's been charged with planting the bomb in the town hall."

"And did he?" Mary asked.

Bobby glared at her with murder in his eyes and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her violently. For a wild moment, she feared for her life, but then he slumped as all the malice seemed to drain out of him.

"Get me a beer," he said, and she did.

The telephone rang and Bobby answered it.

"That was Graham," he said after hanging up. "They've released him on bail. He said they found a fragment of the

wrapping we put the smoke bomb in, and it had his fingerprints on it.”

“Bobby, why are you doing this?” Mary asked, bracing herself for another outburst of rage. Instead, he started to cry.

“Collins and those Eridanians are going to put us out of work,” he sniffled. “We have to do something.”

She held his head against her bosom. “Don’t worry, honey, everything will work out okay, I’m sure.”

* * *

“Graham Lancelot MacDonald, you are charged with unlawfully detonating an explosive device in a public place and disturbing the peace,” the magistrate said. “How do you plead?”

“Guilty, your honour.”

“Mr MacDonald, you do have something of a history of disturbing the peace, but never before have you committed anything of this magnitude. What you did was foolhardy and reckless. Do you understand that now?”

“Yes, your honour.”

“Good. There are many ways in this country to express your opinion on the events that are taking place. Write to the newspapers, use talkback radio, organise a protest march, join a political party or even stand as a candidate in the next election. Setting off smoke bombs at public meetings does nothing to further your cause. I am giving you a six month suspended sentence and placing you on a two year good behaviour bond.”

“Thank you, your honour.”

“Thank heavens that’s over,” Bobby said. “I was sure they were going to lock you up and throw away the key.”

“For setting off a smoke bomb? Nah, six months suspended is par for the course,” Graham said as he sipped his beer. “We’ll just have to be a bit smarter next time.”

“There’s not going to be any next time,” Mary said. “Why don’t you just do what the magistrate said and write to the newspaper or something?”

“That’s not going to do any good.”

“People could have been hurt, and it was touch and go with Julia for a little while there,” Mary said. “Graham, she could easily have died as a result of your stupidity.”

“Don’t lecture me, Mary.”

“Well someone needs to talk some sense into the two of you.”

Graham drained his glass. “Your shout, Bobby.”

Bobby pulled out his wallet and wandered over to the bar.

“Don’t you ever talk to me or Bobby like that again,” Graham snarled. “I know you’re hiding some enormous secret, Mary Anderson, if that’s what your name really is, and when I find out what it is you’re going to regret every word you just said. Your fairy godfather isn’t here to protect you any more, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“If you think you can threaten me, you’d better think again,” Mary said.

They waited in silence, glaring at each other, until Bobby returned with more beer.

* * *

My dearest Mary,

Hilda and I were married last Saturday. It was a low key affair, under the circumstances, but Brian was able to come. His girlfriend must have the right connections because she arranged a free flight from Cornipus for him. It was great to see him again – it seems an eternity since the three of us were working together on Eric’s farm.

He said his girlfriend’s been asking a lot of questions about you, and he was wondering if perhaps you knew her. Her name’s Shirley Pinkerton and she’s originally from Etford.

Kevin is well and growing rapidly. He enjoyed his birthday party a few weeks ago and I've enclosed some photos taken then as well as our wedding shots.

I trust you and Bobby are well and enjoying yourselves.

Love,

Ron.

Mary sighed, then folded the letter and put it and the photographs into her drawer. She was sure she'd never heard of Shirley Pinkerton, and wondered if she might be up to no good. *'If only Frank were still here,'* she thought.

* * *

Brett Farley entered the throne room.

"Come in, young Brett," Morgoth said. "I hear you have some news for me."

"Yes, my Lord. My, um, acquaintance on Cornipus has established a liaison with Brian Lachlan, and has learnt that Ron Simmons is living in the town of Golding on Sontar and has just married the Delphinidae priestess there. Shirley has checked her out and is certain she has no connection with Mary Anderson.

"As to Mary, she would seem to have disappeared without trace. Perhaps the prophecy is correct and she's hiding on Huntress, but my father has seen no sign of her there."

"Your father wouldn't notice a Cornipean bunyip if it jumped up and bit him on the nose," Morgoth said.

"I'm afraid I'd have to agree with you there," Brett chuckled. "Dad was never very observant. You'd be amazed at what I got away with when I was younger."

"I'm sure I would. You've done well, young Brett. Keep me informed of any further developments."

"Of course, and thank you, my Lord."

* * *

Bobby arrived home from work two hours later than usual. Mary could smell the alcohol on him as soon as he walked in the door, and had a pretty good idea of where he'd been.

"I had dinner ready an hour ago," she said. "I can warm it up again in the microwave though, if you like."

"Whatever," he grunted as he planted himself in front of the television set. "The colliery has put their upgrading plans on hold, and Graham and I have been moved into the maintenance section."

"I'm sorry to hear that, honey, although you've been saying for weeks now that it's been on the cards."

"Well now it's finally happened. My pay's been cut as well, so you're going to have to cut back on your spending."

"My spending? I'm not exactly living the life of the rich and famous here, Bobby."

"Well maybe you should have married someone a bit wealthier than."

"Are you having second thoughts about our marriage?" Mary asked. Bobby just grunted.

"The Prime Minister today announced that he has signed a formal diplomatic agreement with the Eridanians, making Australia one of the first countries to do so," the television news reporter said. "He told Parliament that the benefits to this country would be substantial, particularly in the longer term, and it was important to seize this opportunity now. 'Had we delayed any longer we risked being squeezed out by the larger American companies,' he said.

"In local news, Unlimited Energy's managing director, Raymond Marshall, today announced that his company has begun rolling out its domestic subspace power modules. These, he said, would typically be installed in place of the traditional meter box and would supply enough energy to meet the needs of any household now and into the future."

Bobby seized the remote control and turned the television off. "I've had enough of that crap for one day," he muttered. "Where's my dinner?"

"It's ready now," Mary said as she lifted his plate out of the microwave. "I hope it hasn't dried out too much. Next time could you let me know if you're going to be late and I'll wait before starting the cooking."

He grunted again and took a mouthful. "This is awful," he said, but continued eating nonetheless.

"I saw the doctor today and he said the baby's coming along nicely," she said, changing the subject. "He expects the big day will be in about two weeks."

"That's nice," Bobby said with his mouth full. "Graham reckons that if it's a boy we should name him Ned."

"Why Ned?"

"After Ned Kelly, the bushranger."

"I should have guessed."

"So what do you think?"

"I think we should wait until he or she is born before making any decision." She had no intention of telling him what the boy's name had to be any sooner than she had to.

"Suit yourself, as long as you're not planning on calling him anything stupid, like Ron for example."

"No, not Ron," Mary managed to say with a reasonably steady voice. She thought she'd been keeping her mind closed, but apparently not.

"Good," Bobby muttered as he took another mouthful. "There was a boy in my class at school named Ron, and he was the world's greatest dork. Now get me a beer, will you honey?"

* * *

Mary woke in the middle of the night as the first of the contractions began. She roused Bobby.

"What's wrong, honey?" he asked.

"I think the baby's coming."

“Do you want me to take you to the hospital now?”

“I think so, yes.”

Along the way, the contractions became more frequent, and as soon as the triage nurse saw her, she had her admitted to the delivery ward.

“Do you want to watch?” the nurse asked Bobby.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well come and get suited up, then.”

Mary steeled her mind as the contractions began to intensify, mindful of the agony Julia had gone through with Jason’s birth, and so she was surprised, as well as relieved, when the baby almost just glided out.

Bobby, however, had fainted when the baby’s head began to emerge and had to be taken outside. Mary was propped up in bed nursing her new-born son when he drifted shakily into the room.

“My son,” he said. “You know, I think we should call him Aaron.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Mary said. Her telepathy was radiating again, she was sure, but this time she didn’t mind one bit.

* * *

When Mary arrived home with the shopping, Bobby was waiting for her at the front door. In his hand was a bundle of Ron’s letters and photographs.

“Care to tell me what these are?” he asked.

“They’re letters from my cousin,” Mary lied.

“What language are they written in? I’ve never seen writing like this before.”

“He lives in a small village in Africa, and he always writes in their local script.”

“And you can read this?”

“Not as well as I’d like to, but yeah, I can read it.”

“So what do they say?”

“Well, mostly they’re about his wedding and his son’s first birthday.”

“I see. What’s this cousin’s name?”

“Ron.”

“Is he the Ron you sometimes talk about in your sleep?”

“I suppose he must be.”

“Just who are you, Mary?”

Before she could invent an answer, the telephone started ringing and Bobby went back inside to answer it. Mary went into the bedroom to check on Aaron, but when she came back out to the kitchen Bobby looked ashen.

“That was Mum,” he said. “Dad’s had a heart attack and was rushed to hospital.”

“Oh no! Is he okay?”

“He’s in intensive care and listed as critical. Grab the baby and we’ll go over there right now.”

“Of course,” Mary said, picking up Ron’s letters and photos from where Bobby had dropped them and pushing them into her handbag on the way out.

“The main artery that supplies the heart is ninety percent blocked,” the doctor said. “We’re preparing him now for bypass surgery.”

“Can we see him?” Bobby asked.

“Yes, but just for a few minutes.”

Terry Smith looked a diminished man in the intensive care bed, wired to a variety of monitors that surrounded him in a pulsating green glow. He smiled weakly as they approached.

“Dad, what happened?” Bobby asked.

“I don’t know. I was as good as gold, and then pow! The next thing I knew I was here.”

“Hang in there, Dad. You’re in good hands and you’re going to be fine.”

“Is that my grandson there, Mary?”

“Yes, here he is,” Mary said as she held Aaron up to him.

“Did I ever tell you he’s got your eyes?” Terry asked.

“Yes, a hundred times at least.”

“Take good care of him, both of you.”

“Don’t talk like that, Terry. You’re going to be fine,” Mary said as she focussed whatever healing powers she possessed onto him.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said, and then the nurse came and ushered them back out into the waiting room.

“He’s going to be fine,” Mary said to Bobby and Madeleine.

Those four hours were the longest in Bobby’s life. In his mind he replayed all the wonderful times he’d had with his father, trying not to think about losing him but unable not to. Yet, there came over him a soothing feeling, as if someone was massaging his thoughts and pushing aside his fears. He leaned over on Mary’s shoulder and closed his eyes.

Mary reached into Bobby’s mind and felt the conflict within him. As she had learned in her training on Bluehaven, she visualised taking hold of the bad thoughts and pushing them out of his consciousness, and in doing so, she came across his memory of finding Ron’s letters and photographs. In a moment of self-interest that would haunt her for the rest of her days, she defied the most fundamental principles of her Order and pushed those memories out of his consciousness and into the deepest recesses of his mind.

“I have good news for you,” the doctor said as he walked into the room. “He’s come through the operation with flying colours and should make a complete recovery.”

Madeleine leapt out of her seat and almost gave the doctor a big hug before checking herself. “Thank you so much, that’s the most wonderful news I’ve ever heard.”

“There is one thing, though,” the doctor said. “If he’s to avoid a recurrence he’s going to have to watch his diet very closely. He’s fond of his beer, am I right?”

“Yes,” Madeleine said uncertainly.

“Well I’m afraid he’s going to have to give that up.”

“He’s not going to like that.”

“If I were him I’d consider myself very lucky just to be alive. Does he smoke at all?”

“No, he never has.”

“Good, that’s very good. Perhaps he can just have the occasional light beer then, but none of the full strength stuff.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

* * *

“You look terrible, Mary,” Julia said as she was sipping her coffee. They’d bumped into each other in the supermarket, each with toddler in tow, and had adjourned to a nearby café after completing their shopping.

“Yes, I think it’s the lack of sleep due to this little monster,” Mary said. “Bobby’s gone all sullen, too, and we hardly ever speak any more without it turning into an argument. He’s spending more and more time drinking with his mate Graham MacDonald.”

“Wasn’t he the one who set off the smoke bomb in the town hall?”

“He and Bobby were both in it, I think, although Bobby’s never come right out and admitted it. Graham’s a bad apple, that’s for sure, but Bobby will never see it. He worships him.”

“That’s so sad. Look, Billy’s cooking a barbecue on Saturday so why don’t you come round and join us?”

“I’d love to, but I’m sure Bobby won’t come. He blames Billy for all his problems at work.”

“How’s that?”

“He works at the colliery in Gunnedah and he reckons those subspace power things are going to put him out of work.”

“I see. The government is supposed to be putting together an assistance package for those affected, so hopefully everything will work out okay for him.”

“I hope so. We could do with some good news.”

“You look terrible, Bobby,” Graham said as they sat drinking in the Narrabri Arms hotel.

“Yeah, I’m going through a bit of a rough patch, there’s no denying it,” Bobby said. “Aaron keeps waking in the middle of the night, and then there’s the constant worry about work. Mary’s not helping much either, she’s gone all sullen over the last few months, like she’s just lost interest in everything.”

“She’s a strange woman, that’s for sure. She’s not having an affair, is she?”

“Mary? No way,” Bobby said instinctively, but something deep in the back of his mind started flashing, and the name it flashed was Ron. “Do you know anyone named Ron?”

“Only that dork in school, but he left town years ago. I think they moved to Perth.”

“It’s weird. I’m sure she’s not seeing anyone, but for some reason the name *Ron* keeps popping into my head. I think I’m losing it, Graham.”

“Some more beer will soon fix that. Speaking of beer, how’s your father coping with being on the wagon?”

“Good. Actually, he’s looking the best I’ve seen him in ages. It’s like both he and Mum have been given a new lease on life.”

“That’s terrific. Say, the NSW side are playing a charity match in Gunnedah on Saturday, and I know your parents are great cricket fans, so why don’t we go and make it a foursome, just like in the old days.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s a great idea. I’ll give them a ring tonight. Look, I’m going to have to run, Graham. Mary goes ballistic if I’m late home for dinner.”

“Okay, see ya.”

“Mary! I didn’t think you’d be able to make it,” Julia said as she answered the door. “Come on in.”

“Thanks. Bobby’s gone off to a cricket match with his parents and Graham, so I thought I’d take you up on your offer.”

“You’re most welcome. Come on out the back and I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

Julia escorted her through the kitchen and out into the back yard where a group of people was standing around the barbecue.

“Mary, this is my husband Billy, his parents Tom and Sarah, and our friends Peter Thorpe and Matthew Hardcastle.”

“Hi, I’m Mary Smith, and this little monster is Aaron.”

At that moment, a dark-skinned toddler poked his head out of the bushes.

“That’s our little Jason,” Billy said. “He’s a bit shy with strangers.”

“Jason, meet Aaron,” Mary said as she put her son down alongside him.

The two boys sat staring at each other, perhaps sensing something of the destiny that awaited them both, and then giggled and crawled off together into the garden.

Part Three ~ Child of Hope

Starting School

Aaron opened his eyes and for a moment was lost and confused. They had returned a week ago from a holiday in Queensland and in his dreaming he was still there, swimming with the dolphins. He had followed them down into the depths and they had told him many things, things he could no longer remember. Then he was back in his room in Narrabri and the sun was shining brightly through the window.

He jumped out of bed and scampered down to the kitchen where his mother was about to serve his breakfast of scrambled eggs on toast. He had long ago perfected the ability to wake just as the eggs were almost cooked.

“Good morning sweetheart,” she said. “Are you ready for your first day at school?”

After his dream about the dolphins, he’d quite forgotten what today was, but he tried to pretend that he hadn’t.

“Sure, Mummy, all set and ready to go.”

His hand imitated a spaceship taking off and he provided the accompanying sound effects. She placed his plate in front of him, thus silencing him for a few minutes, then dished out her own breakfast and sat down. She reached over and brushed his hair away from his eyes.

“I should’ve taken you to the hairdresser last week,” she said, mostly to herself. “You’re starting to look like a mop.” Aaron giggled.

Six months ago, Bobby had taken him to the barber and brought him back with a crew-cut. They’d argued (so what was new?) and since then she’d been a little reluctant to have the boy’s hair styled the way she liked it, for fear of starting another row, and now he looked like a goddamned mop. She sighed.

“It’s okay, Mum, I like it like this,” he said as he brushed his hair back down over his eyes. She sighed again.

“Now have you cleaned your teeth?”

Aaron was standing at the front door, dressed more or less properly with his little backpack in place, receiving her final inspection.

“Yes, Mummy, all of them,” he said with a grin that showed every tooth in his mouth. She reached down to brush his hair back but faltered – short of gluing it in place, it would only flop down again before he reached the school anyway.

“Okay, kiddo, let’s go then.” She took hold of his hand and led him off down the road for the short walk to South Narrabri Primary School.

The footpath outside the school gate was overflowing with anxious mothers and befuddled children. Mary joined them, still holding firmly to Aaron’s hand, and surveyed the crowd. There were quite a few familiar faces from the preschool and she smiled and nodded to those she knew.

“Mummy, that boy over there doesn’t have any shoes on,” Aaron said while tugging at her hand. “Can I take mine off too?”

“No, honey, you can’t,” she said as she followed his gaze towards a small Aboriginal boy clinging to an Anglo-Saxon woman. It had been four years since she’d last seen Julia Collins, when she’d gone to the barbecue at her place. In one of those quirks of fate that seems so unlikely in hindsight, even in the small town of Narrabri their paths simply hadn’t crossed since then.

At that moment, Julia looked up, met her gaze and smiled. Mary smiled back and started moving towards her, Aaron in tow.

“Your boy’s a lot bigger than when I last saw him,” Mary said as Julia pulled her reluctant offspring around in front of her.

“Say hello to Mrs Smith, Jason,” Julia said.

“Hello Mrs Smith.”

“This is my boy Aaron,” Mary said.

“Nice to meet you again, Aaron,” Julia said. “Do you think you could be friends with Jason and look after him for me?”

“Sure, if I can take my shoes off too.”

Julia glanced up at Mary and she shrugged. Aaron bent down and had his shoes off in an instant.

“Put them in your backpack,” Mary said to him, “but if the teacher tells you to put them back on, then you have to do it, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’m sure there won’t be any problem,” Julia said. “I spoke to Mrs Orchard about Jason’s condition and she said it was perfectly okay for the children to be barefoot if their parents preferred.”

“His condition? What’s wrong with him?” Mary asked, hoping it wasn’t contagious.

“It’s a thing called autothermia that he inherited from his father. The cells of his body have subspace receptors in them that act as a source of energy, and he can’t wear shoes or have his shirt buttoned up otherwise he’d overheat. If the day gets any hotter he’ll probably have to take his shirt off altogether.”

“I see.”

Something in the back of Mary’s mind began to tingle, but she couldn’t quite put a finger on it. Something from long ago, she thought. Something creepy. She shivered.

The school door opened and a large woman with blue hair stepped out.

“Could you all please form a line,” she bellowed.

As each mother and child came forward, their name was ticked off the list and a sticker saying ‘*Hello, my name is ...*’ was filled in and attached to the front of the boy or girl’s shirt. Once properly identified, the children were herded into the building while their mothers milled around outside like lost sheep.

Aaron took Jason by the hand and led him inside. At the end of the corridor, a young woman guided them into a room on the left. As the two boys approached, she smiled.

“I see you’ve found a friend already, Jason.”

“This is Aaron and he’s going to look after me,” Jason said.

“Good for you,” she said. “Now go on in and find yourselves a seat.”

They stepped into the brightly painted room and found an empty pair of desks two rows back from the front. They sat down, looked at each other and giggled. Something inside of Aaron, a thing he would later call his *Jedi self*, flared up, and he thought again of his dream about the dolphins.

“So, how’s everything with you and Bobby?” Julia asked.

“Oh, much the same,” Mary said. “We’re still together, so I suppose that’s something, but it’s far from rosy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I suppose things are looking pretty grim for him at the colliery too.”

“Yes, really they’re just waiting for the final blow to fall now.”

“Look, I’ll have a talk to Billy and see if he knows of any opportunities that might be available for him in some of the new technology businesses.”

“Thanks, I’d appreciate that.”

When Mary returned home, she went down into the cellar to check for mail from the Dolphins. It had been many months since she’d last looked, but something in what Julia had said about Jason had triggered her memory. She unlocked the panel and pushed her hand through into the portal. Waiting on the other side was a letter from Ron.

Dear Mary,

I’m sorry I haven’t written for so long but things have been really busy here. Our school and hospice is now fully operational and has been well received by the local community. We now have ten full-time staff as well as a few helpers who come in from time to time.

Kevin's just turned six. He started school a year ago and is doing very well, particularly in language and communication skills. I can't believe how quickly those six years have slipped by.

All hell broke loose on Bluehaven last month when someone tried to kill the High Priestess's daughter while they were visiting Etford. The palace denied any imperial involvement, but the Temple is unconvinced and Loral has decided to send her here for her schooling. Lorett arrives next week and will be in the same class as Kevin, so naturally everyone is very excited.

Brian graduated with first class honours and is now working in the Justice Department on Bluehaven. Did I tell you he married his girlfriend? Probably not, but I have now. They held the wedding on Cornipus and it was quite nice, although it never stopped raining the whole time we were there.

I've enclosed some wedding photos as well as a recent shot of me, Hilda and Kevin.

I hope you, Bobby and Aaron are well. I suppose Aaron must be just about starting school by now.

*Best wishes,
Ron.*

Mary couldn't tear her eyes away from the photograph of Kevin, even when the tears welling up in them made it too blurry to see. Eventually she turned and climbed back upstairs, with the photos and letter clasped to her chest, then sat down on the sofa and wept.

At three o'clock, she wiped her face with a damp cloth and returned to the school to collect Aaron, joining the group of anxious mothers waiting just outside the gate. A bell rang out, causing her to jump, and then within moments hordes of children came running out.

The flood petered to a trickle, but still there was no Aaron or Jason amongst them. Mary could feel her panic level beginning to rise, but Julia must have sensed it because she placed a hand on her shoulder. Then a mop of blonde hair appeared in the doorway,

and as soon as the child hiding beneath it saw his mother, he ran towards her, his unbuttoned shirt flapping behind him like a cape. In his wake, and struggling to keep up, came a completely shirtless Jason.

“Where’s your shirt, honey?” Julia asked him.

“It’s in my bag. I got too hot and the teacher let me take it off. She let Aaron and the other boys take theirs off too.”

“That’s good. So what did you do today?”

“We did drawing, and then some reading and writing. After lunch we played kanga-cricket and Aaron hit the ball really good and made lots of runs.”

Aaron grinned and Mary ruffled his hair. “Your dad will be very pleased with you.”

Bobby arrived home just as Mary was starting to prepare dinner, and he seemed in a particularly good mood.

“How’d Aaron get on at school?” he asked.

“Pretty good from all accounts. He was the batting star in kanga-cricket.”

“I just knew he was going to be a great cricketer.”

“He also made a new friend, a boy named Jason.”

“Good for him.”

At that moment, Aaron came running into the kitchen and leapt into his father’s arms.

“I scored twenty runs today!” he said.

“Yes, your mother was just telling me. Come out the back and you can show me how you handle the bat.”

From outside, the laughter of father and son was suddenly interrupted by the tinkling of broken glass.

“Oh no, the cellar window,” Bobby said. “You stay out here and I’ll go clean it up.”

Mary suddenly froze as she remembered that she’d forgotten to close and lock the panel over the portal. She dashed down into the cellar only to find Bobby staring at the shimmering light coming from the small rectangular hole in the wall.

“Care to explain what this is?” he asked.

“I don’t know, really. It’s something Frank installed, I suppose.”

He turned to look at her, but before he could say anything he was trapped by her bright blue eyes. Mary reached into his mind and moved his memory of the last few minutes out of his consciousness, while at the same time closing and locking the portal.

“I came in here for something and now my mind’s gone blank,” Bobby said dreamily after Mary had released his mind. “Oh, that’s right, Aaron broke a window and I was going to clean it up. Have you seen the dustpan?”

“Over there under the bench,” Mary said.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

“Um, dinner will be ready in about five minutes.”

“Right, we’ll be in as soon as I’ve cleared everything up.”

For five nights in a row, Bobby woke from a nightmare, drenched in perspiration and a scream almost bursting from his throat. Each time Mary asked him what it was about, he’d say he couldn’t remember.

“I keep dreaming about this shimmering light drawing me towards a hole in the wall,” he said to Graham. “Really, I think I’m starting to lose my sanity.”

“Don’t worry, mate, it’s probably just all the stuff about the Eridanians playing on your mind,” Graham said. “Get some more beer into you and that’ll fix it, trust me.”

That night, before going to bed, Bobby consumed two cans of beer, and there was no nightmare.

* * *

“Okay, everyone, listen up,” the foreman at the colliery said to the assembled workforce. “Five of our major customers have now either cancelled their orders or cut back substantially on the

quantity of coal they want. At this stage management are unwilling to start laying people off, but instead are offering a reduction in working hours along with a reduction in pay.”

There was general disquiet amongst the workers.

“I know you don’t like it, but it’s the best we’ve been able to come up with. That promised government assistance just hasn’t materialised, so really when it all boiled down it was either that or close the colliery altogether.”

“I don’t like this, Graham,” Bobby whispered. “We’ve already cut back our spending to the bone.”

“Maybe that wife of yours should get herself a job now that your boy’s started school.”

“Yeah, perhaps you’re right.”

When Bobby arrived home an hour earlier than usual and with three beers under his belt, he saw his son playing out the front with a skinny little Aboriginal boy.

“Hi Daddy,” Aaron said as he ran and leapt into his father’s arms. “This is my friend Jason.”

“You’re Jason?”

“Yes I am, Mr Smith,” Jason said nervously.

Inside Bobby was seething, but he managed to ruffle Aaron’s mop of hair and smile as he hurried into the house.

“Mary, what the hell is my son doing playing with a bloody Abo?” he yelled.

“That’s Jason, his friend from school,” Mary said as she came out of the kitchen to see what all the shouting was about.

“I don’t care who he is, I don’t want him hanging around my son any more. Is that clear?”

“No it is not clear, Bobby. I know you’ve got a bee in your bonnet about Aboriginals, Eridanians, and for all I know Portuguese fishermen, but I’m not going to stand by and let you force your prejudices onto your son. He and Jason have become close friends over the last few months, and from what I’ve seen Jason is just the kind of boy I’d want him to be friends with. He’s honest, caring and always polite, not like someone I know.”

Bobby looked into her bright blue eyes and his anger subsided a little.

“Okay, I’ll tolerate this Jason kid for now,” he said, “but mark my words, Mary, no good will come of it, I assure you.” With that, he stormed into the kitchen and opened a can of beer.

“Mary,” Bobby said after he’d calmed down a little, “the colliery has cut my working hours and pay again, and I was thinking, now that Aaron’s going to school, that maybe you should get a job.”

“A job?”

“You know, work, pay, money.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Something part-time, though, since I’d like to be here when Aaron gets home from school.”

“Sure.”

“Okay, I’ll start looking and asking around tomorrow.”

“I knew I could count on you.” He kissed her, but his breath tasted so strongly of beer Mary thought she might actually be sick.

“It’s funny you should ask,” Julia said as she and Mary were sipping coffee. “I was talking to my mother-in-law last night. She’s the head librarian here in town and was saying they were looking for a part time assistant but were having trouble finding a suitable person. You should go and see her, and I’ll put in a good word for you too.”

“Thanks Julia. I’ll do that.”

“While I think of it, Billy said that Bobby should have a talk with Ray Marshall at Unlimited Energy. Apparently, Ray’s looking for qualified technicians as the demand for his subspace power packs is growing faster than he expected. I’ve got his card here somewhere, yes, here it is.”

“Thanks again, Julia. I don’t know what we can do to repay you.”

“Just letting your son hang around with mine is payment enough. Jason’s always been a bit shy, but Aaron’s doing a fantastic job of pulling him out of his shell.”

“Aaron thinks the world of him. As soon as he’s home from school it’s always Jason did this or Jason did that, and I’m so happy he’s found such a good friend.”

“Mary, take a seat,” Sarah Collins said as she invited Mary into her office. She was a tall middle-aged Aboriginal woman with a kindly face that was just beginning to lose its youthfulness. “Julia’s been telling me all about you. I understand your son and my grandson are the best of friends.”

“They’re like brothers,” Mary said.

“You know about Jason’s autothermia then?”

“Yes, Julia told me all about it. I still cringe a little when I see him going around without a shirt on in the middle of winter though, and of course Aaron wants to imitate him too.”

“It was pretty hard for me when Billy was little, and of course nothing was known about the condition back then. Tom and I were slightly autothermic ourselves, I suppose, but in Billy it was a lot stronger and nobody knew what to make of it. If it hadn’t been for Frank Halliday I don’t know what we would have done.”

“You know Frank?”

“Yes, Tom’s father worked for him in Brisbane but died in an industrial accident there. Frank blames himself and has been trying to make it up to us ever since. He set up the private high school here that Billy went to, tailoring it specifically to the needs of an autothermic child.”

“Frank’s my uncle, and Bobby and I are now living in his house.”

“It sure is a small world,” Sarah said. “Now, getting down to the business at hand, what we’re after is someone to do the routine tasks of sorting books back onto the shelves and entering new acquisitions into the system. Have you had any previous experience with library work?”

“Before coming here I spent a year studying with what I suppose you’d call a religious order, and often helped out in the library,” Mary said, hoping Sarah wouldn’t ask too many questions that she’d be unable to answer truthfully.

“That’s a good start. Do you have any formal qualifications?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Not to worry. What we particularly need is someone who is conscientious and thorough. I’m sure you can imagine the difficulties that can happen if books start getting shelved in the wrong places.”

“Yes, I know. We had lots of trouble with students doing that.”

“Look, I’m going to stick my neck out and hire you on three months probation. The hours are nine to three, so you’ll be able to be home in time for when Aaron gets back from school.”

“That’s excellent. When do I start?”

“How does next Monday sound?”

“That’ll be fine with me. Thank you so much.”

“That’s great news about the job, honey,” Bobby said. “How much are they paying?”

“It’s five hundred dollars a week,” Mary said, “with prospects for advancement if things work out well.”

“That’s not too bad I suppose. Anyway, it’ll keep the wolf from the door for a little bit longer. Word is the colliery might be closing down at the end of the month.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Look, a friend suggested you might try calling this man at Unlimited Energy. She said they were looking for technicians.” She handed him the card Julia had given her.

“They’re the mob that are causing all this trouble in the first place. I’d feel like a traitor going to work for them.”

“Don’t be silly. The world’s changing, Bobby, and changing for the good as far as I can see. You have to move with the changes or you’ll be left behind.”

“I suppose so. I’ll see what Graham thinks.”

If ever Mary wanted to throttle him, now was the time, but she bit her tongue and said nothing.

“I don’t know, mate,” Graham said. “I’d feel like a traitor going to work for that mob.”

“That’s just what I told Mary,” Bobby said, “but the world’s changed and we have to move with the times or get left behind.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. There’s now little doubt the colliery will be closing, whether it’s this month or next, so I suppose there’s no harm in seeing what this Marshall bloke’s got on offer.”

Raymond Marshall was a plump red-headed man who spoke with a strong Scottish accent. He invited Bobby and Graham to sit down.

“It’s a wee bit unusual to be interviewing two people at once,” he said. “I take it ye both work at the colliery.”

“That’s right,” Graham said. “We’ve been working together since we left school, and I suppose we’d like to stay as a team.”

“Aye, that’s fine, Mr MacDonald. Good name, that. I knew some of the MacDonald clan back in Glasgow. Nice people, aye, that they were. Now I see ye both have ye trade certificates and have had first-aid training as well. That’s good. Look, I have to be honest with ye, I’m very short-staffed here right now, and we’re having trouble just keeping up with the orders that are flooding in. Normally I’d want references and put ye through my gruelling selection process, but in this case I’m going to stick my neck out and offer ye both positions.”

“That’s really great,” Graham said, and Bobby nodded as well. “When do we start?”

“As soon as ye can, or even sooner.”

“Today’s closure of the Gunnedah colliery marks the end of an era,” the television reporter said. “The rapid deployment of subspace energy sources has left little local or world demand for coal, and it was inevitable that the mines here, and indeed throughout the country, would close. The Minister for Mines and Energy, Robert Palmer, said that apart from offering retraining opportunities to displaced workers, there was little his government could do.”

“When Henry Ford invented the motor car there were thousands of blacksmiths that went to the wall,” the minister said. *“It’s progress, and we have to move with the times or get left behind.”*

* * *

The bell rang out and Aaron looked up, pushing his hair back away from his eyes. For the first time in the four years since they’d started school together, Jason was late. He stood and stretched while scanning the playground in search of his friend, but to no avail.

The morning classes dragged by, but Aaron couldn’t concentrate on anything the teacher was saying, his attention instead drawn constantly to the empty seat beside him. He wondered if Jason was sick, but then remembered he’d told him that his autothermia made him immune to all common diseases. Certainly as far as Aaron knew, he’d never had a day’s sickness in his life.

At lunch time, he sneaked out to the bicycle racks and, looking around to make sure he was unobserved, unlocked his bike, strapped his helmet on and sped off in the direction of the Collins house. Leaving school without a teacher’s permission was a serious offence, but at this moment, Aaron thought the prospect of detention a minor inconvenience compared to the yawning chasm that had opened within him.

Before he even knocked on the door, he knew the house was empty. To make doubly sure he went around to the back, but everything was locked up and deserted. On an impulse, he ran next door to Peter Thorpe’s house, but it too was empty.

Head down, he walked back to the Collins house and knocked on the door again. No answer. An idea struck, and he ran around to the side of the house and tried to peer into Jason’s bedroom window, but it was too high and he could see nothing in the glare from the reflected sky. Then, remembering the barbecue setting in the back yard, he dashed around and grabbed a seat to stand on.

Climbing up on his tip toes, he could now see through the glass, but it didn't help any since the curtains were drawn.

Every time he'd been in Jason's bedroom, and he'd been in there often enough over the last four years, he was sure the curtains were always open, otherwise it would have been dark and he was certain it hadn't been. The drawn curtains more than anything instilled a deep dread in him, and he struggled not to cry out in anguish. As a last resort, he tapped on the glass, hoping against hope that Jason's head would pop up in response, but it didn't.

Crestfallen, he climbed on his bicycle and slowly pedalled back to school, arriving just as the bell marking the end of lunchtime was sounding. He secured his bike, hurried round to the classroom and dropped into his seat just as the teacher walked in.

Occasionally the second hand on the clock would move, and eventually, if he didn't die of old age in the meantime, a whole minute would pass. The teacher droned on about something incomprehensible as the knot in Aaron's stomach drew tighter. He looked again at the empty seat beside him, half hoping that Jason would suddenly materialise there, and then cursed himself for being so childishly stupid.

The bell finally sounded, and as quickly as he could Aaron left the classroom, intending to cycle back to Jason's house before going home. He never made it, though, for when passing a corner shop his eye caught the day's newspaper headline and he nearly fell off his bike. '*Collins, Thorpe Dead on Eridani,*' it screamed at him, and he almost screamed back. He fumbled in his pocket for some loose change and, with shaking hands, bought a paper.

'Details remain sketchy, but it has been reported that Earth's premier subspace scientists, Dr Billy Collins and Dr Peter Thorpe, travelled to Eridani last night in a secret bid to save that world from imminent loss of its atmosphere. The attempt succeeded, but at enormous cost as both Collins and Thorpe reportedly died in the process.'

There was more about a subspace tunnel but although Aaron's eyes read every word, his brain had stopped taking them in past that first paragraph. Finally, and without really thinking about what he was doing, he folded the newspaper, pushed it into his backpack and cycled home.

When he walked in the door his mother looked up at him from where she was sitting in front of the television set, and he ran to her and buried his head in her bosom.

"We cross now to our reporter in the Earth embassy on Eridani," the television presenter said.

"There's still a great deal of confusion here, but I can at least confirm that, contrary to earlier reports, Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe are alive but critically ill, after having been exposed to near-vacuum. A hospital spokesman said they've been placed in a drug-induced coma, and their prognosis is uncertain.

"As to what they were doing in the southern hemisphere desert, details remain very sketchy, but it has been confirmed that the subspace tunnel that threatened to drain Eridani's atmosphere has been destroyed. The Governing Council are currently meeting behind closed doors and a wide-ranging enquiry is expected to be announced shortly."

In the weeks that followed, more details began to emerge of what had happened on Eridani, and Aaron remained glued to the television from the moment he arrived home from school until he was forced into bed by his parents.

"Much confusion still surrounds the incredible events on Eridani and the role played by the Australian scientists Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe," the reporter on 'Behind the News' said. *"With me tonight is Elissi Harrish, a senior Eridanian scientist with the Earth-Eridani Scientific Exchange Foundation and leader of the group responsible for the destruction of the subspace tunnel that threatened to drain away Eridani's life-giving atmosphere. What can you tell us about this tunnel, Dr Harrish?"*

“Ten thousand years ago Eridani was a very different world. Where what is now the Great Southern Desert was an ocean, comparable in size to our northern ocean, and at the magnetic south pole a tunnel through subspace linked it to the southern ocean of a twin planet on the other side of the fold.”

“The fold?”

“Subspace is folded over on itself, linking together points on opposite sides of the galaxy.”

“I’m not sure I quite understand.”

“Imagine taking a map of your world and folding it over along the equator. If you then pushed a pin through in, say, Sydney, it would come out on the other side at an equivalent point in the northern hemisphere.”

“I see. So was this tunnel like the hole left by the pin?”

“Yes, that’s right. On both worlds, the tunnel opening was on the ocean floor, and many of the Eridanian fish species had passed through over the eons and populated the southern ocean of the twin. It was the presence of those fish that initially led to the discovery of the tunnel.”

“So what happened to the ocean?”

“Our twin planet, while mostly devoid of life, was rich in minerals, far more so than Eridani itself, and our industrialists of the time, eager to reach the deeper ores, began using matter imploders to cut through the outer layers of rock. These proved to be a very efficient mining device, but left behind a residue of miniscule super-massive particles that quickly gravitated to the planet’s core. Eventually the surrounding material began to collapse under the intense gravitational stress and the core imploded, forming a miniature black hole. The rest of the planet was pulverised into a fine dust which eventually formed rings orbiting the black hole, not unlike the rings of your planet Saturn.”

“I see. So once that happened, Eridani’s ocean began pouring out through the tunnel.”

“Yes, it did. Eventually our scientists and engineers came up with a way of plugging the hole, but by then almost all the water

had been lost. Our Great Southern Desert is what remains of that ancient sea bed.”

“So how did this tunnel suddenly become a threat to the planet’s atmosphere?”

“For the last ten thousand years the few remaining members of the race that once inhabited the southern hemisphere have tended to the tunnel shields, keeping them in pristine working order for all that time. On the other side of the fold, though, the tunnel opening that had once been on the twin planet’s seabed began moving towards the black hole, slowly at first but gaining momentum the closer it got. Gravitational stresses were transmitted back through the tunnel and began weakening the shields, and one by one they failed until only a single shield remained. That’s when Billy and Peter were called in to help.”

“So what did they do?”

“They figured out that the tunnel was being maintained by Eridani’s magnetic field, and proposed setting off a magnetic pulse strong enough to momentarily cancel that out, causing the tunnel to collapse and disappear. Ultimately it worked, as you know, but a renegade group intent on the destruction of our world tried to stop us at the last moment.”

“We’ve heard that Collins and Thorpe suffered injuries from exposure to vacuum. How did that happen?”

“That is a matter still before the enquiry, and until such time as Billy and Peter regain consciousness we can only guess. I understand, though, that they and the leader of the renegades were somehow transported across into the empty space on the opposite side of the fold.”

“I see. So what’s their prognosis?”

“I believe their injuries are healing, and it’s hoped they might make a full recovery in time.”

“That’s good news indeed. Well thank you for your time this evening, Dr Harrish, and please keep us informed of any further developments.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

The telephone rang, and when Aaron's mother answered it, she waved him over. "It's for you, honey."

"Hello," Aaron said, and a tiny voice spoke to him from what sounded like a great distance. "Jason? Where are you?"

"I'm still on Eridani," Jason said. *"Dad's been released from hospital and Uncle Peter's awake now too. Everyone says they're going to be fine, and we should be coming home soon."*

"That's great news. I've been missing you."

"Me too."

The Next Allan Border

Aaron watched in despair as Simon skyed the ball to mid-off where the catch was easily taken. The under-fourteen side had made the state final, a first in any grade for the Narrabri Cricket Club, but they still needed a further twenty-five runs with only two wickets now in hand. The next batsman in was Jason, and he walked nervously out to the middle.

Jason and Aaron had both joined the cricket club three years earlier and Aaron had quickly established himself as their top batsman. Coming in at number four, he had consistently scored well and was not-out more often than not at the end of the match. Jason was considered an all-rounder and was a reliable performer in the side, although in the last year, he had concentrated more on his leg-spin bowling and consequently his batting average had suffered a little. Today he was coming in at number ten, just ahead of their pace bowler Nick Prentice. He looked very small out in the middle of North Sydney Oval.

Jason had bowled well during Bankstown's innings, taking three late wickets and wrapping up the tail, but his first couple of overs had been expensive. Aaron hoped he had worked all the butterflies out of his system, but if appearances were anything to go by he'd just swallowed a whole lot more of them. Aaron caught his friend's eye and smiled at him, and Jason smiled back weakly.

The batsmen had crossed before the catch was taken so at least Aaron had strike. He looked around the field, picking out possible angles to hit a boundary, but the next delivery was a yorker and he was forced to play defensively. The following ball was short and wide, though, and he dispatched it to the boundary with ease. Twenty-one runs to get. On the final ball of the over he hoped to

hit a single and retain the strike, but it was another excellent yorker and it took all his concentration to keep it off his stumps.

Jason took strike and the bowler started his run-up. He had to be the biggest thirteen-year-old Jason had ever seen, at least three metres tall, more like four. He could hear the ball sizzling as it left the bowler's hand, then miraculously got bat on it and glided it out to point. He scrambled through for a single. Twenty left.

Aaron watched the bowler intently and instinctively knew he was about to bowl a bouncer. He charged down the pitch and got his bat under the ball, sending it soaring over the fence for six. Jason grinned at him.

The next one was a slower ball, but Aaron picked it easily enough and made a further two runs. The bowler, who was now starting to feel the pressure, sent his next one wide and Aaron picked off another boundary. Overcompensating, the next delivery slipped down the leg side and Aaron helped it on its way to the fence for four more runs. Another like that and the match would be theirs.

The Bankstown captain had a quick word with the bowler as he walked back to his mark, and the final delivery of the over was just short of a length and right on the stumps, leaving Aaron no choice but to play defensively.

Jason took a deep breath as the fieldsmen moved in around him. If he could get enough power behind the shot, a boundary would be easy pickings. The bowler this over was a spinner, and even though he was quite good at his art, Jason didn't feel any of the intimidation that the pace-men induced in him.

The first delivery turned quite a lot, but Jason was quickly onto it and flicked it wide of the slips fieldsmen, picking up two runs. He steadied himself as the bowler stepped forward and released the next ball. For a moment Jason lost sight of it, then realised it must have slipped out of his hand, for it was sailing way down the leg side. The umpire called 'wide' and the scoreboard ticked over another run, levelling the score.

The next ball skidded straight on and took Jason on the pad. The whole Bankstown side cried out in anticipation of a wicket

while the bowler danced pleadingly in front of the umpire, but after waiting an eternity he frowned and shook his head. Jason sighed with relief.

The crowd hushed as the bowler released his next ball. It looped high, spinning ferociously, but Jason kept his eye on it and took it on the half-volley, sending it sizzling between the legs of a startled mid-on fieldsman. He scurried through for the winning run and saluted to the crowd with his bat. Aaron sprinted up from the other end and patted him on the shoulder while Jason wiped the sweat from his brow.

“I knew you could do it!” Aaron said as he removed his headband and let his hair flop back down over his eyes. “They’ll be putting a statue of you on the steps of the town hall when we get back home.”

“Hardly,” Jason chuckled. “You were the star, Aaron. I just had a lucky shot when it counted.”

Bobby picked up the *Narrabri Times* and turned straight to the sports pages. ‘Local Teenager Breaks Cricketing Drought’, the headline read.

‘Local cricketing hero Aaron Smith, known affectionately to his team-mates as ‘The Mop’, led the Narrabri Cricket Club’s under-fourteens to victory in the state play-offs last weekend, making this the first state trophy the club has ever won. In a batting display reminiscent of the great Allan Border, he steadied the ship after an early collapse and, with the help of spin-bowler Jason Collins, snatched an unlikely victory from the highly regarded Bankstown side.

‘Allan Border himself, who was at the fixture, said it was one of the most impressive performances he’d seen for a long while in a junior side, and looked forward to seeing Smith in the state, and possibly even the national team in a few years. “The boy has an enormous talent and seems assured of a bright future in the game,” Border said.

‘Narrabri coach Ian Henderson said Smith and Collins had breathed new life into the club when they’d joined three years earlier, and he looked forward to even greater things next season.’

“I knew your boy was going to be a cricketing champion,” Graham said to him as he clapped him on the shoulder. “This calls for a drink, and I’m shouting.” Bobby didn’t say no.

* * *

Jason’s fourteenth birthday party took place at his grandparents’ farm, about twenty kilometres north of Narrabri. It was a fancy dress affair, and Aaron came as Luke Skywalker. Like his father before him, he’d become addicted to the Star Wars saga at an early age and had taken upon himself the mantle of Jedi apprentice.

Jason, because of the limitations imposed by his autothermia, was exempted from dressing up and so instead dressed down, wearing just a loin cloth and the traditional body paint of his people.

“You do realise that traditional Aborigines didn’t wear loin cloths,” Aaron said to him.

“You’re the fourth person to remind me of that so far this morning. I swear if anyone else tells me, I’ll take it off and go fully traditional for the rest of the day.”

“Heaven preserve us!”

“I like your light sabre, by the way,” Jason said, changing the subject.

“Yeah, Dad made it for me. It’s even got a tiny subspace power pack in the handle, and it looks pretty realistic in the dark.”

Amongst Jason’s other friends were Frodo Baggins, Fred Flintstone, two Supermen, a Batman and a very authentic-looking Spiderman. One guest, who’d forgotten it was fancy dress, described his costume of board shorts and tee shirt as ‘fourteen-year-old boy’.

Just before noon, there came a humming noise from above them and everyone looked up to see a subspace shuttle descending.

When the hatch opened, Julia's brother Todd and his Eridanian girlfriend Elissi emerged.

"Happy birthday Jase," Todd said as he handed him his brightly-wrapped present.

"Thanks, Uncle Todd. You didn't come all the way from Eridani just for my party, did you?"

"Sure," Todd said, but Elissi poked him in the ribs. "Well, actually we have a bit of business at the Eridanian consulate in Sydney on Monday, but mostly we're here for your party."

"Food's ready!" Tom called out from behind the barbecue, and everyone jostled for position to get their share of the steaks and sausages.

After the meal, Sarah dashed back to the house and returned a few moments later carrying a huge cake bedecked with fourteen candles. Jason blew them all out with one enormous huff and then grimaced as everyone sang *Happy Birthday*.

"Before everyone gets up," Todd said, "Elissi and I have an announcement to make. We've decided at long last to get married, and the ceremony will be held on the twenty-eighth of May in the town of Angust on Eridani. You're all invited of course, just let us know and we'll arrange transport through the embassy."

Once lunch had settled, Tom led the boys down to the creek that crossed the bottom of the property.

"You're very lucky," he said to them. "Before the rain last week this was bone dry."

Assorted costumes were cast aside as the boys leapt into the water. Tom threw them a tennis ball and then sat back and watched them play. Billy and Julia wandered down shortly to join him.

"How do you feel about going back to Eridani?" Tom asked.

"I think I'll be okay," Billy said. "How about you, Julia?"

"I'm a little nervous, but once we get there I'm sure I'll be fine."

"That's good to hear," Tom said. "I doubt if Sarah and I will go as we're getting a bit too old for that sort of thing, but at least the family will be represented."

“I’m sure Jason will want to go anyway,” Billy said.

“What’s that, Dad?” Jason said, having snuck up behind him.

“We’re just talking about going to Eridani for your uncle’s wedding. Do you want to come?”

“You bet! Um, can Aaron come too?”

“Sure, as long his parents give him the okay.”

“Great!” he said, and then dashed back into the water to tell him.

After their swim, Tom led the boys back to the house where he hosed the mud off them. They played touch football for the rest of the afternoon while drying off, with Jason putting his small size and even smaller weight to good advantage, weaving around the less agile larger boys to score repeatedly. Billy smiled to himself, contrasting Jason’s close circle of friends to his own lonely childhood.

At five o’clock Mary arrived to pick Aaron up.

“How was it, honey?” she asked.

“Great! We went swimming in the creek and got covered in mud, then Jason’s grandfather hosed us down and we played touch football,” he said.

“Sounds like fun,” she said.

“Jason’s Uncle Todd arrived in a space ship just before lunch and told everyone he was getting married on Eridani soon. Jason said I could go with him to the wedding. Can I go, Mum, can I?”

“You’ll have to ask your father.”

“Oh but Mum, you know he’ll say no.”

“No, I’m sorry Aaron, but I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to go,” Bobby said.

Aaron could smell the beer on his breath and knew there was no point in arguing, but he did anyway. “Why not, Dad?”

“For a start, because I say so. Anyway, the wedding’s a private family thing for Jason’s parents, and I’m sure they wouldn’t want you tagging along and making a nuisance of yourself. Now go and do your homework.”

“Yes, Dad,” Aaron said, retreating to his room.

Aaron dreamed, and in his dream, he saw a big ugly man with a club grabbing Jason around the head.

“*Try anything stupid and I’ll break its neck,*” the man snarled, and Aaron woke with a scream.

Moments later, he heard footsteps coming down the hall and his mother burst into his room.

“What’s wrong, honey?” she asked.

“Just a bad dream, Mum. I’m fine, really.”

Had he told her about his dream, she may well have warned Billy and Julia against going, and as a consequence, all life on Earth, Eridani and dozens of other worlds would have been ultimately wiped out.

“Good morning, big fella,” Bobby said as Aaron appeared at breakfast. He seemed in a particularly good mood, and Aaron was immediately suspicious.

“Look, I’m sorry if I was a bit short with you last night,” Bobby continued, “but really I think you should start broadening your horizons rather than spending all your time hanging out with Jason. I’m sure there are some nice girls in your school who’d be more than interested in such a handsome young man as yourself.”

Aaron blushed.

“Anyway, I was going to wait till your birthday, but to make it up to you I’ve got something special for you.”

He pulled a brown paper parcel out from behind his back and handed it to Aaron, who tore it open, revealing a woollen jumper with a picture of Yoda on the front.

“Wow, it’s great!” Aaron said.

“Try it on.”

Aaron pulled it over his head and it pretty much swallowed him whole.

“Well it’s a bit big on you but you’ll soon grow into it.”

“Nah, it’s great, everyone’s wearing oversized clothes now. Thanks Dad.”

* * *

Mary drove Aaron to the Narrabri airport on Friday night to see Jason and his parents off. They would be taking a shuttle up to the new orbiting spaceport, and then a subspace cruiser to Eridani.

“Have a great time, Jase,” Aaron said as he shook his friend’s hand.

“Thanks, Aaron, I’ll try to.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment, then Jason patted Aaron on the shoulder and joined his parents who were waiting at the gate. He turned and waved, and then in the blink of an eye he was gone.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t go with them,” Mary said.

“No, its okay, I probably would have just been a nuisance anyway.”

“Don’t talk like that, honey. I’m sure Billy and Julia would’ve loved to have had you along, but we have to let your father think he’s in control occasionally.”

“I guess so.”

“I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“Thanks Mum.”

Aaron woke with a start in the early hours of Sunday morning. He’d dreamed again of the man rough-handling Jason, only this time the dream continued and he saw them being driven to a remote farmhouse where the man holding Jase had pulled him from the car and thrown him to the ground.

He climbed out of bed and padded to the kitchen where he poured a glass of water, then quietly let himself out the back door and sat on the grass looking up at the star-filled sky. In the south, he picked out the constellation Eridanus and the faint star, some twenty light years from Earth, around which orbited the world of Eridani.

“*Be careful, Jase, please be careful,*” he whispered.

He finished his water, looked back once more at the star, and returned to bed.

When next he woke, the sun was shining in his window. He'd slept later than usual but felt anything but refreshed as he made his way out to the kitchen. Just as he reached the table, the telephone rang and his mother answered it.

“Sarah?”

“What's wrong?”

“What?”

“Are you sure?”

“That's terrible.”

“Yes, Aaron's here, I'll tell him now.”

“Honey,” she said to Aaron, “there's some bad news from Eridani, I'm afraid. It looks like Jason and his parents have been kidnapped on their way home from the wedding. The Eridanian police are searching for them, and Sarah will let us know the moment she has any news.”

Aaron sat down heavily, his mouth gaping open.

“I, I saw it in a dream the night after Jason's party, and then again last night,” he finally said.

“Don't worry, honey, I'm sure they'll be okay,” Mary said as she sat down beside him and hugged him.

For the next five days, Aaron was in a daze. Each night he saw Jason's abduction and their drive through the Eridanian countryside in his dreams, but by Friday morning, an idea began to take form, and he eventually plucked up the courage to put it to his parents.

“I've been seeing more and more detail of Jason's abduction in my dreams,” he said, “and I think, well, I think if I could go there, to the place where he was grabbed, I could find the way to where they were taken.”

“Are you sure?” Bobby asked.

“I'm pretty sure, yeah.”

“It’s a shame we don’t have any way of getting to Eridani, then.”

“What about Jason’s Uncle Todd?”

“Good thinking,” Mary said. “Sarah Collins should know how to reach him. I’ll give her a call now.”

“Hang on, before we rush into anything,” Bobby started to say, but Mary had already dashed over to the phone and was making the call.

Todd met them at Narrabri airport and ushered them on board his diplomatic shuttle.

“It’ll take us about an hour to get to Eridani, so just sit back and relax,” he said as he waited for clearance to depart.

“This is a pretty neat ship,” Bobby said.

“It’s a fairly basic model,” Todd said, “but they’re solid and reliable. Okay, we’re ready to roll.”

The ship surged forward and up, rising rapidly over the expanding countryside below.

“We need to go up to about fifteen thousand metres before we can safely jump to subspace,” he said over the roar of the realspace engines.

When the altimeter clicked over, Todd cut off the engines and activated the jump. There was a flash of blue light from outside and then darkness.

They were met at the Angust spaceport by Elissi and a tall middle-aged Eridanian man.

“This is the Police Minister, Jimmac Tuley,” Todd said.

“I’m pleased to meet you, and please call me Jim,” Jimmac said in perfect English. “Todd has told me all about you.”

“Nothing too bad I hope,” Bobby said.

“Not at all,” Jim said. “I understand your son may be able to help us locate our missing people.”

“If you can take me to where they were grabbed, I think I can guide you from there,” Aaron said. “I’ve been seeing it in my dreams for the past week.”

“I can take you there now if everyone’s set,” Jim said.

The road from the spaceport to Angust took them through lush green farmland and then climbed into a low range of hills. They crested the ridge and saw before them the picturesque township straddling a broad river that flowed down out of the highlands to the south. Jim took them through the outer suburbs and into parkland on the south-western side of the town. He pulled up in a small clearing on the side of the road.

“This is where they were flagged down by their kidnappers,” he said. “According to their driver, they appeared to have broken down, but when he stopped and went to offer assistance they hit him over the head, knocking him out. When he came round everyone had gone, so he made his way on foot back into town where he raised the alarm.”

Aaron stepped out of the car and looked around. He felt the essence within him, what he now thought of as *The Force*, rising and strengthening. “*Do anything foolish and I’ll break its neck*,” a gruff voice said inside his head, and he trembled.

“Jason was grabbed here,” he said, “then they drove off down the road, that way.”

Everyone returned to the car and they moved off in a southerly direction.

“Turn right here,” Aaron said, “and keep going along for a bit until you come to a big tree hanging over the road.”

“That’s it there,” he said a few minutes later. “Hang a left.” They turned into a narrow unsealed road that followed the river upstream for a few kilometres before veering to the right and following a smaller stream that flowed into the main river from the south-west.

“Go left,” Aaron said.

“Where?” Jim asked.

“You’ve missed it. Back up a little.”

“Well I’ll be damned; there is actually a track there. I’ve driven along here many times and never seen it before.”

The track crossed the small stream at a badly eroded ford, then followed the course of the river into a valley that narrowed as they moved further south. About five kilometres along it turned to the right and took them up into the hills. They passed through mostly dense forest, but occasionally there'd be small clearings with what appeared to be abandoned farm houses.

"I never knew there were any settlements at all out here," Jim said. "It doesn't look like there's anyone living here now, though. It's the perfect place for a hideout I suppose."

"There's a gate coming up shortly," Aaron said. "They went in there."

Jim pulled over to the side of the road.

"What are you doing?" Aaron asked.

"We wait here until the patrol cars following us go in and secure the area," Jim said, then picked up the radio and gave directions to his officers.

Within minutes, half a dozen patrol cars passed them and turned into the gate. Aaron peered through the trees, trying to see what was happening, but the undergrowth was too dense to make anything out. He expected to hear gunfire and maybe even explosions, but instead there was an eerie silence.

A call came through on the radio and Jim responded.

"The area's been secured and we can go in now," he said as he pulled out onto the road. "It looks like whoever was there left in a hurry earlier this morning. There's no doubt your friends were being held there, though."

Aaron's heart sank as they turned in through the gate and pulled up alongside a low wooden building. He climbed out of the car and stepped towards the wall where a dark stain caught his eye. The essence within him flared up again and he gazed in horror as the final moments of his dream, which until now had been hidden from his waking mind, came flooding back.

"You Billy Collins?" the man with the club yelled at Billy, and he nodded. The man raised the club and began the downswing of what might have been a fatal blow, but Peter leapt at him, pushing him off balance, and the blow went wide. The club-wielder quickly

steadied himself, though, then grabbed Peter, threw him against the wall and brought the club crashing down onto his head. Peter collapsed as blood gushed from a head wound.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Mary asked.

“They, they killed Peter,” Aaron whispered as the shock started to recede.

“Come over here,” Jim said, and led them away from the building and into a small grove of trees. There was a pit about a metre deep that looked like it had been hastily dug.

“There’s no doubt someone was buried here,” Jim said as he pointed to more stains on the ground.

“But why did they dig him up again?” Bobby asked.

“According to our forensic expert, they didn’t. He reckons, from the way the soil’s been disturbed, that the victim dug himself out.”

“What?”

“I know it sounds incredible, but then this whole episode has a sense of unreality to it.”

Jim led them back and into the building.

“There are offices and dormitories in here,” he said as he led them along a corridor and then down a flight of stairs. At the bottom was a small cell with a barred door, and inside two officers in white coats were examining the floor. He spoke briefly to them and then turned back to the others.

“From the footmarks in the dirt we think Billy may have been held here,” Jim said. “There’s a subspace barrier surrounding the cell, which is activated by that switch on the wall.”

“They knew about Billy’s autothermia then,” Todd said.

“It would appear so, yes.”

“Is there any sign of Julia or Jason?” Mary asked.

“None at all. They may have been taken somewhere else,” Jim said. Just then, his radio burst into life and he spoke briefly in Eridanian.

“It looks like they may have been held in one of those abandoned farm houses we passed on the way in,” he said. “It’s deserted now too.”

“They could be anywhere then,” Todd said.

“Yes, but hopefully we may find something here that will give us a clue as to where they’ve gone.”

“Are you sensing anything else, honey?” Mary asked Aaron. He stared into space for a few moments, but shook his head.

“Come on, I’ll take you back into town,” Todd said. “Do you want to stay on Eridani or head back to Earth?”

“I think we’d best go home,” Bobby said. “I don’t think there’s anything else we can do here.” Aaron wanted to disagree, but could think of nothing he could say that would convince his father, so he remained silent.

The telephone rang a couple of hours after they arrived home. Bobby had gone off to tell Graham about his adventures, leaving Mary alone with Aaron.

“That was Todd,” Mary said after she’d hung up. “He said they’ve all arrived alive and well at Elissi’s parents’ place. Apparently they escaped from their captors a few hours before we turned up.”

“Fantastic!” Aaron cried. “Did he say when they’d be coming back?”

“He’s not sure. No doubt the authorities will have lots of questions for them as they continue the hunt for the kidnappers.”

Four days later, there was a knock on the door and Mary answered it.

“Aaron, there’s someone here to see you,” she called out, and Aaron came bounding out of his room. Standing in the doorway and beaming at him was Jason.

“You’re back!” Aaron cried. “Well don’t just stand there, come in and tell me all about it.”

“We were going back to the inn after the wedding when we were flagged down by some people whose car appeared to have

broken down,” Jason began, “but when our driver went to help them, he was hit over the head and they stormed into our car and drove us off into the countryside.”

“I know, I saw all of that in a dream I kept having,” Aaron said.

“Did you really? That’s weird. Anyway, they took us to this old building out in the forest and then one of them hit Uncle Peter and hurt him pretty badly.”

Aaron flinched. “I saw that bit too.”

“Yeah, it was pretty gruesome. I thought they’d killed him for sure, but then they bundled Mum and me into the car and drove us back down the road a short way to an old abandoned farmhouse where they kept us prisoners for almost a week. Dad and Peter must have escaped, though, for they turned up just before sunrise one morning and we ran off into the forest and followed the river back into town. Elissi’s nephew Norrie found us and took us back to his grandparents’ place.

“That night Elissi took us outside and told us about some ancient race that had originally colonised the galaxy, and the next morning we flew off to the Pleiades cluster in one of their fancy ships. There we found the home of two of those original inhabitants, whose spirits Dad and Peter were carrying. Apparently, they’d fled to Earth about a hundred thousand years ago and their life-force had been passed down from generation to generation. Dad called them the Emu and Dodo spirits.

“Anyway, we went into a cave where the bodies of Emu and Dodo had been preserved in a sort of living stone, and the spirits passed into them from Dad and Peter and brought them back to life. They told us that their world had been devastated when a nearby blue star had erupted, flooding the region with x-rays and debris, and Todd discovered that the remnant of that star was about to go supernova.

“On the way back from the cave I fell into a rock pool and was almost drowned by a vine that tangled itself around my legs, but Dad and Todd dived in and saved me. It was pretty scary, and for a few wild moments I was sure I was a goner.”

Aaron turned pale, and Jason immediately regretted having mentioned the incident at all. He grinned at him, forcing Aaron to grin back, and the moment of unease passed.

“Anyway,” he continued, “a few days later there was a conference with representatives from all over the galaxy, and, um, it was decided to try to defuse the star by opening up a portal across the subspace fold and venting the excess matter and pressure to the other side. Everyone’s been given a different task to do, then we’ll all be going back again to see if it can be made to work.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Aaron asked.

“If it doesn’t, the star will explode and a burst of intense radiation will spread out at the speed of light, eventually wiping out all life in this part of the galaxy. It would reach Earth in about four hundred years.”

“Wow,” Aaron said sombrely. “We’d better hope your idea works then.”

“How did you know it was my idea?”

“What do you mean? When I said ‘your’, I meant all of you. Was it you who thought of opening the portal to defuse the star, then?”

“Well, um, yes,” Jason said sheepishly. “But don’t tell anyone, please.”

“Okay, whatever you say. Wow, you’re even smarter than I thought you were.”

Six months later, Todd arrived and took Peter, Billy, Julia and Jason off to the Pleiades to attempt the defusing of the star. Julia was reluctant to allow Jason to go with them, but both he and Billy convinced her that since the method of defusing was his idea, he should at least be allowed to come along and see if it worked. Billy assured her that they would be working on the opposite side of the subspace fold to the star, so even if it didn’t work they’d be in no danger.

Three weeks later the evening news was dominated by reports of the successful defusing operation, and when they returned Jason

was swarmed by photographers and journalists. Camera crews were camped in the street outside their house, and they even tried to invade the school before being chased away by the headmaster.

By the time Christmas rolled around, though, the headlines had been captured by a political scandal in Canberra, and Jason's heroic exploits were by and large forgotten.

Jason's fifteenth birthday party was held at his grandparents' farm and followed much the same ritual as his previous one. A cricket game was held, called the Emus versus the Dodos, and both Jason and Aaron were on the winning Dodo side.

Jason had been given a beautiful new telescope for his birthday and when Mary came to pick Aaron up he said he wanted to stay the night, but she wouldn't allow it.

"We're going out to dinner with your father's boss, in case you've forgotten," she explained, "and there's no way you're wriggling out of it."

They had just finished the main course and were waiting for dessert when Aaron felt his inner self flare up again.

"What's wrong, honey?" Mary asked him.

"I think Jason's in danger," he whispered.

"I'm sure you're just imagining it," Bobby said, "or maybe he's in trouble for forgetting to take out the garbage or something."

"No, it's something serious, I'm sure."

"Well, you can give him a call when we get home if you like," Mary said.

"Is something the matter?" Ray Marshall asked.

"No, everything's fine, really," Bobby said.

At that moment the waiter arrived with their dessert, and with food in front of him demanding to be eaten, Aaron put all thought of Jason aside. By the time he'd finished eating the fear had left him.

The next morning Jason called round and Aaron invited him into the kitchen.

“Last night we were confronted by the leader of the organisation behind our kidnapping, a man named Barrad,” Jason said. “He tried to get Dad to join his organisation, but when he refused he pinned him against the floor with his boot and tried to crush him to death. Then he saw me and started going on about how he was going to take me away to a distant planet and make me a slave in his fractal crystal mine.”

“That’s awful,” Aaron said. “What did you do?”

“It was really weird. He was about to hit me across the face for being flippant with him, and then it seemed I reminded him of a friend he’d once had and that set off some sort of conflict within him. A black halo formed around him with lightning flashes in it, then it all blew away and he turned into a nice person. He said a demon had taken possession of him many thousands of years ago and under its influence he thought he’d killed his friend who looked like me, but then that friend, now an old bloke named Elko, walked in, and the two of them wandered off, reunited at last.”

“You’re right, that was weird.”

“What was even weirder, well, ever since I fell in that pool on the planet they’re now calling Genesis, I’ve felt as if there’s been something growing inside me, and when Barrad started threatening me I felt it flare up, as if it was something of great power. I think that was what drove the demon out of him. Aaron, I’m really scared.”

Just then, Mary walked in, but as soon as she saw Jason, she froze. Ten years earlier on the day he and Aaron had first started school, she’d sensed something in him, something creepy, but today it was much stronger.

“Mum, what’s wrong?” Aaron asked, but she was unable to reply as she had just remembered what it was that Jason’s aura reminded her of.

A long time ago on a distant world, a young girl named Mary Anderson had come face to face with Morgoth. He had placed his hand on her shoulder and touched her mind, and she had felt his power washing over her. Bottled up inside Jason and barely concealed was that same power.

She wondered if Jason might be the boy in the prophecy that had brought her here in the first place, but then remembered a letter Frank Halliday had written just before Jason's birth, where he'd said that Jason would be a half-blooded Barefooter and that he expected the prophecy to be fulfilled in the next generation. *'That boy's name will be Mark,'* a voice inside her head whispered.

"I'm fine," she finally managed to say. "Just a turkey – I mean goose walking over my grave. Tell me, these people who used to live on that world near the Pleiades, did they have very long lives?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Elko and Barrad would have to be close on a hundred thousand years old."

"I see." Mary thought there was little doubt these people were the descendants of Gallad and the other Barefooters who had fled from Morgoth a million years ago, and she shuddered.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Aaron asked.

* * *

Aaron woke feeling cold, and when he looked out the window he knew why. The spell of unseasonably warm weather had come to an end, and outside the sky was a dull uniform grey that threatened to rain at any moment.

After showering, he fished out his old Yoda jumper and pulled it on. It had been three years since his father had given it to him, and back then it had been a couple of sizes too big, but now it felt too small on him. Either he'd grown quite a lot, which he had, or it had shrunk, which it had too, but either way it now barely covered his torso and the sleeves only came three quarters of the way down his arms. The moths had been feasting, too, for there were quite a few small holes in it. He loved that jumper, though, and was determined to keep wearing it each winter until there was nothing left of it but a few strands of wool.

He arrived at school a bit early and sat under the tree waiting for Jason. Mr Duffy, the sports master, walked by and waved to him, and he waved back. He was Duffy's star pupil after captaining the Narrabri under-seventeens to victory in the state cricket competition earlier in the year, and had scored an unbeaten century in the final. There were rumours flying around that he might be selected into the New South Wales state side next year, and with that came the possibility of a national call-up.

He felt Jason approach and, more out of habit than necessity now, looked up and brushed his hair away from his eyes to confirm the presence of his friend. He was becoming quite adept at finding his way around using just his Jedi senses, and really only needed his eyes for reading or watching television. Even then, he could usually see enough through his hair not to have to bother brushing it aside, which suited him fine as he would rather not make eye contact with people if he could avoid it.

"I see winter's got the better of you," Jason said, but his voice was all croaky.

"Yeah, but it sounds like you should be wearing this rather than me." Aaron started pulling his jumper off, but Jason shook his head.

"I thought autothermics never got sick," Aaron said.

"I'm not sick," Jason croaked.

The bell rang, and as they walked off towards their first class a light rain began to fall.

Raymond Marshall and his top executives had been ensconced in the board room all morning, and from time to time strange men in dark suits had been wandering through the factory, taking stock of operations.

"What do you think is happening?" Bobby asked Graham.

"If you ask me, which you did, I'd say old Ray is selling the business."

"You reckon?"

"That's what I just said, isn't it?"

"You're a bit touchy this morning."

“Well I don’t want to end up working for some multinational conglomerate, that’s all.”

“Yeah, Ray’s been a pretty good boss.”

“One of the best.”

Just then Ray himself walked out onto the factory floor.

“Listen up everyone, okay?” he shouted.

“In recent weeks ye might have heard some wee stories on the news about British Aerospace building a new fleet of subspace cruisers,” he said when he had everyone’s attention. “Well I have good news for all of ye. They’ve just awarded us the contract for the fleet’s subspace engines, worth a measly five hundred million dollars. Aye, ‘tis enough to fill a Scotsman’s heart with joy, it is.”

There were a few moments of stunned silence, then everyone started clapping and cheering.

“Drop whatever ye’re doing and follow me. I’m shouting lunch for all of ye.”

There was even more cheering.

“Where are you going?” Jason asked as they walked out of their last class for the day. His voice was still croaky, but he kept insisting there was nothing wrong with him.

“There’s some stuff I want to look up in the library,” Aaron said. “You go on home and I’ll drop round later, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Hi Aaron,” a voice said from behind one of the bookshelves.

“Oh, there you are, Mandy,” Aaron said. “Your note said you wanted to meet me here.”

“Yeah, thanks for coming. Um, I don’t know whether you’ve noticed, but there’s a remake of that old movie *Flipper* just opened. You know, the one about the dolphin. I was wondering if... well... if you’d like to go with me to see it.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. When did you want to go?”

“How’s Saturday afternoon sound?”

“I usually have cricket practice then, but if this rain keeps up it’ll probably be cancelled. How about I give you a call on Friday night?”

“That’d be great!” She pecked him on the nose and ran from the library, leaving him staring into space and wondering what had just happened.

He scratched his head, and wandered off towards the bike racks while pulling his wet weather gear out of his backpack. The rain looked like it had set in.

“Okay everyone, finish your drinks and get back to work,” Ray said. Everyone groaned.

“Just kidding, folks. Ye can all have the rest of the day off, but I want everyone in bright and early tomorrow. We’ve got lots to do if we’re gonna earn that five hundred million. Woo hoo!”

“I think he’s had a few drinks too many,” Graham whispered.

“So’ve we,” Bobby said.

“Nonsense. One more round and I’ll take you home, okay?”

“Are you sure you’re fit to drive?”

“What do you want to do, walk in this weather? Hey, it’s me, remember?”

As Aaron pedalled out onto the street, he soon realised just how slippery the roads had become. It had been a couple of months since they’d last had rain and there was quite a build-up of oil and grime that had turned the surface into a skating rink. A couple of times when cornering, his back wheel had almost skidded out from under him, forcing him to ease off almost to the point of stalling.

By the time he reached the sweeping left hand bend on Parkland Road, the rain had become heavier and visibility was quite poor. Most of the oncoming cars had their lights on even though it wasn’t even four o’clock yet.

He heard a car approaching from behind and moved as close to the broken road shoulder as he could, his rear wheel again trying to slip out from under him. *‘It’s high time the council did something*

about the state of this road,' he thought. 'It's downright dangerous, even for me.'

"Looks like this rain's set in," Bobby said as they turned into Parkland Road. "The farmers will be happy."

"No they won't," Graham said. "Farmers are never happy. You watch, by tomorrow they'll be complaining about the floods."

"Yeah, it seems they've always got their hand out to the government for one thing or another – hey! Watch out for that kid on the bike!"

There was a thump as the car's left fender clipped the bicycle. Bobby turned and watched in horror as the rider tumbled over and disappeared into the ditch.

"Hey, you hit that kid, Graham! Stop the car!"

"Are you crazy? If we stop the police will put the breathalyser on me and I'll lose my licence for sure this time."

"Graham, stop the car, please. That kid might be hurt."

"Look, if it makes you feel better, I'll stop at the next public phone and you can make an *anomimus... aninimice...* you know what I mean."

"If they catch us we'll be in deep shit, you know that, don't you? Hit-and-run's a much more serious offence than driving under the influence."

"They won't catch us, trust me."

"I hate it when you say that."

"Where's your spirit of adventure, Bobby? Hey, there's a phone box over there on the other side of the road. Go and make your call."

Mary was in the kitchen when she heard the front door close. She looked up at the clock.

"You're a bit late this afternoon, honey," she called out. "I was starting to worry about you being out on your bike in this weather. Look, if it's still raining tomorrow I'll drive you to school, okay?"

"It's me," Bobby said. "Aaron's not home yet?"

“No. He’s usually here well before now. Maybe he stopped off at Jason’s place.”

“Yeah, he must have.”

“Anyway, what are you doing home this early?”

“Ray Marshall signed a deal with British Aerospace worth half a billion dollars, so he took us out to lunch and then gave everyone an early mark.”

“Did you say half a *billion*?”

“That’s right. We’re going to be sailing on easy street from now on, honey.”

He started to kiss her when the telephone rang.

“That’s probably Aaron,” she said. “I’ll get it.”

When Mary came back into the living room, she looked as white as a ghost.

“That was the hospital. Aaron was hit by a car on his way home and the doctors are working on him now. It’s, it’s pretty serious I think.”

Now Bobby turned white, and just stood there with his mouth gaping.

“Come on, I’ll take us to the hospital,” Mary said. “They told me the bastard who hit him didn’t even stop. He was found by another man who was following along just behind.”

Bobby said nothing.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “Just the shock, I suppose.”

Bobby and Mary joined the queue at the inquiry counter of the hospital.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m Mary Smith, my son Aaron was brought here following an accident this afternoon.”

“Let me see, yes he’s still having tests done. If you’d like to wait over there I’ll let the doctor know you’re here.”

“Thanks very much.”

Two policemen walked up to Mary and Bobby as they sat down in the waiting area.

“Mr and Mrs Smith?” one of them asked.

“Yes,” Bobby said nervously.

“I’m Sergeant Kent and this is Constable Walters, and we’re investigating your son’s accident. It would appear that the driver who hit him didn’t stop, but the following driver saw the accident and called an ambulance. There was also an anonymous call reporting it about five minutes later.”

“Did anyone get the number of the car that hit him?” Mary asked, and Bobby stiffened.

“Unfortunately, no. Visibility was quite poor owing to the rain, and in any case, the driver of the following car was understandably more concerned with helping your son. We’ve notified all the local smash repair shops to keep an eye out for any vehicles with matching damage, though.”

“I see,” Mary said. “Well I hope you catch him.”

“Quite often in hit-and-run cases the offender will turn themselves in,” the constable said. “Guilty conscience, you know.”

“We’d like to speak to your son if he regains consciousness,” the sergeant said.

“What do you mean ‘if’?” Bobby asked.

“I’m sorry; it was a slip of the tongue. I meant ‘when’, of course.”

“I’m sure your boy will be fine,” he added.

The policemen stepped back as a doctor strode towards them, grateful for the interruption.

“Mr and Mrs Smith? I’m Doctor Briggs,” he said.

“How is he, Doctor?” Mary asked.

“Well his right elbow was shattered in the accident. We’ve set it as best we can, but I must warn you he will probably only have very limited movement in it now.”

“I see,” Bobby said. “Well he’s a left-hander so I guess it won’t disadvantage him too much, apart from his cricket of course.”

“Ah yes, he’s the young cricketer we’ve been hearing so much about lately. Look, I should tell you he’s also suffered a pretty

severe concussion, and while it's too early to say, there's a chance, well a fairly strong chance, that he may have brain damage. I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily, but, well, it's fifty-fifty at the moment as to whether he'll pull through at all."

"Oh no," Mary whispered, and Bobby put his arm around her shoulders.

"Look, it's early days and we won't really know the extent of the damage until we have the scan results back, but I can assure you he's receiving the best of care. You can come up and see him now if you wish."

"Of course, Doctor," Mary said. "Thank you for being honest with us."

Aaron was lying on an intensive care bed with his right arm suspended above him and bandages covering his forehead and knees. The myriad of electronic instruments surrounding him bathed him in a sickly green light. Mary walked up to him and took hold of his hand.

"We're here, honey," she whispered, then kissed him on the lips.

Bobby came up behind her and Mary stepped aside.

"I'll go and let Julia know what's happened," she said, and walked over to the public phone in the corner. She returned a few moments later.

"Julia's coming over and bringing Jason with her," she said.

They arrived about fifteen minutes later. Jason was hiccuping and looked like he might be about to keel over at any moment.

"How is he?" Julia asked.

"He's still unconscious, and he has severe concussion and multiple fractures of his arm," Mary said, and then placed her hands over her face. Julia immediately put her arm around her shoulders and comforted her, while Jason cautiously approached the bed.

He stood in silence looking down on his injured friend, not knowing what to do or say, then gently took hold of his left hand.

'Aaron, don't die, please don't die,' he thought, and closed his eyes.

Aaron found himself in a dark place. Away in the distance, he could hear murmuring voices and what sounded like bagpipes playing something mournful. He had no idea where he was or how he'd come to be there, yet he was unafraid. He was living in the moment, with no past and no future.

A tiny spot of light caught his attention, and as he watched, it became brighter and he felt himself being drawn towards it. The murmuring voices faded and he felt a great calmness and warmth washing over him. *'Come home,'* the light said to him, *'and be at peace with all who have gone before you.'*

But then another voice rose above the others, calling his name. It was a voice he knew, someone he loved, and it was calling him back. *Jason.* He wavered, torn between the light and the voice.

Jason opened his eyes as a cold hand fell on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," the doctor said, and led him away from the bed. He drifted back to where his mother was standing and she wrapped her arms around him. When he looked back the doctor had drawn a curtain around Aaron's bed, and he shuddered.

He closed his eyes again and let his thoughts drift back over all the wonderful times he'd had with Aaron. He couldn't remember a time when his friend hadn't been there, supporting and encouraging him, making him feel wholesome and true. In his mind's eye he saw Aaron's smiling face and those bright blue, mysterious eyes that were always hiding behind his veil of blonde hair.

He unexpectedly chuckled to himself as he remembered how Aaron was always trying to be like him. Jason couldn't wear shoes, so Aaron never wore shoes either. Jason couldn't wear a shirt, so for much of the year, at least until it turned cold enough to force him into his Yoda jumper, Aaron didn't wear a shirt either. On a recent bushwalking trip he'd even tried to imitate Jason's

minimal need for food by eating nothing for five days, but he'd become so weak Jason had almost had to carry him home.

His emotions rose up and consumed him with grief. He wanted to howl, but all that came out was a pathetic whimper.

Bobby was unexpectedly touched by the boy's anguish, and, casting aside all of his hatred and prejudice, he reached out and patted him on the shoulder. Jason turned and looked at him, his lip trembling and his dark eyes filled with unformed tears. The sight of him broke Bobby's heart, and he silently vowed that, should Aaron recover, he would do everything within his power to encourage and nurture the boys' friendship.

* * *

Morgoth woke suddenly and sat straight up in bed. "Her son's dead!" he cried triumphantly as he punched the air, then slid slowly back down and drifted off to sleep again.

The next morning, in a jubilant mood, he called Brett Farley before him.

"That Mary woman is no longer a threat," he said. "You may withdraw your surveillance of the Delphinidae temple and their pathetic school on Sontar."

"Yes, my Lord," Brett said, certain now that Morgoth's sanity was cracking.

"Your father is also forgiven, Brett. He may return to Bluehaven if he wishes."

"My father died a year ago, my Lord. The poisonous atmosphere of Huntress became too much for him, if you recall."

"Oh, I'm sorry Brett, I'd forgotten. I must be getting old." He laughed, but his laughter was unmistakably tinged with madness. Brett smiled.

* * *

"I have some good news for you," the doctor said as he pulled back the curtain. "Aaron has regained consciousness and shouldn't

suffer any after-effects from the bump on his head. I must say though, that his helmet almost certainly saved his life.” He looked sternly at Jason, who nodded back to him even though he always wore a 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?” Mary 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.”

Mary and Bobby moved over to the bedside while Jason and Julia stepped back.

“How are you feeling, big fella?” Bobby asked.

“Pretty crook, actually,” Aaron said.

“Don’t worry; you’ll be as good as gold before you know it.”

“You had us worried for a bit there,” Mary said.

“Is Jason here?” Aaron asked.

“Yes, I’ll get him for you.”

Aaron smiled as Jason stepped up to the bed and looked down on him.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“I am now, thanks to you.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked, but when he looked down Aaron’s eyes had closed and he was asleep. He placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder for a few moments, saying a silent prayer of thanks, and turned away. His headache and sore throat had disappeared, he suddenly realised.

Bobby returned home in a daze, and found himself standing in front of the refrigerator with a can of beer in his hand. He looked at it, as if unsure what it was, and almost tipped it down the sink. But then a nightmarish memory came back of a shimmering light drawing him into a hole in the wall. He hesitated, his hand shaking, before raising the can to his mouth and downing its contents.

* * *

'The promising sporting career of junior cricket star Aaron Smith was cut tragically short on Wednesday afternoon when a hit-run driver ran him down while he was cycling home from school,' the 'Narrabri Times' sports reporter wrote.

'At the end of last season he captained the under-seventeens to an emphatic victory in the state championships and seemed certain to secure a place in the New South Wales squad next year, but a shattered right elbow has put paid to any sporting career he may have had. Many, including myself, had described Smith as the next Allan Border, and the batting legend himself had nothing but praise for the youngster. "It's a tragic loss for the sport," Border said when told of his injury.

'Smith has vowed to continue his interest in the game, and holds no grudge against the driver of the car who left him lying unconscious on the side of Parkland Road. "It was an accident, pure and simple," he said.

'I'm sure all of Narrabri will join with me in saluting this brave young man and wishing him a speedy recovery.'

The Grand Hotel

Aaron's seventeenth birthday was a sombre affair, with his arm still in plaster and likely to remain that way for at least another two weeks. Included amongst the guests were Jason and his parents, and Mary was surprised but pleased to see Bobby chatting away happily with Billy and Julia. Aaron's accident had changed him; he'd been given three weeks off work and in that time he'd positively doted on Aaron and Jason, taking the boys to the movies or anywhere they wanted to go.

Mary lit the candles on the birthday cake and Aaron blew them out while those gathered around him began to sing *Happy Birthday*. The singing petered out before they reached the end of the song, though, and when Aaron looked up he saw why.

Standing about two metres behind them, and smelling strongly of beer, was Graham.

"What are you doing here?" Bobby asked.

"I couldn't *mish* my *fayvrit* Jedi's *birfd*ay, now could I?" Graham slurred.

"I think you have something to tell Aaron, don't you?"

"*Yesh*, I do. Happy *birfd*ay, kid." He tried to punch Aaron on the shoulder but overbalanced and almost fell onto the barbecue.

Bobby pulled him up by the shirt collar, held him there for a few moments, then released him. He fell to the ground and Bobby kicked him in the backside.

"Go home, Graham, and if you know what's good for you, stay there!"

Graham pulled himself to his feet, staggered off around the side of the house and disappeared.

"What the hell was that all about?" Mary asked.

“That dip-stick was driving the car that hit Aaron,” Bobby said before he could stop himself.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Have you told the police?”

“Don’t be daft, Mary. He may be a dip-stick but he’s still a mate.”

Mary shook her head and sighed.

“Cut the cake, Aaron,” Jason said.

After all the guests had gone, Mary went down into the cellar and checked for mail. There was a letter waiting from Ron.

Dear Mary,

I have some wonderful news for you. Kevin and Loretta are engaged to be married! They have been close friends throughout their schooling together, and in recent times, that bond has been growing stronger. They haven’t set a date for the wedding yet as they are still engrossed in their studies in the Temple on Bluehaven, but I expect it will be early next year.

Brian has been promoted to Deputy Director of Justice, and has been chairing a law review committee for the last six months. They have come up with a truly radical proposal that, if implemented, would see those accused of crimes against the empire being presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt. There seems little chance of Morgoth accepting this, though.

Remember that weasel Brett Farley? Brian said he’s now Morgoth’s right hand man at the palace. He’s calling himself a shaman and is using his telepathic skills to spy on people and blackmail them into doing his dirty work for him. The Temple is outraged at this blatant abuse of his Delphinidae heritage, of course, but there’s really nothing they can do about it.

I trust you are all in good health and that Aaron is still doing well at school. I hope his friend Jason is strong enough to control the Barefooter powers he’s inherited, and that whoever’s behind all of this isn’t breeding another Morgoth.

*Best wishes,
Ron.*

Mary folded the letter and placed it with the others in her secret hiding place. Ron's final words about breeding another Morgoth haunted her, though, and she shivered as she thought again of the aura of power she'd sensed around Jason. There was no doubt it was growing as he reached adulthood, but she was also quite sure he was largely unaware of it. Power and ignorance was always a dangerous combination, and she shivered again.

"What's wrong, Mum?" Aaron asked as he walked in and found her staring into space.

"Just thinking about Jason," she said. "His heritage may have given him, um, certain abilities that he may not even be aware of yet. When you both go off to university next year, I want you to keep an eye on him and keep him out of trouble if you can."

"You want me to be his guardian?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Sure. I guess I've been doing that all along, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have, and I'm very proud of you."

He grinned, and turned to walk away.

"There's something else I've been meaning to talk to you about," she said, drawing him back. "You've no doubt noticed that your father is... well, rather fond of his beer."

"I could hardly *not* have noticed."

"So was your grandfather, until a heart attack made him change his ways. Look, honey, I think there may be something in your genes, something that could make you susceptible to alcohol addiction."

Aaron said nothing, but brushed his hair aside and looked into her eyes.

"You're getting to an age now when you'll probably want to start trying alcoholic drinks, and I'm so afraid you might become hooked like your father was."

"I understand what you're saying, Mum. You think I might become an alcoholic like Dad and Granddad, right?"

“Well, yes, if you want to put it so bluntly. I want you to promise me that you won’t take to drink. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Mum, I promise.”

“Say it, then.”

“I promise I won’t take to drink and become an alcoholic like my father and grandfather before me.”

“I’m serious, honey.”

“So am I. Can I go now?”

“Sure, honey.” She hugged him, taking care not to bump his injured arm, and kissed him on the nose. As if on cue, the telephone started ringing. She sighed.

“I’ll get it,” Bobby called from out the back.

Mary walked out to the kitchen just as he was hanging up.

“That was Graham,” he said. “He’s been arrested.”

“What?”

“They pulled him over for a breath test, which was positive, and then one of them spotted the ding on his left fender and became suspicious. They’ve charged him with hitting Aaron, and he wants me to bail him out.”

“So what did you tell him?”

“I told him... um...I told him, he needs to stew for a bit.”

Mary kissed him and gave him a hug.

Early the next morning there came a knock on the door and Aaron answered it. Standing there were Sergeant Kent and Constable Walters.

“How’s the arm, Aaron?” Sergeant Kent asked.

“Not too bad. I get the plaster off next week, then I’ve got a couple of weeks of physio. They reckon I might have some movement in the elbow, but not much.”

“Well here’s hoping. Is your father in?”

“Yeah, I’ll just get him for you.”

Aaron ran back into the house and a few moments later Bobby appeared, looking like he’d just crawled out of bed.

“Ah, good morning Mr Smith,” Sergeant Kent said.

“Good morning. What can I do for you?”

“I assume you know that we’ve charged Graham MacDonald with knocking down your son and failing to stop after the accident.”

“Yes, Graham rang me yesterday.”

“I was wondering if you might have anything further to say to us.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Look, I won’t beat about the bush. I’m pretty sure you were in the car with MacDonald, and that it was you who made the anonymous phone call. Am I right?”

Bobby grimaced slightly, and stared into space for a moment. “I think I should seek legal advice before I answer any further questions.”

“Of course. Let me just say that, if MacDonald enters a guilty plea we probably won’t take the matter any further, but if it goes to trial you will most certainly be called upon to give evidence and, depending on that evidence, you may face charges yourself.”

“You want me to convince Graham to plead guilty.”

“I didn’t say that. Now, I think that’s all for the moment, Mr Smith. We’ll be in touch I’m sure.”

* * *

Dear Ron,

The house feels very empty now that Aaron has gone off to university. Both he and Jason gained admittance to the astrophysics course at Brisbane University, not that there was ever really much doubt. They both did extremely well in their exams last year, and thankfully, Aaron’s accident didn’t have any impact on his studies. Another of Aaron’s school friends, a girl named Mandy, is also attending the same university and is studying marine biology. Her particular interest is dolphins – can this really be just a coincidence?

Jason has met an autothermic girl named Jennifer and they are planning to marry once they’ve completed their undergraduate

studies. Aaron says they're a perfect match for each other. It sounds like Frank Halliday's prediction is coming true, and if so their child might just be the one destined to fulfil the prophecy.

Bobby's friend Graham pleaded guilty to knocking Aaron off his bike and failing to stop after the accident. The magistrate threw the book at him and sent him to prison for six months. It's been something of a revelation for Bobby, and he's still trying to come to terms with it, but more and more I'm catching glimpses of the young man who captured my heart twenty years ago.

I hope the planning for Kevin's wedding is going smoothly. I would imagine that since he's marrying the future High Priestess, it's going to be a grand affair. I wish there was some way I could travel back, just to be there for the ceremony, but I think if I did that, I might not be able to return here to complete my work. I'm finding it hard to believe that both my little babies are now grown men, and I often wonder what became of all those years in between.

Please pass on my congratulations and best wishes to Brian, and tell him I hope he can push his law reforms through.

*Best wishes,
Mary.*

* * *

“So I was wondering,” Graham said as he sat uncomfortably in front of Ray Marshall's desk, “well, I was wondering if I could have my job back.”

“I kind of figured out that's why you're here,” Ray said. “Look, to be honest I'm not at all happy employing someone who's done time, but I'm really short-staffed and your work before was satisfactory, so, to hell with it, I'll put ye on three months probation.”

“That's great! Thanks.”

“But,” Ray said as he hunted round on his desk, “I want ye to keep out of trouble with the law, not so much as a parking ticket,

ye hear, and I don't want ye touching any alcohol. Here it is, I want ye to go and see this chap, he's a counsellor who specialises in managing drinking problems."

"Yeah, sure, anything you say, boss," Graham said as he took the counsellor's card and tucked it into his wallet.

"How'd you go?" Bobby asked when Graham emerged from the office.

"I've got my job back."

"Hey, that's great! This calls for a drink."

"Um, I'd love to, but Ray made me promise I'd stay off the grog."

"Oh, okay then. Sure."

* * *

"Aaron!"

"Huh?" Aaron said as he looked around. "Oh, hi Mandy!"

"I thought it was you hiding under that mop of hair," Mandy said. "Look, I know this really good hairdresser..."

"No way, this hair is sacred."

"I was afraid you were going to say that. How can you even see with it covering your eyes like that?"

"I can see as well as I need to. So, are you still chasing dolphins?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I'm studying a pod out near Moreton Island for my honours thesis. I'm actually seeing aspects in their behaviour that suggest they might have a much higher intelligence than we've ever given them credit for."

"Sounds interesting," Aaron said, but some memory, deeply buried, stirred up an uneasy feeling within him.

"We should do lunch or something," Mandy said. "How does tomorrow sound?"

"That's fine with me. Did you have anywhere in particular in mind?"

"How about Paul's Café?"

“Excellent. I’ll see you there at, say, half twelve?”

“You’ve got a date. See you then.”

“So how’s everything with you?” Mandy asked as they were waiting for their order to be taken.

“Oh, pretty good I suppose,” Aaron said. “I’m doing my honours thesis with Jason on the evolution of supernovas, and it’s pretty fascinating stuff.”

“Jason? Wasn’t he that funny little Aboriginal kid you used to hang round with at school?”

“Yep, that’s him. We’re still room-mates in the college here, and he’s the one with all the brains in our collaboration.”

“Yeah, I remember him now. Smart kid, that’s for sure. His father’s the one who’s been doing all the work with the Eridanians, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Billy’s now the head of AusScience’s Astrophysics Research Centre at Narrabri. I hope I might be able to get a job there next year.”

“So you’re not planning on doing any postgraduate studies then?”

“No, I don’t expect to score high enough in the exams for that, but Jason’s bound to go on to do a doctorate. If he does he’ll be the third generation Doctor Collins in his family.”

“That’s a pretty impressive record. My mother’s a vet, but apart from her I’m the only one in our family who’s gone to university.”

“Sounds like my family. My father’s a technician with Unlimited Energy, the mob that makes the subspace power systems, and my mother’s a library assistant.”

“Well that’s nothing to be ashamed of. I seem to remember you used to be pretty good at cricket, until you had that accident.”

“Yeah, unfortunately my cricketing days are over. I’ve got a little bit of movement in my right elbow, but not enough to be able to wield a bat.”

“That’s a real shame. The sports reporter for the *Narrabri Times* seemed to think you were likely to go on and play for Australia.”

“Well, I think he probably exaggerated a little. Anyway, it’s not a big handicap and I can’t complain. There are lots of things much worse than a stiff elbow.”

“Well I think you’re very brave.” She reached over the table and squeezed his hand, and he blushed.

* * *

Aaron and Jason were working on their thesis when the telephone rang.

“It’s Mandy again,” Jason said as he handed the phone to Aaron.

“Hi Mandy,” Aaron said.

“Hi Aaron. My supervisor’s just told me I can take the boat out to Moreton Island on Saturday, and I was wondering if you’d like to come along and meet my research subjects.”

“Yeah, sure, I’d love to. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at your place at about nine, is that okay?”

“Sure. I’ll see you then.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

“It sounds like you’ve got yourself another date,” Jason said as Aaron hung up the phone.

“Yeah, Mandy’s taking me out on the boat on Saturday to meet her dolphins.”

“Sounds like fun. Can I come too?”

“No.”

“Ah, so things are getting pretty serious between you two then?”

“What do you mean?” Aaron asked, trying to sound innocent, but his blushing gave the game away.

“I thought so,” Jason said. “Well good luck to both of you, I reckon.”

“Thanks, mate.”

The morning was bright and sunny as Aaron and Mandy motored down the Brisbane River. Aaron sat on the bow with his legs dangling between the rails while Mandy steered. He'd had a restless night, spending much of it tossing and turning as he agonised over what might eventuate this day. He'd been seriously dating Mandy for three months now, and with the planning for Jason's wedding in December well in hand, he'd been pondering whether it was time to consider asking her the question.

The glittering sunlight off the water was having a hypnotic effect on him, and he unwittingly slipped into a light sleep until the boat turned out of the mouth of the river and struck its first wave. He woke with a start, feeling completely disoriented, and his stomach cramped a little as they dipped into the trough between waves. He looked around, trying to figure out where they were, but the sun's glare off the water hurt his eyes and he was forced to close them. The moment he did the boat lurched as it ploughed into another wave, and his stomach cramped again. His forehead felt cold and clammy, and he grabbed hold of the rails to steady himself.

"Are you okay?" Mandy asked as he staggered back into the cabin.

"No, not really, a bit seasick I think."

"Here, chew on one of these," she said as she handed him a lozenge. "These are the latest thing, and really work a treat."

"Thanks," he mumbled and hesitantly placed it in his mouth.

"Chew, but don't swallow."

She reached over and put her arm around his shoulder. "You're cold. Did you bring a shirt?"

"Nah, but I'm fine, really."

"Don't talk, chew."

She turned his head towards her and brushed his hair back. "You have really beautiful eyes, you know," she whispered. "Such a deep beautiful blue, I... I..."

“No, don’t look into them,” he said as he turned away. “I don’t know how or why, but... um... I seem to hypnotise people if they look into my eyes. That’s why I keep my hair down over them all the time.”

He chanced a glance back at her, but she was staring blankly at the side of his face. “Oh no, not again,” he moaned as he shifted her across and took control of the boat.

Mandy woke with a start. She’d been dreaming of walking down the aisle, with Aaron, dressed only in his board shorts, waiting patiently alongside the minister. “*Did you bring a shirt?*” she’d asked him, and then he’d brushed his hair aside and she’d looked up into his beautiful big blue eyes. “*Don’t look into them,*” he’d said, and then she’d snapped awake.

“What happened?” she asked.

“You, um... nodded off I guess. Just as well I was here to keep steering the boat.”

“Thanks. You look a bit better, how are you feeling now?”

“Good, yeah, these lozenges really do work.” He pointed to the island that had poked its head over the horizon. “Is that where we’re headed?”

“Yes, that’s it. I’d better take the wheel again.”

Aaron pulled himself up and went back out onto the bow. Ahead and just to their right a dolphin leapt out of the water. “Hey, your friends are here!” he called.

She cut the engine and the boat drifted to a halt about a hundred metres from the beach. Three more dolphins were now leaping around them. Aaron leaned over the railing to get a closer look, and then the first dolphin leapt out of the water and touched his nose with its snout. Mandy gasped, and then watched in slow motion horror as Aaron toppled forward over the railing and dropped into the water.

She dashed out of the cabin and peered over the side, but could see no sign of him or the dolphins. For precious moments, she just stood there, gazing at the rippling water in a mindless daze, until

three dolphins broke the surface and looked right at her, beckoning her.

'You must save him, but he is not for you,' a voice spoke inside her head. Before she knew it she was in the water, and the dolphins were leading her down into the depths.

Aaron was lying motionless on the bottom with his hair waving over his face like seaweed. She reached him, hooked one arm around him and, with the aid of the dolphins, pulled him back to the surface. A small wave caught them and washed them towards the beach, and as soon as her feet touched the bottom, she dragged him up onto the sand.

He wasn't breathing, but still had a weak pulse. With the first aid training that had been drummed into her over the last four years taking control, she rolled him onto his side, pulling his mouth open and letting a substantial amount of seawater pour out, then pushed him onto his back and began applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. While she'd practised countless times on training dummies, this was the first time she'd done it with a real person and for a moment, a wave of panic gripped her. *'What if I do it wrong and he dies, what if he survives but as a brain-damaged vegetable, what if, what if, what if?'* But then she took hold of herself, drew in a few deep breaths and concentrated solely on filling his lungs with air.

'She is not the one,' the voices inside Aaron's head were saying.

'Your destiny lies along a different path,' one said.

'Maleena is waiting for you,' said another. *'You are the guide, you will find the way.'*

'Christopher,' they whispered in unison, before fading into a background of murmuring as his consciousness dissolved away.

Aaron gasped, and then coughed up some more water. He gasped again before settling into a steady slow breathing. Mandy sat back, exhausted, then looked around just as a wave caught their boat and washed it up onto the beach about fifty metres from where she was sitting. She ran down and, before another wave

could lift it and carry it further away, pulled herself on board, grabbed the anchor and dropped it onto the sand. When she looked back towards Aaron, he was sitting up and watching her.

“How are you feeling?” she asked once she’d scurried back down the beach to him.

“Rotten,” he said. “What happened?”

“You fell in the water and almost drowned.”

“I remember dolphins speaking to me.”

“What?”

“Voices inside my head. It hurts.”

“I think I’d better get you to a hospital. Can you stand?”

“I think so.” With her help, he gingerly pulled himself up. His face was white and she thought he might pass out, but somehow she managed to get him to the boat and up on board.

“He might still have a little bit of salt water in his lungs, but otherwise he’s fine,” the doctor said to her. “You did well with the first aid.”

“Thanks, I’m glad to hear it,” Mandy said, feeling relieved but at the same time still trembling inside as those *what ifs* came washing over her again.

“We’ll keep him under observation for another twenty-four hours, but if there are no complications he should be right to leave after that,” the doctor added. “He’ll need to take things easy for a week or two though.”

“Fine, thanks doctor,” Mandy mumbled.

In the weeks that followed, Mandy thought many times of calling Aaron or visiting him, but each time she was overcome with an irrational feeling of fear and dread, and couldn’t quite bring herself to do it. Then she met Greg, another marine biology student, and her memories of Aaron slipped quietly out of her consciousness.

* * *

The examination results came out a week before Jason's wedding. It was no surprise that Jason himself received First Class Honours and the University Medal, and Jennifer was a close second behind him. Aaron was quite pleased with his Second Class Honours Division One, and two days later was called into the AusScience offices in Brisbane for a job interview.

"Your academic record looks quite good, Aaron," the interviewer said, "Although a slightly better result in Applied Mathematics would have helped your cause a little. We were somewhat surprised that you named Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe as your referees, and I must admit I thought you were having us on at first, but they both admitted knowing you and spoke quite highly of you.

"Now I know we did advertise vacancies both here and in Narrabri, but I'm afraid they have already been filled so the best we can offer you at this time is a research assistant posting in the new Peter Thorpe Research Centre in Sydney. Would you be interested in that, Aaron?"

"Um, yes, most definitely."

"Good, then I'll just get you to sign this acceptance form and we'll make it official. You'll be assigned to Doctor Carmichael and will be starting on the eighth of January, if that's suitable for you."

"Yes, of course."

"Right, we'll send you the full details in the post. Thanks for coming in, Aaron, and I hope you'll have a long and productive career with us."

"Thank you," Aaron said as he stood and shook hands.

"Oh, give my regards to young Jason, will you?" the interviewer said just as Aaron was walking out the door.

"Will do."

Jason's wedding was held in the park alongside the Brisbane River on the old World Expo '88 site. Aaron was best man, and once all the guests were settled at the reception he rose and tapped the wine glass in front of him. The crowd hushed.

“We have reached the point in today’s proceedings where traditionally the best man tells of some embarrassing moment in the life of the groom,” Aaron said, “and usually this has something to do with alcohol, women, or a monumental sporting underachievement. Now with Jason this isn’t easy, as he rarely drinks and the only woman he’s ever taken the slightest interest in is Jenny, so I guess that only leaves sport.

“The moment that comes to mind took place in the under-sixteens cricket semi-final. Imagine if you will, the opposition’s number eleven batsman walking out, his side still forty runs in arrears. He is a tall gangly kid who looks like he’s still unsure of which end of the bat he should be holding, and Jason has just taken three wickets without a run being scored off his bowling.

“Jason’s first ball is a sizzling leg break that skids almost at right angles off the pitch just in front of the batsman’s feet, and misses off stump by a whisker. The second delivery is a wrong-un and squeezes between his pads and leg stump without hitting either. By now the batsman is almost quaking in his boots, and on Jason’s next ball, which is another leg break, he gets an edge that drops just in front of first slip.

“Then, on his next delivery, Jason seems to pause halfway through his final stride and let’s go a gentle ball that doesn’t turn at all, and the batsman happily defends. The final two balls of his over are the same, and are hit for four and six respectively. Having got his eye in, the bunny then slashes just about everything our bowlers can toss at him to the boundary, and they would have won the match if our paceman, Nick Prentice, hadn’t knocked the stumps over at the other end when they were two runs short of the target.

“Afterwards Jason said he thought he’d seen the batsman crying, and didn’t have the heart to bowl him out. Our coach was livid, and would have booted him out of the line-up for the final only we didn’t have anyone else who could bowl as well as him.

“This really is just so typical of Jason. He’s one of the most kind-hearted, sensitive, considerate and sincere people you could ever hope to meet, and I’m sure Jenny will have no trouble

keeping him under her thumb. Don't get me wrong, though, Jason's no wimp, and if he wants something badly enough he'll persist quietly and doggedly until he gets his way. I can tell you, as someone who was always trying to borrow his homework, that if you think Jase is a pushover then you'd better think again.

"Oh, and for anyone who hasn't caught the news yet, he's just been awarded the Sumner-Miller scholarship that his father once held, and will be doing his doctorate on supernovas here at Brisbane University."

There was a round of applause and cheering from the crowd, until Aaron raised his hands and shushed them.

"A toast, then, to the groom," he said and raised his glass of grape juice.

"The groom," the crowd responded.

"Hey, what's that you're drinking, Aaron?" someone called out. "It doesn't look like champagne to me."

Three of Aaron's friends then grabbed him, placed a glass of champagne in his hand and forced some into his mouth.

"Hey, a Jedi never drinks!" he protested, but to no avail. Mary, who had come down for the wedding with Billy and Julia, watched in horror as the rest of the champagne was poured down his throat, causing him to choke on it.

"You'll pay for that," Aaron spluttered to his friends, "just mark my words."

"You promised me you'd never drink," Mary scolded him afterwards.

"I didn't have much choice, Mum."

"Well, what was it like? Did you enjoy it?"

"No, it was horrible," Aaron said, almost truthfully, but something deep within him had awoken with his first taste of alcohol, and he knew then for certain that he shared his father's weakness.

* * *

When Aaron arrived at work, he knew straight away from the atmosphere of the place that something was wrong.

“What’s happened?” he asked Stan, one of his colleagues.

“Haven’t you heard the news this morning?”

“No.”

“Sean Fitzpatrick died last night.”

Sean had been the AusScience Director for many years and was almost universally liked and respected by his staff. Aaron gulped and stared into space.

“It’s quite a shock, isn’t it?” Stan said.

“Yeah, it is,” Aaron managed to say.

Aaron had been introduced to Sean two years earlier when the Director had been visiting the Peter Thorpe Research Centre, and they’d formed an easy friendship. He’d dined with the Fitzpatrick family when in Canberra just a few weeks ago, and was stunned by the news. It was the first time in his life that someone he knew personally had actually died, and in one blow it wiped away all of his youthful sense of immortality.

“What was the cause, do you know?” he finally asked.

“Heart attack, they reckon.”

“I didn’t even know he had a heart condition.”

“It just goes to show, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does.”

Later in the day, Warren Carmichael called everyone around him.

“I guess you’ve all heard the news about Dr Fitzpatrick,” he said. “I’ve just received word that the Science Minister herself has appointed Dr Billy Collins from the Narrabri Centre as his replacement.”

Aaron gulped audibly.

“Yes, I thought you’d be pleased, Aaron,” Warren said. “For those of you who don’t know, young Aaron here is close friends with the Collins family, and was Jason’s room-mate at university.”

“Wow, Aaron!” Stan said. “I know who to come to now if I want any favours.”

Less than a month later the bombshell fell.

“Doctor Billy Collins, the recently-appointed head of AusScience, today announced a new direction for Australia’s peak scientific institution,” the television reporter said. “‘We have achieved most of our objectives in the field of subspace research,’ Dr Collins told a packed press gallery this afternoon, ‘and it’s time to redirect our priorities towards the mining sector if we are to avert the looming mineral shortage. We will be providing special funding to both Earth-based and off-world mining ventures, and already a number of major companies have expressed interest.’

“Hardest hit will be the Peter Thorpe Research Centre in Sydney. Established just four years ago, the centre has been at the forefront of subspace research under the leadership of Doctor Warren Carmichael. ‘It was a complete surprise to me,’ Dr Carmichael said, ‘and I’m sure there will be many, both within AusScience and in the broader community, who will rue this decision.’

“Inside sources have suggested that Science Minister Rebecca Gosling may have been behind the move, as it has long been Federal Government policy to provide greater assistance to the mining sector. So far her office has declined our requests for an interview.”

Half an hour later Aaron’s telephone rang.

“Aaron, its Billy Collins here. Have you heard the news?”

“Yes, I just saw it on TV. I take it I’m now out of work.”

“I’m afraid so, but look, sit tight for a couple of weeks and I’ll make sure I find another position for you, most likely at Narrabri. I’ve told Peter we’ll be able to increase his budget a little now that the cutbacks in Sydney have gone through.”

“Okay then.”

“Please, don’t say anything to Jason at this stage. He’s supposed to be concentrating on his thesis right now and I don’t want him distracted. Will you do that for me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks, Aaron. I knew I could count on you. Don’t worry, I’ll have you reinstated as soon as I can. Goodbye.”

Aaron hung up and scratched his head. Something about the way Billy had been speaking just didn’t ring true, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

Six months later, Stan answered a knock on his door and invited Aaron inside.

“How are things at work?” Aaron asked.

“Pretty grim. Those of us left are struggling on, but we can’t get money for anything now and our work is suffering. Just how well do you know Billy Collins?”

“I’ve known him pretty much all my life. His son was my best mate at school and we shared a room at Brisbane University.”

“So what do you think of the way he’s carrying on as Director?”

“It’s totally out of character, if you ask me.”

“That’s what a lot of people are whispering. There’s a rumour going around that he’s about to approve mining on Eden.”

“But I thought Earth’s twin had been declared a nature reserve. I know Billy was fighting very strongly for it a few years back.”

“It had been, but Collins has found a loophole in the U.N. resolution, apparently.”

“I don’t believe it! Billy would never do a thing like that.”

“Well apparently he has. Come and I’ll show you something else.”

Stan led him over to his computer and called up a video file.

“This was recorded accidentally by one of my friends in Canberra when she was testing her new camera. Do you notice anything suspicious?”

The footage showed Billy Collins talking with someone outside the building, then turning and walking back through a side door, pausing for a moment just before going inside.

“Who’s that he’s meeting with?” Aaron asked.

“It’s Howard Werrington, managing director of Deepspace Mines, but he’s not important. Watch again, just before Billy goes back inside.”

“What’s he doing?” Aaron asked. “Run that last bit again.”

“He sneezes. Do you see it?”

“Yes, you’re right, but I don’t see what – ah.”

“He’s supposed to be autothermic,” Stan said.

“That’s right, and autothermics never get sick. Of course!”

“You know what that means, don’t you?”

“That man is an impostor, he has to be,” Aaron said. “If that’s true it would explain a lot of things.”

Aaron arrived in Canberra just before noon. Deciding to try the most obvious approach first, he walked up to the reception desk in the AusScience headquarters.

“May I help you, sir?” the young lady behind the counter asked.

“Yes, I was wondering if I might be able to see Dr Collins.”

“What is it in relation to?”

“I’m an old family friend, Aaron Smith, and as I’m visiting Canberra today I thought I’d drop in on the off chance and say g’day.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Mr Smith, but Dr Collins will be busy all day with other engagements. If you could give me your phone number I’ll pass it on to him and if he gets a free moment he might be able to give you a call.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said and gave her his mobile number, but then in a flash of inspiration he faked a sneeze.

“Don’t tell me you’ve got that bug as well,” she said. “Everyone here’s had it, and Dr Collins looked dreadful on Monday morning. I told him he shouldn’t have come in, but he said he had too many appointments that couldn’t be missed.”

“I’d better go, then, before I catch an extra dose of it.”

Feeling pleased with himself, Aaron thought he’d wander around to the back of the building to see if there might be something suggestive there, and walked past the side entrance he’d seen Billy using in the video clip. *‘Hmm, I wonder,’* he thought as he

rummaged around in his wallet and pulled out his old AusScience identity card. He swiped it in the reader and a green light blinked on.

“Good to see that security’s just as lax as ever,” he muttered as another idea began to form. He waited until the door had latched again, then continued walking down through the car park. He gave the back of the building a cursory scan but couldn’t see anything out of place, so he wandered back to his car and headed into the city to find some lunch.

It was midnight when Aaron returned to AusScience headquarters. He’d parked a few blocks from the establishment and was wearing the black track pants, pullover and beanie he’d bought earlier in the day. Even though it was early summer, the nights were still cold in Canberra and the concrete pavement chilled his bare feet. He didn’t mind, though, as the nerves in his soles were exquisitely tuned to the slightest vibrations in the ground, contributing substantially to what he thought of as his Jedi senses, and putting shoes on his feet would blind him more than covering his eyes ever could.

With no-one in sight, he crept around the side of the building and swiped his card. The door unlatched with a loud clunk and he ducked inside. The interior was in total darkness, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Using those Jedi senses, he quickly found his way to Billy’s office, then pulled out a small flashlight and glanced around. In front of him was a polished oak desk with a well padded armchair behind it. To the left was a smaller desk with a computer screen and keyboard occupying most of it, and along the right wall was a row of filing cabinets. He moved over to the first cabinet and pulled on the top drawer. He’d expected it to be locked, but to his surprise it slid straight out and almost deposited its contents onto the floor. He quickly tried the other drawers and found that none of those were locked either.

He’d only been searching through the files for ten minutes when he struck pay dirt. Filed under ‘E’ was a monthly requisition

form from the AusScience Eden Outpost, listing amongst other things food stocks and toiletries for two guests. He quickly found similar requisitions covering the six months since Billy's promotion, and chuckled to himself that the bureaucratic procedures were so ingrained in AusScience that even when they were illegally holding prisoners they still filled out all the paperwork.

He returned to the outer office, located the photocopier without the aid of his flashlight, and made copies of the documents before returning them to the drawers. He was about to leave when he sensed someone approaching, and quietly crawled behind the copier.

The door opened and an intense flashlight beam entered, closely followed by heavy footsteps. Aaron held his breath as the beam darted haphazardly about the room, then the security guard spoke into his radio.

"What did you find, Phil?" the dispatcher responded.

"Nothing looks out of place here. I'm sure it was just another of those damn false alarms."

"You're probably right. I'll log it, and see if we can get someone to check it out tomorrow."

Once the guard had left, Aaron counted to a thousand before creeping back to the side door and letting himself out. He ran as fast as he could back to his car and returned to the hotel where he was staying overnight.

Aaron had checked out and was about to climb into his car for the drive back to Sydney when his phone rang.

"Aaron? It's Billy Collins here. I'm sorry I couldn't see you when you called in yesterday, but I'll have a few minutes free at about ten o'clock if you can call in then. You're still in Canberra, aren't you?"

"Yes, I was about to leave, but I'm in no particular hurry to get back to Sydney so, yeah, sure, I'll be there at ten."

"Excellent. Just let them know at the front desk that I'm expecting you."

“Aaron! Come on through,” Billy said. “You’re looking well.”

“You too,” Aaron said. “How are you and Julia finding Canberra life?”

“It’s quite a change from Narrabri, but we’re enjoying it whenever I can get away from this place. Can I get you a coffee?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“Look, I’m sorry I haven’t called you back about your re-employment. I know I said I would and I haven’t forgotten, it’s just that everything has been very hectic and the final astrophysics research budget is still being deliberated.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ve been doing a bit of part time work to help pay the rent.”

Billy pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to Aaron. “When you get back to Sydney give this man a call. Fred Cummings is one of my senior advisers and he should be able to find some work for you until we can come up with a permanent posting.”

“Yes, I will, thanks,” Aaron said as he looked at the card and then poked it into his wallet.

There was a knock on the door and a middle-aged woman entered.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Dr Collins, but there’s a call for you from the chairman of Deepspace Mines.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you and take that call,” Billy said. “Thanks for dropping in, and have a safe drive back to Sydney.”

“Thanks Billy, and give my regards to Julia.”

“Will do.”

Aaron hung up the phone. On the surface, his conversation with Fred Cummings had seemed straightforward enough, yet something had caused the hairs on the back of his neck to rise. He’d wanted Aaron to meet him at the Grand Hotel in Bronte on Thursday evening to discuss some possible employment

opportunities and Aaron had said he'd be there, but the warning bells deep within his head were sounding faintly.

He'd been quite impressed with Billy's impostor, and whoever was behind the subterfuge had certainly gone to a lot of detail. He was close enough in appearance to pass as Billy's twin brother and he'd had most of Billy's speech and mannerisms down pat, but Aaron had picked up enough little non-Billy signs to convince him that it really was an impostor. He was about to call Jason and tell him what he'd discovered when there came a knock on the door. He opened it to see a tall elderly Aboriginal man standing there.

"Hello Elko, what are you doing here?" Aaron asked.

"Saving your life, I hope."

"Well come on in, then. Would you like tea or coffee?"

"Tea please, and some of that fruit cake you're so fond of, if you have any."

"But of course. Come through into the kitchen."

"I hear you've been snooping around the AusScience offices in Canberra," Elko said as he finished off the cake.

"Huh? I – what? – how'd you know?"

"Never mind how I know. You should be more concerned about who else knows."

"The man pretending to be Billy Collins is an impostor, and I think the real Billy and Julia are being held in an AusScience outpost on Eden," Aaron said as he handed him the photocopied requisitions.

"Yes, I can see how that fits. I was alerted to some suspicious activity on Eden, and that led me to do some investigating of my own. They know that you know, Aaron, and they're planning on having you meet with an unfortunate accident."

"What – how – when?"

"I don't know, only that it's supposed to be soon, within a matter of days I expect."

"Billy, or should I say the pretend Billy, told me to talk to Fred Cummings, and I was going to meet him at the Grand Hotel on Thursday evening."

“Cummings is a name that was mentioned,” Elko said as he scratched his chin.

“Then I shouldn’t go, I suppose.”

“No, quite the contrary, I think we should both be there and stage a little accident of our own.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’ll come back here on Thursday afternoon and we can take it from there,” Elko said as he stood. “In the meantime, keep your head down and don’t go out if you can avoid it.”

“I was about to call Jase and tell him what I’ve learnt,” Aaron added as Elko was opening the door.

“No, don’t do that. If Jason finds out it will only put his life in danger too, and I can’t be in two places at once.”

Elko arrived around mid afternoon on Thursday.

“What time are you supposed to be meeting Cummings?” he asked Aaron.

“About seven.”

“Excellent. Now here’s what we do.”

“So what’s the big occasion?” Stan asked as Aaron handed him his beer, sat down and took a sizable swig from his own.

“You know how I was always saying I wanted to be a Jedi master?”

“Um, yeah,” Stan said uncertainly.

“Well now I am. I completed my training yesterday and I’m now fully qualified to wield this.” Aaron pulled out the toy light sabre his father had once made for him and waved it around his head.

“That’s good. So, um, what sort of things can you do?”

“Oh, the usual Jedi stuff, you know, levitating objects, jumping from high places, bending people’s minds.” He glanced around the room. “See that black guy at the next table? Watch this.”

He extended his arm in Elko’s direction and said, “This drink tastes off. Get me another one.”

Immediately Elko stood and said to the man sitting opposite him, "This drink tastes off. Get me another one."

"That's pretty good," Stan said as Aaron drained the rest of his beer. "Here, let me get you another one of those."

"Thanks."

"So where do you do all of this Jedi training?" Stan asked as he handed Aaron his beer and took a sip from his own.

"Yanga uses a cave down in the Royal National Park."

"Yanga?"

"He's Yoda's brother."

"I didn't know Yoda had a brother."

"No, it's not widely known. He's a pretty good teacher, though, and not as touchy as Yoda was."

"I see."

Aaron downed half his schooner in one gulp, and then belched loudly. "Yeah, he's very patient, and I've learnt a lot from him over the last six months." His speech was starting to become slurred.

"So that's what you've been doing since, um, since you left AusScience."

"Don't be scared to say it, Stan. I was sacked, no two ways about it."

"Yeah, well it wasn't your fault."

"I know. It was that mongrel Collins. To think I was once best mates with his son." Aaron downed the rest of his beer. "Same again, Stan?"

"No, I'm right for now."

"Well, please yourself," he said as he stood clumsily and staggered over to the bar. Elko was standing there and he drifted over to him.

"Cummings has just arrived," Elko said. "Are you ready for the show?"

"I guess so."

"Here, take this then," Elko said as he handed him another schooner of beer, "but be careful, this one's the real stuff."

They both walked out through the glass doors and onto the rooftop beer garden. Aaron walked over to the edge and looked down.

“I don’t know if I can go through with this,” he said.

“I don’t think you’ve got much choice if you want to save your skin. The people you’re up against are ruthless, and they won’t hesitate to kill you if they think you pose a risk to their plans.”

“All right, Elko, I’ll do it, but if this goes wrong and I die I’ll come back and haunt you.”

“I’m sure you would too, but don’t worry, I’ve got it all worked out.”

Aaron took a mouthful of beer and swirled it in his mouth before spitting it back into the glass. He then splashed a little over his face and shirt, put the glass down and waited as Elko went back inside the building.

“Excuse me,” Elko said as he walked up to where Stan was sitting. “Your friend seems to be causing a bit of a commotion out on the roof.”

“Oh no, I don’t know what’s come over him, I really don’t,” Stan said as he stood. “I’d better go and rein him in.”

“What are you doing out here, Aaron?” Stan called as he walked out onto the roof to where Aaron was waving his light sabre around.

“I *yam* a Jedi, really,” he slurred. “Just watch this.” Without warning, he ran to the edge and leapt off.

Stan looked over the side and saw him sprawled on the ground, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. The old Aboriginal man was leaning over him, checking his vital signs, but then he slowly stood and shook his head to the crowd that had gathered around. Stan turned and dashed downstairs, reaching the footpath just as the ambulance arrived.

“I’m sorry,” Elko said to him, and then vanished into the crowd.

A Funeral Foreseen

My Dearest Mary,

I have some more wonderful news for you. Kevin and Loretta now have a baby daughter! They've named her Lorina and she's beautiful. She has your eyes too! I can't believe I'm now a grandfather – when I was young all the grandfathers were old and decrepit but I don't feel like that yet and I'm sure you don't either. We're still kids, aren't we?

Our school has been so successful that we're now opening similar ones right across Sontar. Hilda and I have been busy recruiting staff over the last few months, but we've had some really good applicants and I'm sure we'll have all of them up and running by the start of the academic year.

I've also received some good news from Brian. He's just been promoted to the position of Director of Justice, so he's now responsible for law enforcement throughout the galaxy. He's still hopeful of pushing his law reforms through, but Morgoth so far has resisted any change. Brian suspects this is mostly Brett Farley's doing, though.

I was pleased to hear that your friend Billy was promoted to the head of AusScience, but I guess you miss him and Julia now that they've had to move away. How far is it from Narrabri to Canberra?

Best wishes,

Ron.

Mary sat looking at the photograph he'd included of himself, Hilda, Kevin, Loretta and Lorina. It seemed only yesterday that she'd given birth to Kevin, and now he had a daughter of his own.

Time was slipping out from under her at an ever-increasing rate, and she wondered again when her mission here might be completed. Her musings, though, were interrupted by a knocking at the front door.

When she opened it, Bobby was standing there, with the two police officers, Kent and Walters, standing on either side of him.

“Bobby, what’s wrong?” she asked. “What have you done?”

“It’s not me,” Bobby said shakily. “It’s Aaron. He’s, he’s dead.”

“What?”

“He fell from the roof of a hotel in Sydney and died. The police said he’d been drinking.”

“Oh no,” Mary gasped.

“Can we come inside?” Sergeant Kent asked.

“Yes, of course,” Mary said.

“If you don’t mind, we’d like to ask you a few questions, to try to see what might have been behind this, um, accident.”

Mary nodded. “Aaron lost his job in the AusScience cutbacks six months ago, but he seemed to be coping reasonably well, going from what he’d told us. He’d been finding a bit of casual work while waiting for Billy Collins to reassign him.”

“We’ve been told by eye-witnesses that he’d been claiming he was a Jedi, like in Star Wars. Do you know anything about that?”

“It was a childhood fantasy he had, that’s all,” Bobby said.

“The man he was drinking with said he’d been celebrating the completion of his Jedi training,” Sergeant Kent said.

“He’d been drinking?” Mary asked. “But he promised me he wouldn’t. He promised.”

“Sit down, honey,” Bobby said. She sat, but her face had gone blank.

“Your son is dead,” Morgoth was saying in her mind.

“No, he’s not really drunk,” she said. “It’s all an act. My son lives.”

Her memory of the dream she’d had during her fever on Sontar came flooding back, and once again she found herself on the roof

of a hotel, where Aaron was swirling beer in his mouth before spitting it back into the glass.

“He’s not really drunk. It’s all an act.”

“What did you say, honey?” Bobby asked. “Are you all right?”

“No, I’m not feeling well. I think I’d better lie down.”

“I’m sorry,” Sergeant Kent said. “We’ll come back at a later time.”

“Of course,” Bobby said.

* * *

As soon as the ambulance door slammed shut, Aaron sat up and spat out the satchel of stage blood.

“That stuff tastes dreadful,” he said, but then winced and rubbed his shoulder. He didn’t know what Elko had used to cushion his fall, and he guessed it had done a pretty good job, but he’d still landed heavily and his shoulder had taken the brunt of the impact.

“Here, let me have a look at that for you,” the paramedic said, and Aaron obligingly peeled off his t-shirt.

“There’s a bit of bruising but nothing too bad. You’ll live I expect.”

“That’s good. It’d be a real shame to have gone through all that only to die of a bruised shoulder.”

The paramedic gave him a look that said his sense of humour wasn’t appreciated. “Where are you taking me?” he asked, changing the subject.

“You’re going to see the rubber man.”

“The what?”

“You’ll see.”

“Since you’re supposed to be dead,” the man in the white coat said, “people are going to expect to see a body and my job is to make you one. I specialise in life-like, or in your case death-like, mannequins.”

“Oh okay, I get it.”

“Good. Now come in here and remove the rest of your clothing while we do a holographic scan of you,” he said as he led Aaron into another room. “You’ll need to keep your eyes closed as we’ll be using lasers.”

Aaron removed his board shorts and underwear, and then, feeling very embarrassed, stood in the centre of the room with his eyes closed while laser beams flashed all around him.

“Right, all done,” the man said a few minutes later. “You can put your clothes back on and take a seat out in the waiting room. We should have you ready in about an hour.”

Aaron sat and shuffled through the books and magazines on the table. Hiding amongst the ten-year-old copies of *Readers Digest* and *National Geographic* was Billy Collins’ book *Emu and Dodo*, and even though he’d read it several times before, he picked it up and began studying it, looking for any clues that might relate to what was happening in AusScience.

Aaron looked up with a start as a police officer entered the room.

“Relax, I’m with Elko,” he said. “I just came to check on progress with the body.”

At that moment, the nameless man in the white coat came in and said, “Ah, Ted, you’re just in time. Both of you come on through.”

They walked into another room and Aaron gasped as he looked down on himself laid out in death on a marble slab.

“It’s, it’s... um... very good,” he stuttered.

“Yes, it’s one of my better attempts,” white coat said. “It should pass any casual inspection, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, no worries,” Ted the policeman said. “The mortician in Narrabri has been briefed so he knows what to expect.”

“That’s good. My plastics don’t stand up too well to embalming fluids.”

“So, when’s my funeral?” Aaron asked sheepishly.

“Monday afternoon,” Ted said. “You’re being cremated.”

Aaron turned as white as the mannequin.

* * *

The priest stepped up to the pulpit and Mary looked around the crowd of mourners once more. Jason had dropped in the previous evening to express his sympathies and to offer to present the eulogy, but so far, neither he, Jennifer nor Peter had arrived.

In her dreams, Aaron's death had always been faked, and when she'd gotten over the initial shock, she had convinced herself that in reality that was what had happened. Her confidence had been totally shattered, though, when she and Bobby had visited the mortician on Saturday morning and she'd seen Aaron lying, quite obviously dead, in the open coffin. Perhaps they'd tried to fake his death, she told herself, but something must have gone wrong with the stunt and he'd not survived the fall. But even that theory was cold comfort for her; there were just too many unanswered questions.

The sermon began and she glanced once more around the congregation looking for Jason, but he had still not arrived.

* * *

Aaron was sitting at the back of a shallow cave on Eden. Elko had brought him there, telling him to wait while he went to fetch the others, but he wouldn't say who the others were or what his plans were for rescuing Billy and Julia. His heart was heavy as he imagined what his parents and Jason would be going through, having unsuccessfully begged Elko to let him call them to tell them he was still alive.

"If we are to have any chance of pulling this off," Elko had explained, "no-one at the funeral, and especially not your parents or Jason, can know that you're alive. You can be assured that they will be closely watched by agents of the impostor and those behind him, and they'll be looking for even the slightest hint of duplicity."

So Aaron had reluctantly agreed to remain silent, and now here he was, alone, in a dingy cave on the other side of the galaxy,

knowing that his family and friends were being tortured with grief for him. He placed his hands over his face and gently sobbed.

* * *

*The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:*

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name' sake.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou annointest my head with oil; My cup runneth over.*

Mary sat at the conclusion of the hymn, overwhelmed by the words she'd been singing. At the core of the Delphinidae creed was the notion of a supreme being, an ultimate consciousness, and while up until now she'd taken little notice of Earth's religions, it dawned on her that there were strong parallels between the faiths, too strong to be merely coincidence. It was believed by many in the Temple that the realm of Sheol was but a transitional state to an afterlife, but there being no hard evidence either way, it had remained a point of conjecture throughout the millions of years of the Delphinidae's existence.

"Jason, who was Aaron's best friend, would now like to say a few words," the priest said, and Mary looked up. Jason did not come forward, though, and she wondered again what had become of Jennifer, Peter and him. In all her dreams, he had presented the eulogy, and she even knew off by heart the words he would say, but now as the events unfolded in real life he wasn't there. She'd been a fool to come to Earth in the first place, she thought, and had only brought heartache and grief to everyone she'd touched. She covered her face to hide the tears that had started to flow.

“Well, I’m afraid it looks as though Jason was unable to be with us this afternoon,” the priest said, looking somewhat confused. “Perhaps, is there anyone else present who might wish to say something?”

Bobby stood.

“My son is dead,” he began softly, causing Mary to shudder. “It doesn’t surprise me that Jason’s not here, though, since it was his father who was ultimately responsible for Aaron’s death.”

There were murmurings throughout the congregation. “Don’t go there,” Mary whispered, but Bobby ignored her.

“It was Billy Collins who put my son out of work and drove him to the roof of that hotel. I’d been almost convinced that my first impressions of the Collins family were wrong, but it would seem I was right after all.”

“Bobby, don’t,” Mary said, a little louder this time. He stopped and stared at her, a blank expression on his face.

“My son is dead,” he continued after a short pause. “At night in my dreams I hear him calling me from behind a dull shimmering light, and I know that if I could just reach through it, I’d be able to bring him back, but I’m too afraid. God give me strength.”

He swayed, and Mary thought he was about to pass out, but he steadied himself and returned to his seat.

* * *

Aaron looked up as he heard a noise, and stood as Elko emerged from the scrub. Following him were Peter Thorpe, Matthew Hardcastle, Jason and Jennifer.

“You sure took your time getting here,” he said as he stepped forward into the light.

“Aaron!” Jason cried as he ran towards him and wrapped his arms around him.

With Elko’s help, Aaron explained the series of events that had led him to suspect that Billy had been replaced by an impostor, and the rationale behind his faked death.

“What became of Billy?” Peter asked.

“At first I feared they’d killed him,” Elko said, “but then I discovered that 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?” Peter asked. “Let’s get moving.”

“We have about two hours of daylight left,” Elko said, “so we should be just about able to make it to our first campsite by then.”

“So how did you guys end up here on Eden?” Aaron asked once they were underway.

“When Dad turned up this morning and wouldn’t look me in the eye I became suspicious,” Jason said, “and then Matthew revealed that he had uncovered other evidence proving he wasn’t who he was claiming to be. At that point he pulled a gun, and Peter drew us all together and flipped us over here.”

“Jason helped me with that,” Peter added.

“So the impostor, he got away then,” Aaron said.

“Yes, I guess so,” Jason said. “He made no attempt to follow us here, if that’s what you mean.”

“We should still be on our guard, though,” Aaron said.

They hiked south along the ridgeline, and late on the third day arrived at the AusScience compound. It consisted of a single metal-clad building surrounded by a security fence, and sitting beneath a tree under the watchful gaze of two armed guards were Billy and Julia.

Aaron thought he saw something in the bushes and moved away from the others to investigate. It was only a piece of wind-blown litter from the compound, but when he turned to go back, he heard an unfamiliar voice and froze.

“Stand where you are and place your hands over your heads,” the voice said, and he crept back into the bushes, watching in despair as his friends were led at gunpoint into the compound.

After they'd gone, he crept out of his hiding place and looked around, hoping something in his surroundings might suggest a plan of action. The security fence looked quite new and he doubted he'd be able to break his way in, so he would need to do something to draw the guards out and keep them preoccupied.

He winced slightly as he stepped on a sharp-edged stone, and noticed for the first time that the ground was fairly littered with small rocks. He picked one up and swung it a few times, getting a feel for the weight of it in his hand, then took aim at the compound and made to throw it. 'Yes,' he thought, *'that'll do nicely,'* and gathered up as many rocks as he could while his plan began taking form.

Satisfied with his rock collection, he ventured back into the scrub and soon found what he was looking for. A creeper vine had wrapped itself around a tree trunk and he tugged on it, testing its strength. Nodding to himself, he pulled a knife from his backpack and cut several lengths. Finally, he cut off a short piece and tied it around his head to keep his hair away from his eyes, and returned to his pile of rocks just as daylight was failing.

Everything had been quiet in the compound for a while, and Aaron judged the time to be right. Picking up three of his rocks, he tested the weight again and let fly. They each hit the metal roof of the building with a satisfying thump. Lights came on, then two guards emerged with flashlights and began searching the perimeter. He stepped out in front of them and raised his hands.

"Stay where you are and keep your hands up," one of them said, but then he looked into Aaron's eyes and faltered.

"What's wrong, Paul?" the other guard asked, but then he too looked directly at Aaron and was captured by his gaze.

"Go to sleep," Aaron said softly, and they both slid down onto the ground. He grabbed a couple of lengths of vine, secured their hands behind their backs and tied them to a tree.

He waited about twenty minutes and then let a few more rocks fly. Another two guards emerged, and as the first one approached him, Aaron stepped out and caught his eyes. "Go to sleep," he

said, and the guard slid down, but while he was concentrating on him the other one raised his gun and took aim.

“Look at me!” Aaron said as soon as he realised what was happening. The guard instinctively looked him in the eye and was captured, but in falling, his finger squeezed on the trigger and the gun discharged. The shot went wide and Aaron was unscathed, but it grazed the first guard on the shoulder and he started bleeding.

“Damn,” Aaron muttered as he fished around for his knife again, cut a strip from the guard’s shirt and used it to bind the wound. Finally satisfied that his captive wasn’t about to bleed to death, he bound their hands and tied them up alongside the first two.

He sat and calmed himself, counting to a thousand before resuming his barrage of rocks. The remaining two guards forced their captives out into the courtyard and panned the forest with their flashlights. Aaron let a few more rocks fly, then waited as the guards became more flustered. When he judged the time to be right, he crept down close to the perimeter and took aim at one of the guards. His target fell to the ground as the rock struck his head, and then Aaron dived for cover as the remaining guard began spraying the forest with gunfire.

Finally, he ran out of bullets and was overpowered by Elko and the others. Aaron returned to his four captives, woke them, and marched them into the compound, where Elko locked them in the building with their two companions before leading his friends into the forest.

Once away from the compound they found a well-covered area to set up camp for the night. Julia’s imprisonment had left her looking haggard and weak, but Jason was coaxed into trying his healing gift on her. He sat on the ground facing her, took hold of her hands and closed his eyes.

“Sleep soundly, Mum,” he said after releasing her, “and awake renewed.” He stood, wiped his forehead and walked off into the forest, with Aaron following closely behind.

“What’s wrong, Jase?” he asked when he’d caught up with him.

“I’m sure my, um, gift thing is getting stronger,” Jason said. “As soon as I touched Mum I could feel it welling up inside me and flowing into her, but I could also sense a darker side to it, that if I’d wanted to I could just as easily have hurt or even killed her.”

“That’s bad,” Aaron said. “You need to be very careful, Jase, because when you have someone else’s life or death in your hands, that puts you in a position of great power, and you know what they say about that.”

“Power corrupts.”

“And absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

“Promise me you won’t let me hurt anyone, please promise me.”

“I promise, even if it kills me.”

“What’s happening to me, Aaron? What is it I’m becoming?”

“I don’t know, Jase, I really don’t, but I’ll tell you something weird.”

“What?”

“I’m pretty sure my mother does.”

* * *

Once more Bobby was standing before the shimmering light. “Help me, Dad, please help me!” Aaron called faintly from the other side, and Bobby cautiously extended his arm into the light.

Another hand grabbed his, but it didn’t feel like Aaron’s. It squeezed tightly and started pulling him in. He screamed...

...and woke, drenched in sweat.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Mary asked. “Are you okay?”

“Another bad dream,” he said. “Aaron was calling me from behind the shimmering light again. This time I plucked up the courage to reach through, but something grabbed me and tried to pull me in.”

Mary took a deep breath. “Honey, I want you to come with me. I need to show you something, down in the cellar.”

“What is it?”

“Remember Frank Halliday?”

“Yes, of course, this used to be his house. But what’s that got to do with anything?”

“He was, well, he came from, um, another place.”

“Another planet, you mean?”

“Another galaxy, actually. The same place I came from.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me, Bobby, and I really don’t think I can bring myself to say it again.”

They’d reached the bottom of the cellar stairs and Mary led him around behind the wine racks to the concealed panel in the wall.

“This is a portal that Frank installed and that I’ve been using to communicate with home,” she said as she unlocked and opened it.

“It’s the shimmering light from my dreams,” Bobby whispered as he stared at the opening in awe.

“You’ve seen it before, about twenty years ago, when I accidentally left it open. I panicked and, well, pushed the memory of it out of your consciousness. It’s because of that you’ve been having those awful dreams, Bobby. I did a terrible thing, and I knew you were suffering but just couldn’t bring myself to confess. And now Aaron is dead and everything is a total waste.”

Bobby reached out and held her as the tears ran freely down her face. “I don’t understand, I really don’t,” he whispered.

“Come upstairs and I’ll tell you everything. I owe you that much, Bobby.”

* * *

Elko led them over the ridgeline and down onto the western plains, where they followed a dry creek bed to a cave. At the far end was a portal into Elko’s home, a mansion suspended in subspace between Earth and Eden.

The next morning he told them that he believed the people behind the abduction of Billy and Julia were renegade Eridanians who’d been trying to get their hands on Billy’s research into time cusps, splits in the flow of time.

“Experience has shown that such cusps are inevitably short-lived and sooner or later the original time line takes over again. Billy did a lot of research into them after first contact with the Eridanians, with the intention of trying to predict and prevent them, but he accidentally stumbled upon the secret to creating a permanent cusp.”

“To do it you need a pair of planets linked across the subspace fold and with a time-slip between them,” Billy said, “and the only such pair of planets known to exist in our galaxy is Earth and Eden. Once I realised what I’d found, I encrypted all my notes and abandoned that line of research.”

“But that was decades ago,” Julia said. “Why all the fuss now?”

“In 1986 a group of Barrad’s operatives attempted to make contact with Tom Collins and his team of SETI researchers,” Elko said. “Their intention was to pave the way for a takeover of Earth, but they were thwarted at the last moment by an Eridanian customs patrol. They created an alternative time line in which that patrol ship crashed before making the intercept, but things started going wrong for them almost straight away. In the end their attempt failed and that time line ceased.”

“So now they’re trying again?” Matthew asked.

“Yes. 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 growing 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. 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 version of reality. 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 alive and well and, by a stroke of good fortune, all currently 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.”

Aaron joined hands with Jason, Jenny, Matthew, Peter and Elko, and as he closed his eyes, he felt the world slip away from under him.

* * *

Aaron blinked, and for a moment felt completely disoriented. He’d been on his way to Tom Collins’ farmhouse, and yet something in the back of his mind was trying to convince him that he’d been elsewhere. He shook his head and ran his hands through his hair, trying to clear his mind, before setting off again.

He arrived at the farm just after sunset, and Tom invited him in.

“How was your trip?” he asked.

“Not too bad, considering. I managed to hitch a ride most of the way.”

“Hi Aaron,” Sarah said, brushing his hair back and kissing him on the forehead as she walked from the kitchen to set a place for him at the table. “Dinner’s ready so come on through.”

He followed her into the dining room, where Peter and Matthew were waiting next to the fireplace.

“It’s been a long time, Peter,” he said as he placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Aaron!” Peter said as he jumped around. “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 time has come to make a stand,” Tom said after they’d adjourned to the living room. “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 in Canberra 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 that he can put to good use in diverting the guards.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Aaron said, but Tom ignored him.

“And you, Jason, your *healing hands* gift, as you call it, I’m sure it 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 felt his Jedi self flaring up, and what seemed like a memory of another existence flashed before him. He stood and brushed the hair out of his eyes, looking around the room at each person in turn.

“There are forces at work here that even I do not understand,” he said, although it felt like some other entity was speaking through him. “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. 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 and I never saw them again.”

“They were using you to get to your father,” Aaron said. “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.

“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.”

The fire within him went out, and he blushed as he sat down again.

“Are you with us, Jason?” Tom asked.

“I’m afraid, terribly afraid of what I might unleash if I do as you ask. The power within me is strong and growing 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," Jenny 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."

Jason looked at Aaron and he nodded.

"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 it was a promise he was unsure if he'd have the strength or courage to keep.

Matthew led them to a rendezvous with the underground resistance, and the next morning they travelled to Canberra and smuggled themselves into the Empress's throne room. The Empress, not realising the peril she was in, welcomed them.

"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."

"You killed my parents," Jason snarled and began moving towards her.

"Now what on Earth would make you think we'd do a thing like that?" she said. "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 to him and took hold of his hands. He closed his eyes and a moment later she grimaced in pain and tried to break away from him, but he held tightly to her and forced her onto the floor. She gasped for air, shuddered and then collapsed, dead.

“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.”

Peter found a glowing sphere hidden in the drinks cabinet and held it aloft.

“That’s it,” Tom said. “Destroy it, Peter.”

“No, wait,” Jason said. “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 Peter found himself drawn towards him.

“Stop it, Jason,” Aaron cried and leapt at him, but Jason grabbed him and he screamed in agony.

“You cannot stop me, Jedi,” Jason snarled as he threw him to the floor, and for the first time in his life, Aaron felt the full force of his friend’s power. Every nerve in his body cried out in pain as he gasped for air but couldn’t fill his lungs. He looked Jason in the eye but all he saw there was madness, and then his vision faded to black and he knew no more.

* * *

“How old did you say this Morgoth was?” Bobby asked.

“About a million years, give or take,” Mary said.

“And Aaron was supposed to go back there and bump him off.”

“Well, not exactly. Aaron was supposed to accompany Jason and Jennifer’s son, and be his guide.”

“So what happens now?”

“In my dream Morgoth said, *‘Your son is dead and my grandson here is mine.’* I think without Aaron’s help, Mark will be snared by Morgoth.”

“Mark?”

“Jason’s son will be named Mark.”

“Because you dreamt it.”

“Yeah, I dreamt it. Whether my dream comes true remains to be seen, though.”

Bobby looked at her in silence for a few moments before saying, “I’ve also got a confession to make.”

“What’s that?”

“When Graham ran down Aaron that time, I, um, it was me in the passenger seat of his car. I didn’t know it was Aaron we’d hit, I swear, and I begged Graham to stop but he wouldn’t because he knew he was over the blood alcohol limit.”

“Oh honey, you must have felt so awful when you found out who the kid on the bike was.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t dob in a mate, but it was my son he’d hit, my son. And to make it worse, we were only driving down that road because he was giving me a lift home to save me from having to walk in the rain.”

Before Bobby could say any more their clock radio burst into life.

“In a series of dawn raids police this morning arrested some twenty senior officials from AusScience and the Ministry of Science. Included amongst these was AusScience head Billy Collins, although there are unconfirmed reports that he is actually an impostor and that the real Dr Collins was being held prisoner on Eden.

“Police have also surrounded the home of Science Minister Rebecca Gosling, and something of a standoff has developed there. We cross now to our reporter on the scene in Canberra.”

“The whole street is swarming with police, and after a barrage of shouting about half an hour ago everything has gone eerily quiet. Rumours are running rife that Gosling was part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government.

“Wait, was that a gunshot? It sounded like it came from the house, and the police are now moving in. I’ll have to pass it back to you, Steve, while I find out what’s happening.”

“That was Jerry Thomas reporting live from Canberra, and we’ll keep you up to date with developments. In other news, residents in the town of Bega had a lucky escape when...”

Bobby switched him off. “What was that all about? Did he really say that the bastard who sacked Aaron wasn’t Billy Collins at all?”

“That’s what he said,” Mary said, feeling giddy with relief. “I can’t imagine how they managed to get away with something like that for so long. I hope Billy and Julia are all right, though.”

“Yeah, me too. I must admit, you know, that I was really starting to like those two before they moved to Canberra.”

“I wonder what’s going to happen to them now?”

* * *

Aaron opened his eyes and found himself back in Elko’s home, still standing in a circle and holding hands with the others as if they’d never left.

“Did all that really happen?” he asked.

“Yes, it did, and we thought Jason had killed you,” Jennifer said.

“I thought I had too,” Jason said. “I’m so sorry, Aaron, that thing within me just took over completely and I couldn’t stop myself.”

“That’s okay, Jase, I understand. What happened after that?”

“The Empress’s assistant walked in and distracted me enough for Peter to throw the orb against the wall and smash it,” Jason said.

“Peter, what’s wrong?” Julia asked, and everyone turned to see him staring blankly into space. “Are you okay?”

Peter didn’t respond, though. “Help me get him into bed,” Elko said.

Jason knelt beside Peter, took hold of his hands and closed his eyes. A few moments later, he opened them again.

“It’s no use,” he said. “I can’t find his soul, his mind’s just empty.”

“Stay with him, Jason, and keep trying,” Elko said. “It’s probably an after-effect of having that orb shatter so close to him, and it may pass eventually. In the meantime, I’ll take the others back to Earth. From the reports I’ve been hearing, it sounds like the impostor’s been caught, and Billy and Julia will be needed to give evidence.”

“I’ll stay here with Jase and Peter, if that’s okay,” Aaron said.

“Sure,” Elko said. “Oh, and if you want to call your parents to let them know you’re okay, there’s a telephone in the next room. Just dial four to get an Earth line.”

“Thanks Elko, I’ll do that right now.”

* * *

The telephone rang and Mary and Bobby both jumped. “I’ll get it,” Mary said.

“Hi Mum, it’s me, Aaron.”

“Aaron? But, but,”

“I’m okay, Mum, really.”

“But everyone thought you were dead. We even saw you in the coffin and everything. What happened?”

“It’s a long story, but we had to fake my death to throw the conspirators off my trail. I’ll tell you everything when I get home.”

“When will that be? Where are you now?”

“I’m in Elko’s home, but I’m not exactly sure where that is. Peter’s not well, though, and Jase and I are staying with him for the moment. I’ll keep in touch.”

“Well you be careful, you hear?”

“Sure, Mum.”

“Hold on, your father wants to talk to you.”

“Son?” Bobby said.

“Hi Dad. How’s things?”

“A whole lot better than they were five minutes ago. Is it true that Billy Collins was really an impostor?”

“Yeah, it was all part of a plot by the science minister to take over the country. Billy and Julia are on their way back now to testify.”

“Well you make sure you get back safely and in one piece. I don’t want to have to go to your funeral a second time.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry I had to put you and Mum through all of that. I’ll see you soon, Dad, and I love you both. Bye.”

“Love you too, son.”

“So it looks like my dreams were right after all,” Mary said, “except for Jason’s eulogy. I wonder where that came from.”

“Hmm, yes,” Bobby said. “So, does, um, does Aaron share your psychic abilities?”

“We’ve never actually discussed it, but I believe he probably does. I think that’s why he likes having his hair covering his eyes, to reduce the risk of making accidental psychic contact with people.”

“You’re probably right. Well I’d better watch what I think around you two from now on.”

Four days later Mary answered a knock on the door to find Aaron standing there with a silly grin on his face.

“You’re back!” she cried as she hugged him. “Bobby, come quickly, Aaron’s back!”

“How’s Peter?” Bobby asked once they’d settled into the living room.

“He’s fine now. His spirit got trapped in another time line and he lived through twenty years of it before Jase called him back to us. It was really weird.”

“I imagine it would be.”

“Oh, and before I forget, Jenny’s pregnant!”

“What?” Mary asked.

“She just told us this morning. The baby’s due in August.”

“It’s all happening, then,” Mary whispered.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said.

In the fallout from the AusScience conspiracy, Billy and Julia received an ex-gratia payment from the government and decided to set up their own business in Coolum Beach, where Julia's parents lived. Peter, Jason, Jennifer and Aaron also went with them as part of the company, leaving Mary and Bobby behind in Narrabri. They'd considered moving too, but Bobby had his commitments with Unlimited Energy and they felt it best to stay.

On the morning of the twenty-seventh of August, Mary received a call from Aaron.

"Jenny's baby was born this morning!" he said. "It's a boy."

"That's wonderful news, honey."

"They're naming him Mark."

Mary was silent for a few moments.

"Mum, are you there?"

"Yeah, sorry, just another of my silly premonitions coming true. That's great, honey. Thanks for calling and letting me know. Give them all my best wishes."

"Will do."

The Prophecy

Ron looked up from his desk as he heard a knock on the door. “Come in,” he said, and someone he hadn’t seen for many years entered his office.

“Brian! It’s great to see you again!”

“Good to see you too, Ron. It’s been a long time between drinks.”

“It sure has. What brings you to Sontar?”

“Well, you, actually. I bring a message for you from the Enlightened One.”

“What?”

“He’s inviting you and your family to the palace for dinner with him. He’s very impressed with the network of schools you and Hilda have set up, and he thinks it’s time he extended an olive branch to the Temple.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say. I’m not sure...”

“You won’t have to wear shoes, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

“No, it’s not that,” Ron said, then noticed the grin on Brian’s face. “Oh, you remember the little disagreement we had when we first went to work on Eric’s farm.”

“Little disagreement? You just about killed me.”

“Yeah, I was a bit wilder back then, I must admit. No, I’m just not sure about us going to the palace, after all the anguish he caused us when we were setting up.”

“I think you’ll find him a changed man. He was a bit rattled by some prophecy about his demise that he thought might involve Mary, but he’s put all that behind him now. Brett Farley’s been helping him a lot.”

“That little twerp?”

“Be careful what you say, he’s now Morgoth’s chief adviser and shaman, and many reckon he’s the real power behind the throne.”

“We live in strange times.”

“That we do. So how’s the family?”

“They’re all fine. Young Lorina turns eight in a few months.”

“Eight? It seems only yesterday she was born.”

“Yeah, the time’s certainly flying by. So, has your boy shown any signs of getting married yet?”

“No, Owen’s too involved in his work to discover women, I think.”

“He’s a nice looking boy and well mannered too, so I’m sure someone will steal his heart some day.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Brian laughed. “So, will you accept Morgoth’s invitation?”

“I don’t know. I should really talk it over with Hilda, Kevin and Loretta first. How long are you on Sontar for?”

“A few days.”

“Why don’t you join us for dinner? That’s if you don’t have any other plans.”

“Yeah, sure, I’d like that.”

“It’s settled then. Come round to the house at about seven. Do you know where we live?”

“I have the address somewhere I think.”

“It’s pretty easy to find anyway. Just follow the road south out of Golding and we’re the big house at the top of the hill on the right.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

* * *

It had been eighteen years since the defusing of the supernova in the Pleiades cluster, and the last of the x-rays from the rogue star were about to pass by the planet Genesis where Billy and Peter had discovered the preserved bodies of the Emu and Dodo spirits

they'd been carrying. Aaron, Peter and all the Collins family had travelled there to join in the celebration of the rebirth of that world.

Two years earlier Aaron had received a taste of Mark's growing powers. It had been his fifth birthday party and they'd been playing back yard cricket. It was the first time Aaron had tried to wield a bat since his arm was damaged, and he was making a bit of a meal of it.

"Uncle Aaron," Mark asked, "why don't you bend your right arm?"

"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."

Mark wrapped his hands around Aaron's elbow and grimaced with concentration, then released his grip and looked up at him expectantly. Aaron cautiously tried flexing it, and to his great surprise it bent.

"Is that better?" Mark asked.

"Much better, yes, thanks," Aaron muttered, and flexed it a few more times.

After a few weeks of exercise it was as good as new, and Aaron soon found himself playing competitive cricket again, with a good prospect of being called up to the state side.

Elko approached Jason and Jennifer and beckoned them into his ship.

"This may seem an unusual request," he said, "but I was wondering if I might be able to obtain a small blood sample from each of you."

"Nothing you ask for would ever surprise me," Jason laughed. "Sure, that's fine with me. What about you, Jenny?"

"No worries, as long as you leave me some."

"Just a small drop will suffice, I assure you," Elko said.

He took the drops of blood, spread them onto glass slides and placed them in the machine on the bench in front of them. A few moments later a series of DNA bar graphs appeared on the screen, and Elko nodded.

“Jason, remember the time you first came here and you fell in the pool outside the cave?”

“How could I forget? A vine tangled itself around my legs and I almost drowned.”

“Exactly. You see, it wasn’t the first time that vine had tasted human DNA.”

“What do you mean?”

“A million years ago a group of people crash-landed on this island while fleeing their enemy from a distant galaxy. They were all autothermic and members of a race known as the Barefooters, and their leader was a man named Gallad.

“Their enemy eventually found them and a fierce battle was fought alongside that pool. Gallad was fatally wounded by an arrow and fell into the water, where his DNA was assimilated by the vine. There it waited, while this world was rendered uninhabitable by the radiation from the rogue star, until you came along.

“The vine implanted some of Gallad’s DNA into you, where it supplemented the autothermic genes you inherited from your father.” He pointed to the matching regions of Gallad’s and Jason’s DNA on the display.

“That’s amazing,” Jason said.

“But that’s only half the story,” Elko continued. “I’ve been tracing your family tree back, Jenny, to see if I could find the source of your autothermia, and the blood sample I’ve just taken has confirmed my suspicions. You are a direct descendent of Gallad’s wife Marinda.”

“But how could that be?” Jenny asked.

“When this planet became uninhabitable, many of the people fled to other worlds, including Earth, and amongst them was Marinda. She had been touched by the radiation and died soon afterwards, but not before she had borne a child. Her heritage was passed down from generation to generation, spreading out widely amongst the early inhabitants of Europe before converging again in the Simpson family. You are carrying a full fifty percent of her genes.”

“So what does it all mean?”

“Think about it. Jason is fifty percent Gallad while you are fifty percent Marinda. Do you think your coming together was an accident?”

“Mark,” Jason said, and Elko nodded.

Meanwhile Aaron had taken Mark out for a walk around the village. As he rested on a bench in the town square, an old man came over and sat beside him.

“So it’s true what they say,” he said.

“Tell me what it is they’re saying and I might be able to answer,” Aaron said.

“They say your friend, the one with the dark skin, is carrying Gallad’s blood and the boy here is Gallad’s son.”

Aaron nodded.

“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 know nothing about anything!”

“When the time comes, you will, and that time will come soon enough.”

Before Aaron could ask anything more he stood and walked away, and Mark came and sat beside him.

“I heard what that man said,” he whispered, “and I know what lies ahead of me.”

“You do? Who told you?”

“The dolphins.”

Aaron shuddered as he remembered his encounter with the dolphins when he’d fallen from Mandy’s boat and almost drowned. Even now, he still sometimes dreamt about it, and in those dreams were fragments of memories he could never quite reach in his waking hours. There was a name, *Maleena*, that meant nothing to him, but he was sure it was important.

“Aaron?” Mark asked, snapping him out of his ponderings. “I know there’s something about me, something passed down 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."

Aaron held him tightly and waited for his tears to subside.

"The old man said I was to be your guide, 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."

He laughed as he realised how stupid that sounded, and Mark grinned.

At that moment an Eridanian man, one of Jason's friends, came running up to them and told them they were wanted in the ancient Council hall on the other side of the island, and they followed him across. There they learnt of a dark realm spanning the universe, a place called Sheol, and of the existence of a portal into that realm at the bottom of a canyon on the mainland.

"That is the path Mark must take, if he is 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. Everyone turned, and Aaron saw it was the old man he'd met earlier.

"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?"

"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 drew in a deep breath. "I will go," he said.

Frank Halliday sighed as he removed his old man disguise. It really wasn't that much of a disguise any more, he mused, considering his age. He'd not wanted to interfere in the events that were unfolding, but his agents on Bluehaven had informed him that time was of the essence, so he'd reluctantly decided to give

everyone a little nudge in the right direction. He hoped there wouldn't be any dire consequences.

* * *

Ron, Hilda, Kevin, Loretta and Lorina arrived at the palace just on sunset, where they were met by Brett Farley. He looked taller than Ron remembered him being at school, and had also gained a substantial amount of weight.

"It's good to see you again, Ron," Brett said as he pumped Ron's hand. "I always thought you'd go on to do great things."

'Sure,' Ron thought, *'when you weren't trying to flush my head down the toilet.'*

"You seem to have done pretty well yourself," he said diplomatically. "Brian reckons you're now the real power behind the throne."

"Don't let the Enlightened One hear you saying that, but yeah, I guess I am," Brett said with all the modesty that Ron remembered him for. "If the truth be known, Morgoth's going a bit soft in the head."

"Really?"

"Yes. Remember that girl in school, Mary Anderson?"

Ron stiffened, but quickly took hold of himself and closed his mind to any probing. "Yeah, she and I studied together at the Temple for a while."

"Right. Anyway, Morgoth was convinced she was going to give birth to the boy prophesied to overthrow him, and was hiding on Huntress. He sent my dad there to try to find her."

"And did he?"

"Of course not. If the truth be known she's probably working the streets on Shimmel."

Ron tensed again.

"Um, you don't know where she is by any chance, do you?" Brett asked.

"No, I don't. She left the Order after her first year and I haven't seen her since."

“Too bad. Still, I guess she’ll turn up eventually.” He turned as he heard footsteps approaching. “Ah, here’s Brian and Shirley. You’re late again.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Brian said. “Right, shall we go in?”

“After you,” Brett said.

“My Lord, allow me to present Priestess Hilda, her consort Ron, High Priestess Lorett, her consort Kevin and daughter Lorina,” Brett announced to Morgoth as they entered the formal dining room.

“I am most pleased to see all of you here,” Morgoth said. “Please, join me at the table.”

Ron glanced around the room, taking in Morgoth’s unabashed opulence. There were numerous paintings hung in golden frames and drapes of the finest cloth laced with precious gems, while filling the far wall was a huge tapestry depicting a youthful and brazenly naked Morgoth wielding a golden sword.

“Pretty awesome, isn’t it?” Brett whispered in his ear. He shook his head in disbelief.

As they sat, a scantily-clad waitress entered carrying two baskets of herb bread, while a waiter in tight red trousers and a frilled white shirt filled their wine glasses.

“The education of our children has always had a special place in my heart,” Morgoth said as they began nibbling, “for it is with our children that the future of the Empire lies. I know you have probably heard some very bad things about me, and some of them might even be true, but trust me when I say that I have always had the galaxy’s best interests at heart. The well-being of our children is absolutely vital, far more important than the latest star destroyer or planet imploder.”

Ron shot a glance at Brian, who nodded slightly and rolled his eyes. This was the same speech Morgoth had given when they’d visited the palace with the school excursion half a lifetime ago.

“I have been hearing wonderful things about your schools on Sontar,” Morgoth continued, “and I would like to announce tonight

a one-off funding grant to the Delphinidae Temple to expand this throughout the empire.”

“You are most generous, my Lord,” Loretta said.

“My Director of Education will be in contact in due course to make all the arrangements. Perhaps you would care to tell me what motivated you to begin this undertaking.”

“It was mostly Hilda’s doing,” Loretta said and looked towards her.

“When I began my ministry on Sontar,” Hilda said, “it soon became apparent that, with the bulk of the population being either slaves or peasants, education of the children was a luxury most could not afford. I began running informal classes in basic literacy for some of the children in Golding, and I suppose it grew from there. The big breakthrough came when the Temple agreed to fund both the construction of a dedicated schoolhouse and the employment of staff.”

“I’m hearing rumours that the Golding school is now becoming quite prestigious,” Morgoth said, “rivalling perhaps some of the schools on Cornipus.”

“I’m afraid so. The demand for places has certainly been growing, but we’re doing our best to make sure that those most in need can still be accommodated.”

At that moment, four waitresses entered with the main course, putting an end to the conversation. While they were eating, Morgoth kept glancing across at Lorina, causing Kevin to feel a little uncomfortable.

“Your granddaughter is attending the school in Golding, is she not?” Morgoth asked as the dessert was being served.

“Yes, she’s following in her mother’s footsteps,” Hilda said.

“Do you like your sweets?” Morgoth asked Lorina as she dug into her ice cream.

“Yes, I do.”

“Come with me, then, and I’ll show you something special,” he said as he stood, and escorted her into an adjoining room.

“What’s that all about?” Kevin asked Brett.

“I really don’t know. He’s never done that before.”

Before anyone could speculate further, a scream came from the room. Kevin grabbed a knife from the table and dashed after them, knocking his chair over in the process.

He entered the room to see Lorina crouched in the corner, with Morgoth, stark naked, leaning over her and wagging his penis in her face.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Kevin yelled as he brandished the knife.

Morgoth leapt around. “How dare you?” he cried. “Guards! Guards!”

By the time the guards burst into the room Morgoth had his clothes back on. “He pulled a knife and tried to kill me,” he told them. “Take him away!”

The others looked dumbfounded as the guards led Kevin back out through the dining room. Lorina came dashing out behind them and buried her face against her mother.

“I think you’d all better leave,” Brett said.

“So he took the bait,” Brett said when he was alone with Morgoth.

“Like a bunyip to a honey pot. To think all this time Mary Anderson’s child was right under my nose and I didn’t know it.”

“So what are you going to do with him?”

“Why, execute him of course. What did you expect?”

“Just be careful, that’s all. The Delphinidae are a devious lot.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Brett.”

“No, of course not.”

“Have Brian Lachlan come to see me first thing tomorrow morning, and fetch his son Owen as well.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

* * *

Mark, accompanied by his parents, Aaron, Peter and the crazy old man, waited outside the cave at the bottom of a deep gorge. They’d flown east from the island to the mainland and landed atop

a vast plateau, from where they'd had to climb down a narrow and treacherous path into the gloomy canyon.

The old man had insisted that only Aaron and Peter could accompany Mark, much to the dismay of his parents.

"But I don't know what I'm supposed to do," Aaron protested.

"You will find the way," Frank said, not wanting to say anything more than he absolutely had to.

"Where do the dolphins fit in?" Aaron asked, and Frank almost had a seizure. He steadied himself and hoped Aaron hadn't sensed his reaction.

"What are dolphins?" he asked.

Aaron attempted to describe them, doing a particularly good job, but Frank feigned ignorance and merely shrugged.

Peter led them slowly into the cave, their way lit by torches borrowed from the spacecraft that had brought them from Earth. The brand on them was *Dolphin*, an omen for sure but whether for good or evil Aaron was uncertain.

He glanced about the floor of the cave, taking in the scraps of ancient armour and other pieces of rusty metal and rotting cloth whose purpose was no longer apparent. He reached out with his Jedi senses, but all that remained was a feeling of melancholy, of eons long past and forgotten.

At the back of the cave was a rectangular space filled with a dull shimmering light.

"This is it, guys," Peter said. "Once we go through there, there's no turning back."

"I know," Mark said, and Aaron patted him on the shoulder. He reached back and took hold of his hand.

They stepped forward through the portal and immediately found themselves in total darkness.

* * *

"All stand, please, for his Honour, Brian Lachlan, Director of Justice."

Morgoth had insisted that Brian preside over Kevin's hearing in the Bluehaven Supreme Court, and he had reluctantly accepted in spite of his obvious conflict of interest. As a result, he'd been unable to speak with either Kevin or Ron, not that there was much he could have said to them to avert the inevitable outcome of what was nothing more than a sham trial.

"Kevin Simmons, you are charged with the attempted murder of His Highness Morgoth the Enlightened," Brian said. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Kevin said loudly and confidently. Brian admired his bravery, but that only made him feel sicker than ever.

"I believe His Highness has prepared a statement for the court," Brian said, and the prosecuting attorney stepped forward and began reading from a scroll.

"I, Morgoth the Enlightened, Supreme Ruler of the Universe, do hereby testify that on the night in question I was entertaining the defendant and his family in Dining Room Five of the Imperial Palace on Bluehaven. The defendant's daughter had expressed an interest in sweets, so I invited her into the pantry to show her some of the more exotic desserts I keep on hand for special occasions. I showed her one particularly spectacular delicacy and she squealed with delight, and then moments later the defendant came charging in, brandishing a knife from my table and threatening to kill me. I immediately summonsed the guards who subdued him and took him into custody."

"Thank you. Do you have any witnesses you wish to call?"

"Yes, Your Honour, I call Herbert Green, captain of the Imperial Guard."

Herbert Green stepped forward and entered the witness box.

"Mr Green," the prosecutor said, "could you please tell the court what transpired on the night in question."

"I was on guard duty outside the dining room while His Highness was entertaining guests from the Delphinidae Temple. I heard a scream, followed by what sounded like a chair falling over, and then His Highness called and I ran with my companions into the adjoining pantry, where I saw the defendant threatening His

Highness with a knife. We overpowered him and took the knife from him.”

“Is this the weapon?” the prosecutor asked as he showed him a plastic bag containing a polished silver steak knife.

“I believe it is.”

The prosecutor handed the exhibit to Brian. “I have no further questions, Your Honour.”

“Thank you Mr Green, you may stand down,” Brian said. “Now, Mr Simmons, do you have anything to say in your defence?”

“Yes I do. My family and I had been invited to dine with the Emperor. While we were eating dessert he enticed my daughter into the pantry, and then I heard her scream. Without thinking, I grabbed a knife from the table and ran in to see what was wrong, and there was Morgoth standing naked over her and preparing to rape her. I asked him what he thought he was doing and he called for the guards. By the time they arrived he’d put his clothes back on, and made out nothing was happening.”

“Did anyone else see him threatening your daughter?”

“Only my daughter herself.”

“How old is she?”

“Seven, Your Honour.”

“And so she is too young to testify. There were no other witnesses?”

“No, Your Honour.”

“I see,” Brian said and took a deep breath. “In that case I have no choice but to find you guilty as charged, and sentence you to death. You will be taken to the holding cells for a period of three days, and then, ahem, and then on the morning of the fourth day you will be taken to a place of execution where your life will be terminated.”

“You bastard, Brian!” Ron yelled from the gallery. “What sort of friend are you? You’re nothing but Morgoth’s puppet, you spineless wimp! You promised you’d never hurt him, Brian, you promised!”

“Clear the court!” Brian said, and the guards escorted Ron, who was still screaming and yelling abuse, from the building.

Morgoth looked on with anticipated pleasure as Kevin was led into the arena and strapped onto the execution platform. One of his favourite inventions, his *Solar Terminator* was elegant in its simplicity, using four curved mirrors mounted on extendible towers to focus sunlight onto the hapless victim. As the sun rose into the sky, the focussed spot of light would begin burning from the feet up, ensuring a slow and painful death with little mess to clean up afterwards.

It had been almost thirty-five years since he’d first laid eyes on Mary Anderson and sensed the threat she carried. She and her son had somehow managed to evade him, and for a while he’d been convinced the boy was dead, but now at last he had him right where he wanted him.

The mirrors locked into place, forming a spot of intense light about a metre from Kevin’s feet. Morgoth leant back in his seat just as Brett Farley came running up to him.

“Excuse me, my Lord, but some disturbing news has just come in.”

“What is it, Brett?”

“The time freeze on Meridian has been deactivated.”

“What? By whom?”

“Three people apparently emerged from Sheol about a week ago, and one of them, a small child, is claiming to be a descendant of Gallad.”

“Has this been verified?”

“Not yet, my Lord, but I’ve dispatched a team of specialists to take a DNA sample from him and we should have an answer one way or the other by the time we arrive.”

“You have my ship ready?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Good. Tell Brian to put the execution on hold until we return.” Morgoth reached over in front of him and pressed the big red

button labelled *Abort*, causing the mirrors to retract, and then took one last glance at the prisoner before hurrying out of the stadium.

“This is incredible,” Brett said as the ship docked with the Meridian spaceport. He had just received the DNA analysis of the boy, and was still scratching his head. “According to this, the boy is actually the child of Gallad and Marinda, but I don’t see how that could be possible since Gallad was reported dead almost a million years ago.”

“Show me that,” Morgoth said, and he studied the report intently.

“*My grandson,*” he whispered. “Bring him to me, Brett.”

Morgoth stood as Brett led a frightened seven-year-old boy into the room, and he could immediately sense the unmistakably powerful aura of a full-blooded Barefooter emanating from him. The boy was wearing only a pair of yellow shorts, and with his shoulder-length black hair and light brown complexion, his resemblance to Morgoth’s memory of Gallad as a child was quite striking. He looked up into Morgoth’s eyes and, in spite of his obvious fear, he smiled.

“My Lord,” Brett said, “allow me to introduce Mark Collins.”

“I am most pleased to meet you,” Morgoth said as he placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Are your parents Gallad and Marinda still alive?”

“No, they died a long time ago, but I’ve been told their heritage has been passed down over the ages through my parents’ families. My actual parents are Jason and Jennifer Collins.”

“Describe your mother to me, Mark.”

“Well, she’s kind of tall, taller than my dad at any rate but he’s pretty short, and she’s skinny with black hair that comes down just past her shoulders.”

“What colour are her eyes?”

“Brown, like mine.”

“You don’t know anyone named Mary Anderson, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” Mark answered truthfully, as he’d never met Aaron’s parents.

“I see, good. So where are you from, and how did you come to be here?”

“I’m from the planet Earth, and I came here through a dark and scary place where we rode on the backs of glowing dolphins. Um, Maleena said you’re my grandfather, sort of.”

“Did you say Maleena?”

“Yes, she met us on the space station when we came out of the dark place. She’s an elf.”

“I see. Yes, she’s right, I’m your grandfather. Come with me now and we’ll get some refreshments,” Morgoth said as he led him from the room, “and then you can tell me all about this place you call Earth.”

“I am old,” Morgoth said. “They say I’ve lived for over a million years, but I’m no longer really sure. I can remember my youth as clear as if it were yesterday, but the intervening millennia are nothing more than a blur to me now. Soon after Gallad was born I survived an assassination attempt, but it left me impotent. Do you know what that means?”

“It means you can’t make babies any more,” Mark said.

“That’s right. You’re very knowledgeable for one so young. Anyway, as I was saying, with both my sons dead and no way for me to father another child, I despaired that I would depart this realm without a clear successor, and if that happened this galaxy would be plunged into a war so terrible that none may survive. I don’t know what it’s like where you come from, but here there are many ruthless people all vying for power, and it takes someone strong, someone with Barefooter powers like you and me, to hold the Empire together.”

“You want me to be your heir, is that right?”

“Yes, Mark, it is. Isn’t that why you came here?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Well then, it’s settled. You will need training, of course, to familiarise yourself with our political system and to hone your own Barefooter skills. Here, have you ever tried this?”

Morgoth casually picked up a knife from the table and plunged it into his own stomach. Mark watched in horror as a small trickle of dark blood began running from the wound, but that horror turned to amazement as the knife suddenly popped out and the cut sealed itself without so much as a scar.

“Here, you try it,” Morgoth said as he picked up the knife and passed it to Mark. He held it nervously, unable to pluck up the courage to repeat Morgoth’s feat.

“Just try cutting your arm for starters,” Morgoth said, and Mark gingerly slid the blade across his forearm, fully expecting a great gush of blood to go spurting across the room. Instead, the wound sealed itself almost instantly.

“Very good,” Morgoth said. “Your powers are every bit as strong as I thought they’d be. Don’t think you can’t be killed, though, because you can drown or suffocate just as easily as anyone else, but you’ll find that you are impervious to cuts, bullets and even most poisons.”

“How many times have people tried to kill you?”

“Hundreds of times, maybe even thousands, and as you can see, none have succeeded.”

“Wow.”

“So it’s settled then, my young apprentice and heir.” Morgoth reached over and pressed a button on what Mark presumed was an intercom. “Brett, come in here please.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the voice of Brett replied.

“You remember my mentioning ruthless people seeking positions of power? Young Brett is one of them, just like his father. He thinks I’m soft in the head and that he’s the real power behind the throne, and I’m happy to let him go on thinking that so long as he’s useful to me, but eventually he’ll become overconfident and lazy like his father and I’ll have to let him go.”

“You mean kill him?”

“Probably, but don’t let that worry you. He should remain useful for a good many years yet.”

At that moment, Brett knocked and entered the room. “My Lord?”

“Prepare the dining room, and invite Mark’s three companions to join us for dinner.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Oh, and a throne as well for my heir.”

“Your heir?”

“My grandson here will be succeeding me as soon as we have him trained up.”

“I see, yes of course, my Lord.” Brett turned to leave but Morgoth wasn’t quite finished.

“Brett, invite the media as well. I’ll have an important announcement to make.”

Brett entered the dining room, where Morgoth and Mark were sitting at the head of a huge table laid out with a wide assortment of foods. “Your Highnesses, may I present Doctor Peter Thorpe and his elves Aaron and Maleena.”

A man in his late fifties or early sixties stepped forward, followed by a younger man, whose hair covered his eyes, and the Elf woman Maleena, whom Morgoth had known from long ago. Something about the young man bothered him slightly, but his mind was elsewhere and he paid it no heed.

“Join us, please,” he said.

“Help yourselves to the food,” Mark added, and Aaron began filling his plate in earnest while Peter and Maleena glanced suspiciously over the offering before picking up a few pieces of bread and fruit. A young blonde-headed waitress entered the room and began serving Morgoth and Mark.

“To the health of the Empire,” Morgoth said as he raised his glass.

“Praise the Enlightened One,” responded Maleena, and Peter and Aaron followed her lead.

Once sufficient food had been consumed, Morgoth tapped his glass and the media contingent's 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.

"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."

"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 that there'll be no further aggression against any of your worlds."

Aaron gasped and then covered his face with his 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 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. "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,” Mark said softly.

Aaron brushed his hair away from his eyes and stared at him. “Mark, remember your father and the Empress. Don't let that happen again.”

Morgoth looked at him closely for the first time as more and more alarm bells began ringing inside his head. This man was an Elf, that much was plain. *‘Farley had even introduced him as such,’* he remembered, *‘and yet he had come with Mark from Earth. How could that be? Unless, unless, unless he was Mary Anderson's son, the one in the prophecy!’* Everything suddenly fell into place and he realised, all too late, how stupid he'd been.

As Morgoth started to rise, Mark's hand fell down onto his lap. “Grandfather, I can't,” he said as he pressed firmly on a stud of his board shorts.

Morgoth's vision flashed bright red, and then he was blind. Pain, like a million angry teeth, wracked his entire body and in his ears came a deafening roar. His throat and mouth were suddenly parched, and when he tried to draw breath, his lungs felt full of dust. He felt himself falling and tumbling, over and over, and then, as the sound of bagpipes rose out of the noise, his consciousness dissolved away and he was no more.

Aftershocks

Brett dashed out of the bathroom as the alarms sounded, pulling up his trousers as he sprinted down the corridor.

“What’s happened?” he asked the guard at the entrance to the dining room.

“Morgoth’s dead.”

“What?”

“Morgoth’s dead. I think that boy killed him.”

“Give me your gun.”

“What?”

“Give me your gun,” Brett yelled, “and turn that bloody alarm off!”

The scream of the sirens stopped just as Brett entered the room. Where Morgoth had been, there was only his toga, a few pieces of bone and a pile of dust. Next to him, the young boy was just getting to his feet.

“My subjects, behold,” the boy said as the cameras zoomed in on him. “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.”

Brett raised his gun and stepped towards the boy. Something felt wrong, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Sure, Morgoth had been assassinated, but assassinations were not an unusual occurrence in the Empire and it wasn’t that which was bothering him. It was something about the boy, the boy Barefooter whose presence he’d felt the moment they’d come out of subspace into the Meridian system. *‘That’s it!’* he thought. *‘I can no longer sense him, it’s like he’s just a normal kid now. Whatever it was that killed Morgoth has destroyed his Barefooter powers as well.’*

He stood with his weapon raised and his gaze concentrated on the boy while he weighed up his options. He could kill him, certainly, but with all the cameras broadcasting this across the galaxy that might not be a wise option. The boy was pretending that he still had his powers, and if he meant to continue the charade, then that was something Brett could exploit to his own advantage.

He dropped his gaze and placed his weapon at the boy's feet. The boy looked puzzled for a moment, but then picked up the gun and handed it back to him. He accepted it, acknowledging his fealty to the new Emperor, and then nodded to the other guards who came forward and repeated the ritual.

The boy turned back to the cameras, steadied himself and took a deep breath. "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."

* * *

Brian stood and switched off the monitor screen, then knelt before Kevin and said, "I am at your mercy, my Lord."

As soon as he'd heard the news report about Morgoth's grandson turning up on Meridian, he realised that the Delphinidae's prophecy was about to be fulfilled and dispatched a guard to bring Kevin to his office. They'd both watched as, firstly, Morgoth had granted independence to each of the twelve worlds, including Bluehaven, and then within minutes had been killed by the child. The child had then not only stood down, but declared the post of Supreme Ruler null and void, and the legal implications of that were at best unclear. He had no doubt, though, that the galaxy would be in for a tumultuous time, and he thought that now might

be a good moment to disentangle himself from the administration of government.

Kevin ran his hands through his hair but remained silent for a few moments before speaking. “Get out of my sight, Uncle Brian, before I do something I might later regret.”

Brian scurried from the room, jumped in his car, and drove home.

* * *

Mary got the shock of her life when she answered a knock on the door and saw Frank Halliday standing there.

“Hello Mary,” he said. “May I come in?”

“But of course, Frank. What brings you back to Earth?”

“I have some wonderful news for you. The prophecy has been fulfilled.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your son, and the son of his friend Jason, travelled through Sheol to Meridian a week ago, and I have just been informed that Morgoth the Enlightened is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Apparently Mark set off a subspace pulse tuned to a resonance in Morgoth’s fractal Barefooter genes and he turned to dust as his million years of age suddenly caught up with him.”

“Is it, is it really true?”

“Yes, I’ve seen the recording myself.”

“What about Mark and Aaron? Are they okay?”

“Yes, they’re fine, although the pulse also destroyed Mark’s Barefooter genes and he’s just a normal kid now. They should be back on Genesis already, and will be home soon.”

“That’s wonderful. I can’t believe that after all this time, it’s finally happened. Bobby will be thrilled.”

“You’ve told him about your mission?”

“We thought Aaron had been killed about eight years ago, and I confessed everything to him.”

“That was a big risk, but I guess it doesn’t matter any more. I suggest you keep an eye on your mailbox, though, as you may be recalled to Bluehaven for a debriefing.”

“So what will you be doing now?”

“The time freeze on Meridian has been deactivated, so I’ll be going there as soon as I can to begin searching through the archives for any hints as to what became of the other Barefooters. I imagine my work will be even more important now that there’s a power vacuum back home.”

“Yes, of course. Well good luck and thanks for bringing me the news.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Frank said as he stood and began walking to the door. “I’m sure our paths will cross again.”

* * *

Ron looked up as Hilda entered the room. He stood and they embraced.

“Have you spoken to Brian yet?” she asked.

“Of course not. Why should I?”

“Well, he’s been your friend all your life for starters. Did you know Morgoth was holding Owen and threatened to kill him if he found Kevin not guilty?”

“No, I didn’t, and I suppose that makes a difference, but hang on, that meant the choice was between having his son or mine killed, and he chose mine.”

“He did, yes, but I’m sure if he’d found Kevin innocent Morgoth would have had him eliminated in some other way. In any case, he had no choice under the law as it currently stands. Once charged, the defendant is presumed guilty until proven innocent, and remember it’s been Brian who’s been campaigning to have that law changed for years now.”

“I suppose so.”

“Anyway, Loretta wants to appoint him Mayor of Dolphin Island, but she’d like you two to make up before she asks him.”

“What? Why him?”

“He’s the best legal mind we have by far, and in the political turmoil that’s bound to happen now that Morgoth’s gone, we’re going to need all the skills in that area we can muster. For the Temple’s sake, Ron, call him and offer him an olive branch.”

“Oh, all right then.”

She kissed him on the nose, causing him to giggle in spite of himself.

“Anyway, I’ve got something to cheer you up.”

“What is it?”

“A letter from your girlfriend on Earth.”

Ron blushed as he took the envelope from her and tore it open.

Dear Ron,

Frank Halliday called in last week to tell me the wonderful news. I still can’t believe that after all these years, it’s finally over and Morgoth is dead. He said that I might be called back to Bluehaven for a debriefing, and I was wondering if you could find out if that’s going to happen and if so when it might be. I’m sure Bobby will want to come too and see some of the places I’ve told him about.

Aaron’s back on Earth now and he brought Maleena with him. She’s the fabled Delphinidae guardian who was left on the Meridian spaceport awaiting the return of the Barefooters, and has spent the last million years frozen in time. They’re going to be married in a few weeks, and Bobby and I will be going to the coast for the wedding. I’m looking forward so much to meeting her.

I’m sure you’ll be very busy in the aftermath of what’s happened, so don’t rush to reply to this letter. I’ll send you the photos from Aaron’s wedding as soon as I have them.

*Best wishes,
Mary.*

* * *

“Hello Brian.”

“Ron, is that you? Look, I’m so sorry, mate, so terribly sorry. You were right to call me a spineless wimp, because that’s exactly what I am.”

“No, its okay, Brian, really it is. Hilda told me that Morgoth was holding Owen and threatening to kill him. Is he okay now?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. A little shaken, but otherwise okay.”

“That’s good to hear. Look, we’re having a bit of a feast here at the Temple tonight and I was wondering if you and Shirley would like to come.”

“If you think it would be okay. I mean, right now I feel like I want to just curl up into a ball and disappear.”

“No, everything’s sweet. Hey, I got a letter from Mary. Apparently, Frank Halliday told her the news. And guess what?”

“What?”

“Her son’s marrying Maleena.”

“Not *the* Maleena?”

“The very one.”

“Some people have all the luck.”

“Too right! So will we see you here tonight?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Excellent! Hilda said she’d kill me if you didn’t come.”

“And she probably would, too.”

“You’re so right. See you soon.”

“Yeah, and thanks, Ron, you’ve got a heart of gold.”

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me, but it hasn’t done me much good yet.”

“Oh, get away. Bye.”

Part Four ~ Grandchild of Renewal

Christopher

Mary gasped and dropped the book she'd been reading. The other passengers near her on the aircraft looked around in mild alarm, and she blushed.

"What's wrong?" Bobby asked as she reached down and picked it up again. The book, called *Troubled Times*, was an account by Peter Thorpe of the AusScience conspiracy that had captured the nation's attention some eight years earlier. She'd reached the part where Peter had found himself trapped in another time line after destroying the orb.

"Look here," she said. "When Peter first entered that time line he found himself in the chapel attending Aaron's funeral, and Jason presented the eulogy exactly like he did in those dreams I had."

"Are you sure it's the same?"

"Yes, word for word. I had the dream so often back then I know it off by heart."

"That's weird. Do you think there might actually be an alternative universe in which events played out like that?"

"Quite possibly. I should ask Peter about it when we get to Coolum Beach. He's sure to be at the wedding."

"That's fascinating," Peter said after Mary had described her dreams to him. "Aaron died for real in that time line, and Mark never went to confront Morgoth. I'd thought it might have been all in my head, but it seems there could be more to it than that."

"Mark featured rather prominently in your write-up."

"Yes, he was autothermic in that time line when no-one else was. It was really quite bizarre. He, oh, here comes the happy couple. We'd better move inside."

The wedding was taking place in the Coolum Beach Community Centre and there was a good turnout in spite of there being no guests on the bride's side. Aaron's Best Man was Jason, not surprisingly, and he'd been patiently waiting at the front of the hall since the doors opened, checking numerous times that the rings were safely in his pocket.

Being unable to dress for the occasion because of his autothermia, he'd instead decorated his body in the traditional markings of his people. Mary smiled at him as she walked in with Bobby and Peter, and he nervously grinned back.

"Aaron, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to honour and to cherish, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?" the celebrant finally asked after almost boring everyone to sleep with an extraordinarily long dissertation on the virtues of marriage.

"I do," Aaron proclaimed.

"Maleena, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to honour and to cherish, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

"I do."

"The rings please, Jason."

In pulling them from his pocket, Jason fumbled and they both fell to the floor and rolled down amongst the congregation. There was a mad scramble as people tried to reach under their seats to retrieve them, but eventually they were safely back in his sweaty hand and he passed them nervously to the celebrant. Aaron glared at him and rolled his eyes, causing Jason to cover his face while trying to compose himself.

Aaron took the offered ring from the celebrant and placed it on Maleena's finger. "With this ring I thee wed."

Maleena placed the other ring on Aaron's finger and repeated the pledge.

"By the authority vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife," the celebrant said, and the newlyweds kissed while Jason wiped his brow and ran his hands through his hair.

After the service, Mary and Maleena came face to face for the first time. Maleena looked at her, puzzled for a moment, and then said, “So now I know where Aaron got his Elvish genes from. What’s a Delphinidae priestess doing here on Earth?”

“This was my calling, to do my part in the fulfilment of the prophecy.”

“So you came here, married Aaron’s father and bore him a son all in the hope that he’d be able to guide Mark in his confrontation with Morgoth.”

“Well, yes.”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Mary, truly remarkable. Do you intend returning to Bluehaven now that your work is done?”

“I’m not sure. There’s talk that I might have to go back for a debriefing though I haven’t received any formal request as yet, but in the longer term, well Bobby has his work here and, um, I suppose I’ve come to like this place.”

“I can understand that. I had no hesitation coming here with Aaron when he asked me to. I fear things could turn very ugly back home for a while until the political balance is sorted out. Don’t tell Aaron, though, or he’d probably want to go back there and help.”

“Yes, he probably would.”

“What part of Bluehaven are you from?”

“I was born in Bringal Vale, but fled to Sontar when I was sixteen after Morgoth sensed I might have some part to play in his downfall.”

“I came from Etford, so I know the Bringal Bay area fairly well, or at least I did a million years ago. I suppose it’s changed a lot since then.”

“Probably not.”

“No, I guess you’re right. It’s always been a bit of a backwater.”

“Excuse me, Mary,” Billy said as he walked up to them. “Sorry to interrupt, but your husband seems to be causing something of a disturbance.”

“Oh no, not again. Sorry Maleena, but I’d better go and sort him out.”

“No worries. It’s been wonderful meeting you, Mary, and I’m sure we’ll see each other quite often in the years ahead.”

Mary followed Billy out to the bar, and there was Bobby, beer in hand, having a pushing contest with another inebriated guest.

“Bobby Smith, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Mary bellowed, and everyone in the hall turned to watch.

“He was saying Aaron looks like a walking mop,” Bobby slurred as he turned and spilt most of his beer onto the floor.

“Come outside, Bobby,” she said as she grabbed him by the arm and guided him towards the door.

“You promised you’d stay off the grog,” she said once she had him away from the other guests.

“I only had a couple,” he slurred.

“More like a couple of dozen by the sound of you. Look, I love you, Bobby, but I can’t just sit by and watch you drink yourself into an early grave. Remember what the beer did to your father, and how much better he’s been since he gave it up.”

“But I can’t help myself, honest, I can’t.”

“You need help, Bobby. There’s an Alcoholics Anonymous group in Narrabri, and as soon as we get back, I want you to go and see them. Okay?”

“But...”

“No buts, Bobby. Either you give up the grog or I’ll leave you, I promise.”

“You should do what Mum says,” Aaron said as he snuck up behind them, causing them both to jump around. “You need help, Dad, you really do.”

“Okay, then, I’ll give it a go.”

“You can beat this, Bobby, I’m sure you can,” Mary said as she hugged him.

“I’m sure you can too,” Aaron said.

* * *

Dear Mary,

We've just held our first free and open elections since Morgoth came to power a million years ago, and it was a grand affair with musicians, street dancing, market stalls and heaps of food and drink. Kevin was elected Bluehaven Head of State while Brian's appointment as Mayor of Dolphin Island was reaffirmed. Mother Superior Lariate will be Bluehaven's representative on the new Galactic Council that's being set up on Meridian and Brian's wife Shirley will be one of her aides. She will be spending a fair bit of time away from home, but the Meridian to Bluehaven shuttle service is being expanded so she'll still be able to get back fairly often to spend time with Brian and Owen.

All of Morgoth's henchmen, including Brett Farley, have disappeared, taking their files and records with them. The administrative departments are being temporarily relocated to the Temple until a new government office building can be constructed, and the palace will be converted into a memorial to those who lost their lives under Morgoth's regime. Personally, I'd rather have seen it reduced to rubble but I suppose it does have historical significance.

Hilda and I will be returning to Sontar in a few weeks, but Kevin and Lorett will now be based permanently here on Bluehaven. We'll certainly miss having them and young Lorina around.

I asked Lorett about your debriefing and she said that nothing is planned at this stage and it's unlikely you'll need to return here. Of course, if you wanted to come back and visit, or even to live here, you and Bobby would be most welcome. Maybe we should organise something just for the heck of it!

Thanks for the photos of Aaron's wedding. It looks like it was a grand affair and everyone here sends them our best wishes.

*Bye for now,
Ron.*

Mary had just finished reading the letter when the telephone rang.

“Hi Mum.”

“Oh, hi Aaron, I wasn’t expecting a call from you. There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

“No, quite the opposite actually. Maleena’s pregnant.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thanks Mum. We weren’t sure if we’d have any success in that area, what with being from different galaxies and all, but the doctors say everything appears to be normal so we’re hoping it all goes okay.”

“I’m sure it will. After all, you were...” She checked herself as she hadn’t yet told Aaron of her origins.

“I was what?”

“Nothing, never mind. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“Someday you’re going to tell me your terrible secret, Mum.”

“What? I, um, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Whatever you say, Mum. So, how’s Dad coping with Alcoholics Anonymous?”

“It was a bit rough for him at first as he went through the withdrawal stages, but he’s been going to all the meetings and I must say I haven’t seen him looking this good in ages.”

“That’s great. I’m really pleased to hear it. Give him my love, will you?”

“Yeah, sure. Well, thanks for calling and give Maleena my best wishes.”

“Will do. Bye Mum.”

“Goodbye son.”

Mary hung up the phone and sighed. She’d almost let slip about her origins and mission, and there was really no reason now not to tell Aaron about the heritage he carried, but yet she just couldn’t bring herself to do so. She sighed again.

* * *

When Christopher came into the world, he did so with little warning. Aaron and Maleena had gone down to the beach for their

morning swim, and until they entered the water nothing seemed unusual or out of place. There was a small swell running and they waded out beyond the breakers and floated in the relatively calm water.

“Look, there’s a fish,” Maleena said, and Aaron caught a glimpse of a small silver arrow darting between his feet. Then a second one appeared, followed by a third, fourth and fifth. Before they knew it they were surrounded by fish.

A flock of seagulls left the shore and began diving into the water all around them, paying them no heed in their quest for breakfast. They tried to swim away from the fish, but it seemed whichever way they moved the fish would follow a few moments later.

Aaron gasped as a dorsal fin broke the surface about ten metres away from them, swallowing a mouthful of water in the process. Moments later three more fins appeared.

“Sh-sh-sharks,” he whispered to Maleena, but before she could say anything a bottle-nosed dolphin leapt out of the water. Within moments half a dozen dolphins were circling them.

“It is time, Maleena.”

She grimaced, and for a moment, Aaron thought something must have bitten her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I think the baby’s coming.”

“Quick, I’ll have to get you to the hospital.”

“No time. It’s coming now.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just support me in the water, and when it comes out get it to the surface as quick as you can.”

“I’m not sure...”

“No time for that, Aaron. Here it comes.”

With one enormous spasm that caused Maleena to almost bend over backwards, the baby came sliding out into the water, and Aaron, with his eyes closed most of the time, grabbed him and brought him up to the surface. As soon as his head broke through, he drew his first breath and began crying. The dolphins crowded in

on them, both to support them and to take a look at the newborn infant.

“We should call him Christopher,” Aaron and Maleena both said in unison, and laughed.

“*May your life be long and fulfilling, Christopher of the Delphinidae,*” the dolphins said telepathically, and then helped them back to shore.

* * *

Mary spied another speck of dust and attacked it ferociously with her feather duster.

“Oh for Loria’s sake,” Bobby said, “it’s just Aaron and Maleena coming and not the King of bloody England.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it’s not the King who’s coming to visit.”

“No, before that.”

“I said, um, for Loria’s sake. You’re radiating again, aren’t you?”

“I must be,” Mary laughed.

“Now sit down and relax. The house looks fine, really.”

“Oh no! Bobby, what are those work boots doing there?”

“I left them there when I came home from work, just like I always do.”

“The Delphinidae are always barefoot, and boots are almost a sacrilege. Ron and Brian had a fight about it when we were kids.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me. Relax, and I’ll hide them away in the bedroom.”

“Thanks honey.”

“I wish I didn’t have to wear the horrible things. I’d much rather go barefoot all the time like you do.”

Mary kissed him just as a taxi pulled up outside.

“Quick, they’re here!”

She dashed out of the house and down the driveway to meet them. Bobby followed at a more leisurely pace.

“Oh my goodness, isn’t he gorgeous!” Mary said as she glimpsed the baby.

“He has your eyes,” Maleena said. “And his father’s appetite!”

“I’m sure Aaron gets that from Bobby,” Mary said.

“Come on in and I’ll put the kettle on,” Bobby said.

“Oh, what a lovely home,” Maleena said as she walked in the front door.

“It was never this clean when I lived here,” Aaron said, earning him a dirty look from his mother.

“I’m not surprised,” Maleena said, “given the amount of mess you’ve been able to accumulate since our wedding.”

“Now, now, there’ll be no fighting here,” Bobby said. “So who’s having what?”

“Tea for me,” Maleena said.

“And me,” Mary said.

“A coffee for me, thanks Dad,” Aaron said.

“How’s work going, Dad?” Aaron asked as they were sipping their beverages.

“Funny you should ask. Ray Marshall’s retiring at the end of the month, and there’s a sleazy young guy who’s taking over the reins. He reckons we should all be working twice as hard for half the pay, if you know what I mean.”

“It sounds pretty grim. Actually, we’ve been doing a lot of work for one of the big long-haul freight companies, trying to solve the stability problems in the subspace drives of the super-carriers, and Billy reckons we really need someone with practical experience in subspace power systems. He wanted me to ask if you’d be interested in coming to work for us.”

“Talk about questions without notice. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Of course. There’s no need for an answer straight away, tomorrow will be soon enough.”

“How would you feel about that, Mary?”

“I’d say take it with both arms before Billy changes his mind or finds someone else. I’d actually been thinking how nice it would be to move to the coast so we could be close to our grandson.”

“I should have known,” Bobby said. “I’ll give Billy a call and see what he has to offer.”

* * *

It was settlement day on Bobby and Mary’s new home in Coolum Beach, and they’d just about finished packing everything into the removal van when Bobby spotted the portal on the wall of the cellar.

“What are we going to do with that?” he asked Mary. “We can’t very well leave it there.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have the key handy? Open it up and I’ll see if there’s any way of removing it.”

Around the perimeter of the frame were eight recessed screws, and Bobby hunted through his toolbox for a matching screwdriver.

As he removed the eighth screw, the portal fell to the floor with a crash, leaving an unmarked area of brickwork behind where it had been.

“I thought it would have extended back through a hole in the wall,” he said in amazement. “Look at it, there’s no depth to it at all.”

Mary picked it up. The interior of the frame was still glowing with its dull shimmering light, but on the back, it looked like just a plain metal sheet. She closed the cover and locked it, then wrapped it in newspaper and packed it away with the rest of the stuff from the cellar.

“Well now I’ve seen everything,” Bobby said. “A portable portal!”

“You’d better grab the screws so we can put it up somewhere in the new place,” Mary said.

Their new house was in the same street as Aaron and Maleena's place and overlooked the ocean. Mary had fallen in love with it from the moment the real estate agent had shown it to them, and couldn't wait to unpack everything from the truck. Aaron, Jason, Jenny and Mark came around to lend a hand, and Maleena arrived with Chris just as they were finishing.

"It looks great!" Maleena said. "All your furniture from Narrabri fits in just perfectly."

"It does, doesn't it?" Mary said proudly. "I just know I'm going to love it here."

"Me too," said Bobby. "There's a fantastic golf course just down the road in Yaroomba."

"I might have known," Mary laughed. "It sounds like I'm going to have the place to myself most of the time."

* * *

Dear Ron,

I have lots of news for you in this letter. Firstly, Aaron and Maleena came to visit us, bringing baby Christopher with them. Maleena said he was born in the sea and the Dolphins gave him a full Delphinidae blessing.

Bobby's boss at Unlimited Energy has retired and he was none too happy with his replacement, but out of the blue Aaron told us that Billy Collins was looking for an experienced subspace power technician. Bobby accepted the offer and we've just moved into our new home in Coolum Beach. If you recall, that's the same town Bobby and I were staying at when Aaron was conceived. This can't just all be coincidence, can it?

Our new home's very nice anyway, so I'm not complaining. It overlooks the sea and is only a short walk from Aaron's place. I'm looking forward to spending lots of time with my grandson!

I hope everything's settling down with the new government there. Bobby and I may well take up your invitation to visit, but it will probably have to wait until we're settled in here.

*Best wishes,
Mary.*

* * *

Aaron had just finished his dinner when the telephone rang.

“Aaron? It’s Trevor Hunt from the Australian Cricket Board. I’m not interrupting your dinner, am I?”

“No, I’ve just finished actually.”

“Good. As I’m sure you know, we have an Ashes tour coming up this year, and we’d like to offer you a position on the squad.”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“I never kid, Aaron.”

“Wow! I don’t know what to say. I’m overwhelmed.”

“I take it then you’ll accept our offer?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Excellent. We’ll be having a pre-tour briefing on Saturday week in Sydney.”

“I’ll be there, for sure.”

* * *

Mop-Head to Bat for Hapless Australians

Aaron “mop-head” Smith is the surprise selection in the Australian eleven for tomorrow’s test at Lords. At thirty-seven years of age, Smith’s selection in the touring squad confounded the critics and thus far, he has shown indifferent form in the preliminary tour matches. With the injury to rising star Colin Peterson, Smith’s selection is symbolic of the level of despair in the Australian camp as they struggle to redeem themselves after a run of failures in both the test and one-day arenas.

Century for Smith puts Australia in Box Seat

Mop-head Smith, whose selection raised many eyebrows, rescued Australia from an all-too-familiar collapse to finish the day in a strong position. Coming in at number four with only twenty-three runs on the board, Smith took the English bowlers by surprise and racked up his maiden Test century off just 85 balls. He finished the day on 147 with Australia well-placed at 385 for 4.

Mop-Head Sends England to the Cleaners

Australia wrapped up the first test at Lords in just over three days of play, thanks largely to the batting prowess of their new wonder boy Aaron “mop-head” Smith. His quick-fire 162 in the first innings and a solid 48 in the second cemented Australia’s position as the English batsmen failed to live up to expectations. Coach Ryan Scott has dismissed reports of wholesale sackings, but some changes to the English line-up seem certain after their humiliating defeat.

Mop-Head the Hero in Historic Australian Series Win

Australia rubbed England’s collective noses in the dirt with their win yesterday in the fifth test at The Oval, wrapping up the series five nil for the tourists. The undoubted star of the series was thirty-seven year old Aaron “mop-head” Smith who single-handedly humiliated the English attack. Opening his test career with a maiden century at Lords, he never looked back and finished the series with an average of 86.

“There he is Mum!” Chris cried as Aaron strode out of the Customs hall at Sydney Airport. He ducked under the barrier and leapt into his father’s arms, knocking a reporter’s microphone out of his hand in the process.

“Have you been good for Mummy while I’ve been away?” Aaron asked while kissing him on the forehead.

“Yes, Daddy. I saw you on the television!”

“Did you now?”

“Sure did. All the kids at school said you did really great!”

* * *

“You must come to us, Christopher.”

“Now, Christopher.”

“You must come.”

Chris sat up in bed, his eyes wide open.

“Come to us, Christopher. Come to the sea.”

He crept out of bed and down the dark and silent hallway to the front door. Outside the air was cold in the predawn grey as he ran down the road to the beach.

“Come, Christopher, you must hurry.”

The voices grew louder as he reached the sand.

“Come into the water, Christopher. Come.”

He entered the water, and the Dolphins surrounded him.

Mary had just sat down to breakfast when the telephone rang.

“Mum, Chris is missing.”

“What do you mean, missing?”

“He’s gone. When Maleena called him for breakfast he wasn’t in the house.”

“I’ll get your father and we’ll come right over.”

Billy, Julia and Peter arrived at the same time as Bobby and Mary, while Jason, Jennifer and Mark were already waiting inside.

“Mark, Chris spends a lot of time hanging round with you and your friend Sean,” Aaron said. “Do you have any idea where he might have gone?”

“Well, the beach for starters, and, um, there’s a few places up in the national park where we often go walking.”

“Okay, we’ll check the beach and you can do the park. Give Sean a call and see if he’ll go with you. Take your phone and call in every hour or so.”

Mark dashed from the house, dialling Sean's number on the way out. Sean said he'd be only too happy to help, so after grabbing some maps and supplies they headed north into the bush.

Billy and Julia stayed behind to man the phones and liaise with the police, while Jason and Jennifer checked the beachfront and Bobby and Mary searched the local streets. Aaron and Maleena took their car to check out the neighbouring towns of Point Arkwright and Yaroomba.

“Police are searching for eight-year-old Christopher Smith who went missing from his Coolum Beach home in the early hours of this morning,” the radio announcer said. *“He is of slight build with short blonde hair and is believed to be wearing only a pair of blue boxer shorts. Let’s hope and pray they find him quickly.”*

Insurrection

Brett gasped and dropped the book he'd been reading, causing his followers to look around at him in mild alarm. He scowled.

"What is it, sir?" Hoskins asked.

"What do we know about alternate time lines?"

"The Enlightened One had been encouraging research in that field in recent years, although I'm not sure if anything came of it. There was a military scientist, Major Hemmingway, who was leading the project."

"Where is he now?"

"I'm not sure."

"Could you find out for me, please?"

"If you wish, sir."

"Yes, I do wish." Brett rolled his eyes as Hoskins dashed off, wondering yet again how his father had put up with the fool for so long.

Nine years had passed since the death of Morgoth. In the immediate aftermath, his former forces had fled far and wide, taking as much from the military wing of the palace as they could. Brett had gone to ground on Meridian, keeping an eye on the formation of the new Galactic Council and taking note of its weaknesses.

Twelve months ago he'd received word that a group of Morgoth's former generals had taken control of the military base on Nimber, a feat which they'd accomplished without the Governing Council even being aware it had happened. He'd immediately relocated there and installed himself as leader of the imperials.

He had been browsing in the nearby shops when a book caught his eye. Called *Troubled Times*, it was written by the older man

who'd come with Mark the Bewildered and had been translated by someone named Halliday in the Meridian central library. He'd started reading it, hoping to gain some insight into the three visitors from Earth, but the revelation of the alternate time line in which Thorpe had been trapped opened up a whole lot of new possibilities. His mind was still racing as Hoskins escorted Major Hemmingway into his office.

"Thank you for coming, Major," Brett said as he stood and saluted.

"I'm pleased to be of service, sir."

"Have you read Thorpe's book?"

"Yes, I bought a copy as soon as your man contacted me."

"So what's your take on the alternate time line he describes?"

"If you're asking me if it's possible, then my answer is most definitely yes. Much research was done into the phenomenon of time cusps during the War of the Barefooters, but the military applications were considered to be at best minimal."

"Why is that? I would have thought changing the course of history to be just about the ultimate weapon."

"The problem was that time cusps were always temporary. Inevitably, the time lines would merge and in every case, the original one took precedence. Occasionally a few minor changes might persevere, but by and large they proved to have little military merit."

"But according to this book, that Collins fellow, Mark the Bewildered's real grandfather it would seem, found a way of creating a permanent cusp. Is that possible?"

"I think we can presume that it is, but unfortunately the book gives no detail of how it was done apart from it involving twin planets. My guess is it would require something to happen at the moment the cusp ends and the two time lines merge, something to prevent the original time line from taking precedence."

"Are there any twin planets in our galaxy?"

"Twinning across the subspace fold is quite a rare phenomenon, but there is one that we know of. Bluehaven has a twin."

Brett looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“It’s a desert world with a toxic atmosphere so its existence isn’t widely known, but I can assure you it’s there all right.”

“I see,” Brett said as he scratched his chin. “Any thoughts on how we might be able to use this to our advantage?”

“According to Thorpe’s book, in the alternate time line the descendants of the Barefooters never awoke on Earth, and, at this point in time at any rate, that world hasn’t discovered subspace. I think it’s reasonable to assume that in that version of reality Mark never came to Meridian to challenge Morgoth.”

“And so Morgoth never fell.” Brett scratched his chin some more. “I think it’s time we launched our offensive, don’t you?”

“Indeed, my Lord.”

* * *

“We need your help, Christopher.”

He was sitting in a dark place, surrounded by glowing dolphins.

“Nine years ago your father took your friend Mark to a far-away place and they did a good deed.”

“Yes, I know. That’s where my mother came from, before she came back here with Dad.”

“That’s right. But there’s another version of reality, Christopher, and in that version your father died, Mark never went to Meridian and you were never born.”

“I don’t like this any more,” Chris whimpered. “I want to go home.”

“You can go home soon, Christopher, but first you must listen and learn. The two realities will soon merge, and Mark is the key as to what will happen then.”

“Why him?”

“In the other time line there are copies of most people.”

“Like twins?”

“Yes, like twins. There are a few who don’t have duplicates though. Some may have died in one version, like your father, and some weren’t even born, like you.”

“I think I understand.”

“The people in each version are completely unaware of their twins, and after the time lines merge they become single people again and have no memory of the other reality. But Mark is special. He is single-natured, which means there can only ever be one of him, and he lived through that other time line before he was born in this one.”

“I know. He’s been telling me about some of the dreams he’s been having.”

“In that other time line he never went to Meridian, and so that version of Morgoth still lives. Some of his supporters are now aware of its existence and we believe they will try to force it to become the dominant time line when it merges with this one. Mark’s destiny is to prevent that, and we need you to help him.”

“What do I have to do?”

“When the two time lines begin to merge, you must bring him here.”

“How do I do that?”

“That’s what we’re going to teach you today.”

* * *

Shirley had just finished speaking to Brian when the telephone rang again.

“Hello, my sweetie.”

“Brett?”

“Who else would I be? Not your dim-witted husband I’m sure.”

“No, of course not. It’s just that I wasn’t expecting to hear from you after all this time.”

“Yes, it has been a while since we last shared a bed. Do you remember what we talked about that night?”

“How could I forget?”

“Well the time’s come to put words into action. We move tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I heard. It’s just that you took me by surprise, that’s all.”

“You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Right. Ten o’clock tomorrow morning. Are you sure you can handle everything for us?”

“Trust me. Have I ever let you down?”

“Never, sweetie. I’ll look forward to celebrating with you tomorrow night.”

“Me too.”

At half past nine, Shirley entered the Council Hall and approached the security desk.

“Good morning, Mrs Lachlan,” the guard said. “What’s in the box?”

“It’s a cake my son made for me,” she said as she opened it. “Would you like a slice?”

“Thank you,” he said as he took a piece. “You’re very lucky to have a son like Owen. My two brats would never think of doing anything like that for me.”

“Yes, I’ve been truly blessed with both a loving husband and a loving son. What more could I want?”

“Mm, this is delightful. Thanks again, and give the boy my regards.”

“Will do, Fred.”

She walked through the scanner and entered the chamber. Fred finished off his cake, licked his lips and slipped into unconsciousness.

“The next item on the agenda is the Appropriation Bill for the Wildlife Sanctuary on Cornipus,” Lorate said. “Mr Spires, would you care to present your proposal?”

“Thank you, My Lady. As you may be aware, scientists on Cornipus have recently discovered a small colony of red-bellied bunyips, a species previously believed to be extinct. The colony is in a very environmentally-sensitive area and it is vital that it be properly protected. I’m sure you will all agree...”

The doors burst open and a dozen armed men strode into the chamber.

“Sit down, Mr Spires,” Brett said. “This council is now dissolved.”

“You can’t do that!” Lariate said as she jumped to her feet, and twelve rifles turned on her.

“I’m afraid I can, and I have. Now sit down please.”

Lariate obediently sat.

“This is most improper and cannot be allowed,” the member for Sontar said.

“Shut up, you silly little man,” Brett said, and shot him. “Shirley, come up here please.”

Shirley glanced at Lariate before scurrying to the back of the chamber.

“Now, who’s going to be next?” Brett asked.

“This is an outrage,” Lariate said. “Back off now, Brett, before you find yourself out of your depth.”

“No,” Brett said, and then took Shirley by the arm and escorted her from the chamber.

“You shot that man!” Shirley said. “Are you mad?”

“That silly little man was James Pumpington. Thirty years ago he was the Director of the Sontar Land Titles Office, and was ultimately responsible for my father being sent to his death on Huntress.”

Before Shirley could say anything further, the silence was broken by a burst of gunfire and screaming. She turned back towards the chamber but Brett stopped her.

“I think our negotiations here have been concluded,” he said. “It’s time for us to go to Bluehaven and reclaim the palace.”

As they passed the security desk, Brett noticed the unconscious guard and pointed his gun at him.

“No, don’t kill him, Brett, please,” Shirley said. “He’s a nice guy with a wife and two good kids. He doesn’t deserve to die.”

“Whatever you say, dearest,” he said as he stowed his gun away and led her up to the roof where his shuttle was waiting.

* * *

Chris found himself floundering in the water about fifty metres from shore. The north-easterly sea breeze was chopping up the surface and, in spite of being an excellent swimmer for his age, he struggled to both stay afloat and keep water out of his mouth.

A wave surged, carrying him closer to the shore, and he relaxed a little. He could vaguely recall being in a dark place with the dolphins, but already his memory of what had transpired was becoming dim. Something was going to happen soon, and it was going to involve Mark, but beyond that, he couldn't recall.

Another wave picked him up and carried him closer in, but he saw with renewed despair that the current was pulling him towards the rocks at the base of the headland. He started swimming against it, but then remembered his father's warnings about coping with rips and forced himself to stop. '*Never swim against the flow,*' Aaron had drummed into him, '*as you'll go nowhere and only tire yourself out.*' He floated on his back and braced himself as the next wave dropped him onto the rocks. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself above the wash and slumped into a crevice.

"Chris?"

A voice was speaking to him out of the darkness. He lifted his head and forced his eyes open to see a familiar face looking down on him.

"Markie? Is that you?"

"I'm here," Mark said as he reached down and helped him up. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. I'm just cold, and very tired."

Chris looked over Mark's shoulder and saw a shuttle landing on the beach.

"What happened to you?" Mark asked.

"The dolphins took me. They wanted to tell me about you, and what's going to happen soon."

“What do you mean?”

But before Chris could answer, the paramedics from the shuttle took him away, and afterwards he had no memory of what had transpired that day.

* * *

Brian looked up at what sounded like a stampede in the corridor outside his office, and a moment later Ron and Hilda burst in.

“They’re all dead!” Ron cried. “All of them, including Loriate.”

“Shirley’s been taken hostage,” Hilda added.

“What?”

“Brett Farley and his goons raided the Galactic Council on Meridian and killed all the councillors,” Ron said. “He’s apparently taken Shirley hostage and is currently holed out in the old imperial palace here on Bluehaven.”

“We have to get her back,” Brian said. “Where’s Owen?”

“As far as we know he’s still on Cornipus,” Hilda said. “Our people are trying to contact him.”

“Thanks.”

The telephone rang and Brian grabbed it, almost knocking it off the desk.

“Hello? Yes, she’s here, I’ll put her on.

“It’s Kevin for you, Hilda.”

As Hilda listened, her expression darkened. “I see. Thanks Kevin. We’ll be down straight away.”

“What’s happened?” Brian asked.

“Kevin wants to see all of us in his office.”

“Owen!” Brian said as he entered Kevin’s office and saw his son sitting there.

“I came as soon as I heard, Dad.”

“I think you’d better sit down, Uncle Brian,” Kevin said.

“What’s happened? Is it Shirley? Is she dead?”

“No, she’s not dead, well not yet at any rate. Nevertheless, I think you should really sit down.”

“Mum’s not a hostage,” Owen said.

“What do you mean?” Brian asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh Dad, she was having an affair with Brett Farley.”

“An affair? But how do you know?”

“I walked in on them when I was visiting Meridian about eighteen months ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just couldn’t, Dad. I knew it would break your heart. I’m so sorry, so sorry.”

Brian stood and embraced his son while Ron looked on in shock.

“I’m sorry, mate,” he said. “I had no idea, no idea at all.”

“Here, drink this,” Hilda said, offering Brian a glass.

“What is it?”

“Never you mind, just drink it.”

He did, and then sat down and shook his head. “That sure packs a punch. How long, how long has it been going on, does anyone know?”

“We believe Shirley and Brett may have had a relationship before you even met her on Cornipus,” Kevin said. “He may have sent her to spy on you when Morgoth was trying to find Mum and Dad.”

“Oh my God. How could I have been so stupid?”

“Don’t go blaming yourself,” Ron said. “If you want to blame anyone, blame Brett.”

“Just what the hell is he up to?” Brian asked.

“Taking control of the galaxy by the look of it,” Kevin said. “He and about fifty of Morgoth’s former military staff have taken over the palace. They’re up to something in there, I’m sure, but I don’t know what.”

“We have to stop them,” Brian said. “All of them.”

“I’m with Dad,” Owen said.

“They’re heavily armed,” Kevin said.

“So much the better,” Brian said grimly.

“The Temple guardsmen are assembling a strike force,” Kevin said. “They have about twenty volunteers so far, mostly acolytes and young priests, and not very experienced I’m afraid.”

“I know the layout of the palace like the back of my hand,” Brian said, “including parts of the military wing. I want to go.”

“I’ll go too then,” Ron said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hilda said. “If you go then I’ll have to come too.”

“Now you’re all being ridiculous,” Kevin said.

“No, Kevin,” Brian said. “Your father and I have an axe to grind with Brett from way back.”

“Oh very well then. We marshal in the courtyard an hour after sunset tonight.”

“For death or glory,” Ron said.

“No, only death,” Brian whispered.

* * *

“So just what does this thing do?” Brett asked as he stood in front of the metallic ring Major Hemmingway had erected in the anteroom to Morgoth’s old throne room. It was about three metres high and the space it enclosed seemed to shimmer slightly.

“This is a portal into that other time line. Look carefully at what you see through it. Notice anything different?”

“Not really, no wait, I can see papers on that desk when I look at it through the ring.”

“Precisely. In that other time line Morgoth has just stepped out of the room, and if you keep watching you may see him return.”

“Look, there he is now and he’s, he’s with me!” Brett said. “This is incredible!”

“I can assure you it is very credible, sir.”

“So what can we do with this thing, apart from look through it?”

“As best I can tell, that time line will merge with this one in a few weeks, and in the normal course of events our one would dominate and Morgoth would be gone forever. However, with this

device we can change the balance and force that version of reality to become the dominant one.”

“I see. So Morgoth will still be alive?”

“Yes, and everything will be back to business as usual.”

“Good work, Major. Let me know when the moment of merger approaches.”

* * *

When Ron and Hilda arrived in the courtyard there were about twenty-five others assembled and ready, more or less, for battle. A few of the guardsmen were giving the young acolytes some last-minute fencing practice, and Ron pulled out his own short sword and gave it a few swings before re-sheathing it, hoping he wouldn't be required to wield it in anger.

“Dad, don't you think you should put some armour on?” Kevin asked as he observed that Ron was wearing only the plain white shorts that designated his rank as a Delphinidae priest.

“No. I hear the imperials are using guns so armour wouldn't help much anyway and would only slow me down. Besides, I have my faith to protect me.” He touched the small silver dolphin that hung around his neck.

“Whatever makes you happy. What about you, Hilda?”

“Same excuse as your father, I guess,” she said while shrugging her shoulders. Kevin shook his head and turned back to the heavily-armoured acolytes.

“Okay everyone, listen up,” Brian said. “Tonight we go to reclaim Bluehaven for the Delphinidae. Our enemy has already shown how ruthless they are by their actions on Meridian, so be constantly on your guard. My wife is numbered amongst them, but I impeach you not to show her any mercy or think for one moment that she will have mercy for you. She will not, I assure you.

“We are Delphinidae, and killing is against our nature, but if we must kill to survive then kill, we shall. Cast aside all thought of morality and honour, for the people we are up against have cast aside theirs. Tonight you will be expected to lay your lives on the

line, and if any of you have any doubts whatsoever please feel free to return to your quarters with no shame or dishonour.”

There was murmuring amongst the ranks, and two very young acolytes turned and walked back towards the dormitory, their heads bowed.

“Michael, Phillip, a moment please,” Loretta said, and they turned back to her. “Do not walk away with your heads bowed, for you have shown great bravery in coming out here in the first place, and a great deal of sense in recognising your own limitations. A time will come when you will receive your true calling, I foresee it, so do not be ashamed.”

“Thank you, my lady,” they both said, then bowed and walked resolutely away. Another young acolyte fidgeted for a moment before bowing to Loretta and walking away also.

“If any of you think any less of those three because of the choice they have made this night,” Loretta said softly after they were out of earshot, “then walk out that gate and never return, for you are not worthy of the Delphinidae.”

There was more shuffling and murmuring until Brian cleared his throat. “We’ll be going by boat around the northern tip of the island to a hidden landing below the western wall of the palace. There’s a secret door at the base of the cliff and we’ll be using that to gain entrance. Once inside we will most likely be in total darkness, so you’ll need to make full use of your other senses. We turn to the right immediately after entering the building, and about fifty paces in there’ll be a staircase. We go up three flights of stairs and regroup there. Are there any questions?”

Everyone looked at each other and there was some murmuring, but no questions were forthcoming.

“Right, we move off then. May the Dolphins smile upon us.”

The sea was calm and the moonless night dark and still as Brian guided the boats onto the landing. The Delphinidae warriors crept through the broken rocks towards the base of the cliff upon which the palace was perched.

Suddenly a woman's voice cried out from atop the parapet. "Brian, no, it's a trap!"

A single gunshot rang out and she fell to the rocks below.

"Shirley!" Brian cried as he tried to run towards her body, but Ron held him back.

Two intense spotlights flashed on from the palace wall, making them all easy targets for the dozens of armed imperial soldiers emerging from behind the boulders. Gunfire rang out as the Delphinidae dived for cover.

"Back to the boats!" Brian yelled, but then found himself looking down the muzzle of a gun. Before the soldier could pull the trigger, though, a dagger suddenly embedded itself in his chest and he fell to the ground.

"Nice throw, Owen," Brian said shakily.

"Watch your back, Dad," Owen said, and Brian turned with his sword raised, slicing through the arm of a soldier who was trying to take aim.

"Grab his gun and take those lights out," Kevin yelled at him, and as Brian complied the cliff base was plunged back into darkness.

Ron crept up behind a soldier and hit him across the back of the head with the butt of his sword. He fell to the ground and Hilda quickly disarmed him.

"Ron, behind you!" Hilda cried, and he turned and rolled just as the soldier fired. The bullet meant for him whizzed past his ear before taking Hilda in the chest. Ron thrust his sword upwards, finding an opening in the base of the soldier's armour and piercing him in the stomach. He let out a surprised whimper before falling to the ground.

Ron crept over to where Hilda lay, but he knew before he even reached her that she was already dead. A sob wracked him before a black fury arose and drove away all conscious thought. He calmly retrieved his sword from the stomach of the writhing soldier and ran into the melee, cutting down anyone who stood in his way.

Owen was locked in hand-to-hand combat and was being driven backwards into a crevice when Brian leapt onto his assailant and struck him down. As he bent over to help Owen back up a gunshot rang out and pain exploded in the side of his head. He reached up and felt blood streaming from a wound just above his ear, before toppling over backwards and striking his head on the rock. Owen ripped off his shirt and tied it around his father's head, trying to stem the flow of blood.

Ron swivelled as he heard the report and felt as much as saw Brian fall. He slew the soldier who had fired the shot, but in the moments that followed his blind fury left him as he crept towards his friend, his eyes heavy with tears.

"He's still alive," Owen whispered to him. "Help me get him back to the boat."

Oblivious to the battle that was still raging around them, together they lifted Brian and dragged him back through the rocks to the waiting boats. Two of the acolytes helped them pull him on board and before they knew it they were sailing back around to the eastern shore.

* * *

The weeks that followed were a blur for Ron as he plodded through his duties in a semi-daze. Everywhere he turned he saw reminders of Hilda, and he'd lost count of the number of times he'd gone to tell her something only to find an empty space where she would have been. He would frequently find himself walking along the beach with no recollection of how he got there, and in his dreams, he would be constantly reliving that horrific moment at the base of the cliff. Kevin, Loretta and Lorina had rallied around him providing as much support as they could, but it wasn't enough, could never be enough.

"Seven of our people lost their lives in service to the Order," Loretta had said at the funeral, "and that on top of the death of Mother Superior Lorie in the Meridian massacre. To their families, friends and associates we offer our sincere sympathies,

and if there is anything the Order can do to ease their suffering we will do it.

“We had all hoped that with the fall of Morgoth and the establishment of the new Galactic Council we would have enjoyed the peace and prosperity we’d all longed for so much, but alas events have turned out otherwise. Nonetheless, the Dolphins are still expressing optimism, and it is their belief that our present problems are but a transient impediment on the road to a lasting peace. We have much work and many dark days ahead of us, but we must not lose hope of a brighter future.

“Please join with me now in silence as we remember those who have been taken from us. Farewell Priestess Hilda Simmons, Priestess Marianne Taylor, Priest Gregory Hill, Acolyte Paul Redding, Acolyte Richard Baker, and Guardsman John Avis.”

Afterwards, Ron had waded into the sea and scattered Hilda’s ashes amongst the Dolphins who had come to pay their respects. A ray of sunlight penetrated the overcast sky for a moment, creating what Kevin and Lorett described as a halo around him, and then it was gone.

Shirley had not been counted amongst the seven. It remained a mystery as to why she had tried to warn them and why she’d then been shot by Farley’s people, but Ron hoped she’d perhaps had a change of heart and turned against her lover. He still found it hard to believe she’d been unfaithful to Brian throughout their marriage, and tried to convince himself that maybe she was only pretending to have feelings for Brett. Something deep within him, though, told him he was only clutching at straws.

Brian himself remained in a coma. The bullet that struck his head hadn’t penetrated his skull, but the bone had cracked and a small splinter had entered his brain, causing bleeding and an increase in cranial pressure. Specialists had been flown in from Cornipus and his condition had been stabilised, but his prognosis remained uncertain.

“We’re hopeful he may eventually regain consciousness,” the surgeon had told Ron and Owen, “but beyond that, well, who can tell?”

“I’m sure you’re doing everything you can,” Ron said.

“Is there anything else we can do for him?” Owen asked.

“No, not unless you can find one of the ancient Barefooters.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were reputed to have healing powers, and from what I’ve read this sort of head injury would have been right up their alley. It’s a pity they’ve all died out.”

“Yes, it is,” Ron said.

* * *

Aaron, Maleena and Chris had travelled to Tom and Sarah’s farm near Narrabri for the celebration of Billy and Peter’s seventieth birthdays. Bobby and Mary had also been invited, but Bobby had already committed himself to help out at the Yaroomba Golf Club with a tournament they were hosting that weekend, so they had stayed behind.

The other time line that Peter had described in *Troubled Times* was the talking point of the party as it had ended on his seventieth birthday. In that time line Mark had led him to the back of a cave and he’d passed through a portal into Sheol at the moment it had ended, and as the date approached Mark had been remembering more and more of his previous life.

After the speeches at the party the night before, Aaron had led Mark out into the kitchen.

“How much do you remember of that other time line?” he asked.

“Pretty much everything now. I’ve been reliving it in my dreams just about every night for the last couple of months.”

“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 together. I have an uneasy feeling about this.”

“Me too,” said Chris, who had tagged along behind them and had been listening intently to the conversation.

The next day, after a swim in the creek, the traditional Emus versus Dodos cricket match was held, the sides being captained by Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe respectively. Aaron and Chris were chosen as Dodos while Mark was in the Emu team. The Emus batted first and were all out for a mere seventy-seven runs.

After lunch, the Dodos began their innings with Aaron and Peter opening the batting, and were making easy work of knocking off the target when Peter began to feel ill.

“I think this heat is starting to get to me,” he said. “I think I’d better go and...” Before he could finish the sentence, he clutched at his chest and fell to the ground.

As Chris watched on in horror, his memories of the day spent in Sheol with the Dolphins came rushing back. “*When the two time lines begin to merge, you must bring him here,*” they had said to him, and he moved over alongside Mark and took hold of his hand. Using the technique the Dolphins had taught him, he opened a portal into Sheol and a few moments later they were surrounded by darkness.

* * *

“Sir, I think you should come up here,” Major Hemmingway said.

“What’s up?” Brett asked.

“The time lines are about to merge.”

“I’ll be right up.”

A minute later Brett was standing in front of the portal, watching Morgoth working at his desk in the other time line.

“It should be happening any minute now,” Hemmingway said.

The image shimmered slightly, and then suddenly turned black.

“What’s happened?” Brett asked. “I thought that time line was going to take precedence.”

Hemmingway poured over the instrumentation. “It hasn’t collapsed, it just seems to be suspended relative to this time line. Something must be preventing our one from being subsumed.”

“What could be doing that?”

“I’m not sure, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it had something to do with Peter Thorpe or Mark Collins. Both appear to have experienced the two time lines sequentially rather than in parallel, if Thorpe’s book is anything to go by. I need to go back to the archives and see if anything like this has ever been documented before.”

“Keep me informed of anything you find.”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

* * *

“Markie?” Chris whimpered, and Mark reached down and picked him up. He was shivering.

“I don’t know what’s happening, but hold tight, okay?” Mark said.

“Is Peter dead?”

“I think he must be.”

“I’m cold.”

It was then Mark noticed that the temperature had indeed plummeted, and he rubbed his hand up and down Chris’s back to try to warm him. A few moments later, though, the cold turned to heat and Mark put him back down again.

“I’m hot now,” Chris said.

“I think that means we’re in Sheol. You know, the dark place I told you about that we went through to reach the other galaxy.”

“Oh, okay then,” Chris said. Something about it made him think of dolphins, but the memory continued to elude him.

“Hello, is anybody else here?” Mark called out, and his voice seemed to reverberate around in the darkness. All was quiet until a sickly chuckling arose in the distance.

“That sounds like Mark the Bewildered,” a rough voice called 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!” Mark cried.

“Keep quiet, Mark,” Chris whispered, but Mark didn’t seem to hear him.

“I’m going to take the elf anyway and eat it,” the voice said, now sounding a whole lot closer.

Chris felt something move behind him and screamed. He tried pulling Mark away, but his sweaty hand slipped right out of his grip and he almost fell over. Panic engulfed him and he ran as fast as he could into the darkness.

“*Christopher, come to me,*” a voice spoke inside his head, and he turned to see a faint spot of light to his left. He ran towards it, and as he approached, it resolved itself into a glowing dolphin.

Shards of a Shattered Dream

Ron knew as soon as Kevin walked into the room that the news he carried would be grim. He beckoned him to take a seat.

“What is it, son?”

“The imperials have taken full control of the armed forces on Nimer, and the fleet has launched an attack on Sontar. Communications are chaotic at the moment and nothing’s been confirmed, but, but it looks like they’ve blown up the school in Golding.”

Ron buried his face in his hands and slowly shook his head.

“I’m so sorry, Dad, so sorry. Damn that bloody Farley!” Kevin thumped the table with his fist, causing a photograph of Hilda to topple off and smash on the stone floor.

“Oh Dad, what have I done?” he cried as he knelt down and started picking up the pieces.

“No, leave it son.”

Kevin moved around to the other side of the table and sat beside his father, putting his arm around his shoulders. Eventually Ron rose and walked down to the shrine, where he said a silent prayer to Loria before leaving the Temple grounds and following the well-worn path to the beach.

He sat at the water’s edge and watched the small waves lapping on the shore, while out to the east the gathering storm clouds were painted red by the setting sun. Gulls circled a little way off shore, occasionally diving for fish, and in the distance, the call of a sea eagle rang out.

The sky darkened as the last of the sun’s rays disappeared, and soon the bells in the tower rang out calling the faithful to their evening meal. Ron remained where he was, though, too deep in grief to notice or care.

Twilight had passed and night descended on him as he removed the silver dolphin from around his neck and held it in his hands. It had been on this very stretch of sand that he'd received it, a token of his induction into the priesthood, and with him that day had been Mary, eight months pregnant with Kevin. It was the day they'd first learnt of her calling, the day a lifetime of separation had really begun. Yet in spite of that, he'd gone on to find genuine happiness with Hilda and their work in the school, but now fate had stolen those from him too.

He wrapped the dolphin and its chain in his right hand and was about to hurl it into the sea when he heard someone approaching. Feeling suddenly guilty, he quickly put it back around his neck and looked up as Lorina came and sat beside him. He reached out and hugged her, and she hugged him back.

"You weren't at dinner, Granddad."

"I'm afraid I wasn't hungry."

"I understand."

They sat in silence for a while before she suddenly asked, "Do you know what ever became of Mark?"

"Mark the Bewildered?"

"Yes."

"Your grandmother occasionally mentions him in her letters and he seems to be happy and enjoying life. Why do you ask?"

"I was praying in the shrine tonight and suddenly thought of him, that's all. He'd be almost a man now, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, he would. He's about the same age as you, if I recall correctly."

"Do you think he'd come and help us if he knew what was happening here?"

"Perhaps. Yes, I think he probably would, honey."

"I've prayed that he will."

They sat in silence looking out at the waves, until something further along the beach caught Lorina's eye.

"What's that?"

"Where?"

"Up there, on the beach."

Ron followed her gaze and saw a shimmering light dancing on the sand.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Let’s go and see.”

As they approached, the light resolved into a rectangular opening standing by itself on the sand, and then it seemed a figure emerged from it just before it disappeared. In the starlight they could just make out a slightly built man as he moved down the beach and into the sea.

They watched in silence as the mysterious visitor swam around for a bit before returning to the sand and sitting with his head in his hands. As they crept a little closer Ron reached out with his mind and sensed a young man lost and alone, and his heart went out to him.

“It’s Mark,” Lorina whispered, and before Ron could stop her she dashed across the beach towards him.

As she approached, Mark turned and looked at her, causing her to jump a little.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” he said in a language that was foreign to her but yet understandable.

“I’m sorry I snuck up on you,” she said in that same tongue, hesitantly at first as her mouth worked its way around the unfamiliar sounds.

Their eyes made contact and she saw his concern for a young boy he called Chris, and then an image flashed into her mind of him riding through blackness on the back of a dolphin.

“Your friend is safe,” she said. “He’s with the Dolphins. My name is Lorina.”

“I’m Mark.”

“I know.”

She stepped forward and he stepped forward, and then on an impulse she reached out and took hold of his hands. They were warm and gentle, and she kissed him on the nose. He giggled.

“Come with me,” she said as she pulled him back towards the Temple. “It’s late, and you’ll need to rest before dawn.”

Ron watched as the two youngsters walked hand in hand along the beach, and for the first time since the horrific events began almost a month earlier, he smiled.

* * *

“Sir, sir!” Hoskins cried as he ran into the room.

“What is it?” Brett asked, wondering if Hoskins might actually wet himself with excitement.

“Mark the Bewildered turned up in the Delphinidae temple last night!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s definitely him! He’s got an elf boy with him, too. Maleena’s son!”

“I see,” Brett said as he stroked his chin. “Get Major Hemmingway up here, will you?”

“Now?”

“No, next week will be fine. Of course I want him now!”

“Oh, sorry sir.” Hoskins scampered off to find him and Brett rolled his eyes again. Some day he would shoot him, he promised himself.

He wasn’t sure, but he thought it likely that Hoskins had been the one who’d shot Shirley, even though her warning cry to her husband had been on Brett’s orders. It had been a last minute decision, and Brett hadn’t informed him, so on this occasion he’d been prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. ‘*Next time, though, next time,*’ he thought as he massaged the butt of his pistol.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Major Hemmingway asked as he entered the room.

“Yes,” Brett said. “Apparently Mark Collins turned up at the Delphinidae temple last night.”

“So I’ve heard. I presume he came here through Sheol.”

“I imagine so.”

“That would explain it then. I found this paper in the archives which I think might tell us why the other time line hasn’t taken

over yet.” He passed a folder to Brett, who opened it and scanned quickly through it.

“Tell me what this all means,” he said.

“Mark is a singleton, meaning he can only exist in one time line at a time. He experienced the other time line before being born in this one, and can remember it as a kind of past life.

“Now the converse is also true, that is a time line can’t end while a singleton still lives in it. Ordinarily Mark would have died at the moment this time line was supposed to have been subsumed, picking up his life where he left it in the other one, but he could prevent that by entering Sheol just prior to the moment of transition. I suspect he either knew that himself or somebody else did and opened a portal around him.”

“An elf boy, Maleena’s son, apparently accompanied him.”

“He was probably the one who opened the portal then. The Dolphins would have instructed him.”

“I dare say you’re right.”

“So what are your plans? Mark will make a formidable opponent, if you intend challenging him.”

Brett was almost about to tell him that Mark had lost his powers, but checked himself. It was a secret known only to him, and it was his golden rule that secrets should never be disclosed without good reason.

“Bring the fleet here, and I think we’ll offer Mark a choice.”

“As you wish, sir.”

* * *

Kevin rose as Lorina entered the room, followed by a gangling black-haired boy in his late teens and the younger blonde-headed elvish boy he’d met earlier.

“Mark, this is my mother Loretta and my father Kevin,” Lorina said.

“It’s an honour at last to meet you,” Kevin said.

“Do you know that ten years ago you saved my husband’s life?” Loretta asked. “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."

"I am at your service, my Lord," Kevin said as he knelt before him, but Mark raised his hands.

"Wait, I think there's been a terrible mistake here."

Lorina dashed over to her father's side and whispered, "The subspace pulse that killed Morgoth also destroyed Mark's powers."

"Is it true?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, I lost my Barefooter genes in my confrontation with Morgoth, and I no longer have those powers."

"Then all hope is lost," Kevin said as he began pacing the room. Mark glanced at Lorina, but she avoided his gaze and looked instead at her feet. "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?"

Mark's head dropped and his shoulders drooped, and Kevin knew straight away that he'd cut the boy deeply. He quietly cursed himself, as the last thing he needed now was more enemies.

"I'm sorry, Mark, I have hurt you, unjustly it would seem." Kevin stepped towards him but he flinched away, his eyes full of unformed tears. He brushed at them angrily before steeling himself.

"Why did you come here, Mark?" Kevin asked. Mark raised his head and looked him in the eye as he steadied himself.

"I didn't *come* here. I was brought here against my will. Yesterday 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!” Kevin said, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. Mark saw him do it but didn’t flinch, and Kevin smiled inwardly to himself. “Barefooter genes or not, you certainly have spirit, young man.”

“That’s it!” Chris cried out from behind Mark, and everyone turned to look at 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 said, stroking his chin.

“No, bad idea, very bad,” Mark said, but everyone ignored him.

* * *

“The fleet has arrived, sir, and the men are awaiting your orders,” Hoskins said as he stood at attention and saluted Brett.

“At ease, soldier,” Brett said, tempted once more to just pull out his pistol and put an end to the blithering idiot before him.

“Thank you, sir.”

Brett stood atop the grand steps from where Morgoth had frequently addressed his most loyal subjects. The courtyard before him, once beautifully manicured by the palace groundsmen, was now overgrown with weeds, and he vowed to make amends once the Delphinidae had been dealt with.

He looked down upon the ranks of soldiers assembled before him and smiled.

“I thank all of you for answering my call at such short notice. Mark the Bewildered, grandson and heir of The Enlightened One, has returned to us, but is currently being held by the Delphinidae in their temple on the eastern shore. Tonight we march to free him and set him in his rightful place upon the throne behind me.”

The troops cheered, and he raised his hands to silence them.

“The Delphinidae, for all their *thou shalt*s and *thou shalt not*s, are nothing more than a pathetic rabble of rogues and wimps, and I want you to show no mercy in disposing of them tonight. If we

must reduce their temple to rubble to achieve our objective, well such are the casualties of war.”

Again, the troops cheered. Brett was loving this.

“Return now to your quarters, and assemble here ready to march at sunset.”

His forces snapped to attention as one and saluted. Brett returned the salute, then turned and marched back into the throne room.

“What was all that about rescuing Mark from the Delphinidae?” Hemmingway asked.

“If we can’t end this time line by destroying him, we might as well have Morgoth’s grandson on the throne where we can manipulate him. For all his powers he’s still just a boy, after all.”

“Good thinking, sir.”

* * *

Ron glanced across at the palace gates from the café where he was sitting with a young acolyte from the Temple. Another squadron of imperial troops had just entered, and he shook his head in dismay as he swallowed the last of his coffee and set his cup down on the table.

“I think we’ve seen enough, don’t you?” he said.

“Do you think they mean to attack us?”

“I don’t see what else they’d be doing here. My guess is they’ll launch an all-out offensive tonight.”

“We’d best get back and warn everyone then.”

Ron waved the waitress over and paid the bill before casually standing and wandering back out onto the street. He glanced around while waiting for his companion to join him, but could see no sign of them having been watched. He pulled out his phone and reported what he’d seen to Kevin.

“*Get yourselves back here as soon as you can, Dad,*” Kevin said, “*and no heroics, please.*”

“Who, me?” Ron laughed, then put away the phone as the acolyte joined him.

“Their bathroom is disgusting,” he said as he wiped his hands on his shirt.

* * *

The thunderstorm struck just as Brett’s forces marched out of the palace gates, and by the time they reached the top of the ridge that separated the east and west coasts they were soaked to the skin. The rain, however, had ceased and they were soon assembled outside the temple wall.

The temple was in darkness, but in the occasional lightning flash Brett could make out many figures perched on top of the walls. Their defences looked ineffectual against the firepower he had under his command, but he knew from long experience not to underestimate his opponent. In any case, if everything went to plan there would be no need for an exchange of fire.

“I am Mark, rightful heir of Morgoth,” a voice rang out from the loudspeakers mounted on the towers. *“Who comes here?”*

“Lights,” Brett said to Hoskins, and a few moments later Mark was illuminated by powerful spotlights. For a moment, Brett was surprised to see that he was dressed only in what appeared to be swimming trunks, but then remembered that he would be pretending to be a full-blooded Barefooter who would overheat in anything more substantial.

“It’s Mark the Bewildered,” many of his men began whispering.

“Quiet!” Brett said.

“Who leads here?” Mark asked.

“I do,” Brett said as he strode forward to the front of his troops. Spotlights from the towers came on and quickly settled on him. “I am Farley, Shaman of the Imperial Council, my Lord.” He bowed theatrically before his supposed master.

“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.”

Brett signalled Hoskins to prepare to open fire if this failed.

“*Very well then,*” Mark said after a slight pause, “*come to the gate in one hour from now.*”

“He fell for it, sir,” Hoskins said, again looking like he was about to wet himself. “Like a bunyip to the honey pot, he was.”

“Yes, very well put, Hoskins. Now leave me in peace while I prepare for my audience with our new master.”

Hoskins began laughing and then couldn’t stop himself. He blushed, saluted and disappeared behind the nearest tree. Brett was sure he could smell fresh urine.

Two Delphinidae guardsmen done up in their ridiculous armour with the spiky hats were waiting for him at the temple gate. Brett bowed and allowed himself to be frisked.

“Come this way,” the more senior guard said. “Mark is expecting you.” Brett wondered if this fellow might be Hoskins’ brother, and had to bite his tongue to stop himself from chuckling at the thought.

The guards led him down a flight of stairs into what appeared to be a shrine, with a statue of a woman and two dolphins in the centre of the floor. To the right was an anteroom and they ushered him through.

Sitting before him at an oak table were Mark, an Elvish girl who was probably the daughter of the High Priestess and a younger Elvish boy. They stood as he entered the room, and Mark reached down and grabbed his translator headset.

“No need for that, my Lord,” Brett said in the Earthling tongue, “for I am fluent in your language.”

“Be seated,” Mark said, his puzzled expression living up to his ridiculous title of *bewildered*. Brett smiled to himself as he sat before them.

“These are my aides, Christopher son of Aaron and Lorina daughter of Lorett,” Mark said.

Brett nodded to each of them and they responded in kind.

“We have regained control of the galaxy in readiness for your return, my Lord,” he said.

Mark looked stunned. “Ten years ago I relinquished my position as Supreme Ruler, and wish that to remain so.”

“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.”

The effect on Mark was just as Brett had expected.

“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.”

Mark looked even more uncomfortable and Brett couldn’t help but smile.

“Consider my request, and then come to the palace at dawn tomorrow and take your rightful place as leader.”

Brett stood and bowed. “We will crush you if you don’t,” he snarled as he strode from the room, leaving the guards scurrying along in his wake.

* * *

Brett looked up towards the ridge line as a single blast from a horn rang out in the stillness of the morning air. A voice cried out something, but it was too faint to make out.

“They’re coming, sir,” Hoskins said.

“Yes, I believe they are.”

Mark, accompanied by Lorina, Chris and two guardsmen, arrived at the palace gate about an hour later.

“You have chosen wisely, I see,” Brett said.

“What other choice did I have?” Mark protested.

“Well, there’s one other. Come, let me show you around.”

He ushered them in, but as the guards tried to follow, he put out his hand to stop them. “You may wait for your charges here.”

For a moment, he thought they were going to challenge him, but he stared them down and they acquiesced. '*Pathetic*,' he mused.

"I'd be most remiss if I didn't offer you refreshments after your long journey," he said as he led them inside to where an array of food and drink had been prepared. He watched carefully as Mark almost picked up a cream bun, before remembering he was supposed to be playing the role of an autothermic Barefooter and settling for water instead.

Once everyone else had been replenished, Brett led them across the courtyard and up the steps to the throne room. "Come," he said, seeing Mark staring at the throne, "and try it on for size."

Mark climbed cautiously onto Morgoth's throne and Brett pulled out the footrest for him. He leant back and closed his eyes, but then opened them wide in shock. Brett wondered what he'd seen, although he had a pretty good idea given the sometimes barbaric nature of Morgoth's court.

"Come, I have something else to show you," Brett said and led them into the anteroom. Before them stood the portal, the interior of the ring still totally black.

"You can feel it, can't you," he said. "This is a portal into another time line, one you're no doubt 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 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 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. 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.”

Mark took a step backwards, bumping into a console, as Brett twirled a knife in his hands.

“But like I said, you have a choice, Mark. 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.”

Brett took a deep breath and smiled. Either way now, he would win.

“Mark, how do you choose?”

Chris looked up and saw someone standing in the doorway. “Uncle Jason!” he cried, and everyone turned around.

“Who the hell are you?” Brett asked. This was an unexpected development and for a moment, he felt a shudder of panic.

“I am Mark’s father. Release him please, and I’ll do you no harm.”

“Huh, father indeed,” Brett sneered. “You’re even punier than he is. Begone, before I summon the guards.”

“My son may have lost his Barefooter genes, but I have not. Release him NOW!”

Brett steadied himself and, with a flick of his wrist, sent his knife flying across the room and into Jason’s chest. He stood still, a puzzled look on his face, as a stream of blood ran down his stomach and began pooling on the floor. Brett began to smile, but it quickly turned into a frown as the knife quivered for a moment and popped out. The wound immediately sealed over without so much as a scar.

He had seen Morgoth perform this trick on numerous occasions, and the only conclusion he could draw was that the man standing before him was indeed a full-blooded Barefooter. His mind racing to find a way he could twist the situation to his own advantage, he

instinctively took a step backwards and would have gone right into the portal if not for the hairs on the back of his neck rising as he approached it. He glanced around and took a quick little sidestep to avoid it.

At that instant, Chris leapt at him, knocking him off balance. He swung his arms wildly, trying to save himself, but it was to no avail as he toppled and fell into the portal.

For a moment, his body was wracked with pain, but that disappeared as he found himself sprawled across the floor of the anteroom in the other time line. Morgoth, who had been working at his desk, turned around.

“Brett, what the hell are you doing?” he yelled, but the look of surprise on his face suddenly turned to horror. Brett glanced back over his shoulder and saw the portal beginning to appear, a black disc floating in mid air and growing rapidly in size.

Morgoth pushed him aside and leapt into the blackness, but as he passed through, he slowed down until stopping with just his feet poking out. Meanwhile the portal continued to expand, spreading its blackness around the room.

With his last breath, Brett cursed both himself and the elf boy who’d pushed him, and then the blackness engulfed him as the time line into which he had fallen came to an end.

* * *

Hoskins watched in horror as the events unfolded before him on the security screen. Before he could react and summon the guards, however, the building began to shake. He leapt to his feet and dashed for the door as the room was suddenly plunged into darkness.

He stumbled outside just as the first pieces of masonry began to fall. He saw Mark, Lorina, Chris and Jason come running down the steps and stagger out to the centre of the courtyard as the shaking intensified. The tower above the throne room began to sway, and moments later, there was a grinding sound of stone against stone as it toppled onto the roof, setting off a chain reaction

that spread around the entire complex. Wall by wall, room by room, the palace collapsed in upon itself, burying the entire imperial garrison who were still ensconced in the underground dormitories.

As suddenly as it had started, the shaking stopped, and an eerie silence came over the remains of the palace as the dust settled. Jason, who had tried to protect the others by spread-eagling himself across them, stood and helped them to their feet.

Hoskins began walking towards them, but before he had taken more than a few steps, the silence was broken by the sound of a descending spacecraft. The vessel circled once overhead before cautiously settling down next to Jason and the others. As soon as the hatch opened a woman descended the stairs, and Mark ran to her and they embraced. Hoskins started moving towards them again with his arms raised in surrender, but by the time he reached the ship, they'd all boarded and secured the hatch. He stood there, alone and with his arms still raised, as it took off and disappeared towards the east.

* * *

“What’s happening about Peter?” Mark asked his father once they were airborne. “I mean with the funeral and all that.”

Jason ruffled his hair and said, “I don’t think you need worry about that for a good many years yet.”

It took a few moments for Jason’s meaning to sink into Mark’s overloaded mind. “He’s alive?”

“We were extremely lucky,” Jenny said. “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 hugged him and then added, “That’s so good of you to be thinking of him anyway, Mark.”

“Where’d you get the ship from?” Chris asked his father.

“We found it parked in an ancient space station on the other side of the fold from Genesis,” Aaron said. “Jason, your mother and I came through Sheol, while the others followed on the ship.”

“The bad man wanted to make Markie the king of the universe or whatever before Uncle Jase upset his plans.”

“Good old Uncle Jase,” Aaron said, and Jason glared at him.

* * *

Ron was waiting outside the Temple with Kevin and Loretta when the ship landed. While everyone was fussing over Mark, Chris and Lorina, he pulled Jason aside.

“Jason, I’m Ron Simmons, Kevin’s father,” he said. “Can you spare a moment?”

“Certainly, Ron.”

“I understand you’re carrying the Barefooter genes.”

“I’m only a half-blood, but yes.”

“I was wondering, well, a close friend of mine suffered a gunshot wound to the head in our failed attempt to retake the palace a few weeks ago, and the surgeon said that the ancient Barefooters had healing powers that might have been able to help him.”

Jason looked into him with his deep dark eyes before nodding slightly. “I don’t know the extent of my powers and I can’t make any promises, but if you’ll take me to him I’ll do what I can.”

“Thank you,” Ron said as he led him inside the Temple.

Brian was lying on an intensive care bed with beeping electronic instruments monitoring his condition and an intravenous drip feeding nutrients and medication into his arm. Jason cautiously approached and took hold of his hand. He closed his eyes.

At first, everything was dark, but then vague shapes began to appear. He was in the midst of a battle, wrestling an opponent who had been attacking his son. He quickly overpowered him, but as he reached down to help Owen back up a gunshot rang out and pain exploded in the side of his head. With blood flowing freely down the side of his face, he began to fall, tumbling over and over as the sounds of fighting faded and the darkness reclaimed him.

Light exploded all around him and he found himself walking down a lush green slope. Ahead of him a silver bridge spanned a broad river, and on the far side a city of towers glistened in the warm sunshine.

“Come to me, Brian,” a voice called from one of the towers. He looked up and saw Shirley standing at the top, waving to him, and he ran towards the bridge.

Next to it was a sign. ‘River Styx Crossing – another Farley Corporation project,’ it said, and he faltered.

“Come to me Brian, come quickly,” Shirley cried.

Another voice called from across the river, and he looked to see Morgoth standing atop a golden tower. “Come across, Brian,” he said, “and I’ll adopt your law reforms.”

“Listen to him, Brian,” Shirley added. “We need you here.”

He’d taken a tentative step forward when someone spoke from behind him. He turned to find himself face to face with Hilda.

“This is not your time, Brian,” she said. “You must go back.”

“I’m tired and my body is broken,” he said. “I can’t go back.”

“You have help now and your body is mending. Ron will need you in the years ahead and you must go back, for his sake.”

He turned his head and looked longingly at the glittering towers.

“Don’t listen to her, Brian,” Shirley pleaded. “You can’t go back.”

“I’ll make you mayor of this city,” Morgoth added, “and double your pay.”

Brian sighed and returned his gaze to Hilda.

“Ron needs you, Brian. All is not lost. You must tell him, all is not lost.”

“All right, I’ll go back.”

Hilda kissed him on the nose and he hugged her, closing his eyes, but when he opened them again she was gone. Slowly, and with a heavy heart, he turned his back on the bridge and began walking uphill.

“Brian, you idiot, what do you think you’re doing?” Shirley cried, but her voice was growing weaker. He didn’t look back.

Finally he heard another voice, Brett's, say, "It's no use, sweetie. Come back to bed." He laughed.

The grass withered and died, and the ground beneath his feet became rough and hard, biting into his soles like tiny teeth. Dark clouds moved across the sun and the temperature plummeted as a cold rain began to fall. The raindrops turned to ice, piercing his skin like pins and needles, and all the while, the sky grew darker and darker. Yet he continued to walk, fighting his way uphill with all his strength. Ahead he could hear a steady beeping. Beep, beep, beep...

Jason opened his eyes and stepped back from the bed, exhausted. He wiped the sweat from his brow and sat heavily in the chair behind him.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked.

Jason nodded weakly, but before he could answer another voice said, "Ron, is that you?"

"Brian!" Ron cried, and leapt to his friend's side as he opened his eyes.

Shimmel

Brian was discharged from hospital the next morning. His surgeon was amazed at his sudden recovery, more so as the scan he took revealed no trace of his injury remaining.

Brian listened intently as Ron described all that had happened over the past month, but when he reached the destruction of the school on Sontar something in the back of his mind began to tingle.

“All is not lost,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“I don’t know, call it a hunch if you will, but I think we should make haste to Sontar.”

He grabbed Ron by the hand and dragged him across the courtyard to the Temple’s travel agent.

“We need to get to Sontar as quickly as possible,” he said to the startled clerk behind the desk.

“Let me see what we have available,” she said, checking her computer screen and then making a brief telephone call. “We can have a ship ready for you in an hour, Mr Lachlan.”

“Thank you so much,” Brian said. “Right, Ron, let’s start packing.”

From the air, it was apparent that the school had been the primary target of the attack on Golding. While the rest of the town appeared to have escaped damage, the school buildings were completely flattened and Ron couldn’t see how anything of value could possibly have survived.

“What is it we’re looking for?” he asked.

“I’m really not sure, but Hilda seemed to think it was important,” Brian said.

“Hilda?”

“What?”

“You said Hilda thought it was important.”

“Did I? I have no idea what would’ve made me say that.”

“Are you sure you’re fully recovered from your injury?”

“Well I thought I was.”

They landed on the playing field adjacent to where the main hall had once stood. The ground was littered with debris and broken glass, and for the first time in his life Ron questioned the wisdom of never wearing shoes. He gave the silver dolphin a quick rub as he stepped from the ship and hastened carefully after Brian who was running barefoot through the rubble with no apparent concern.

He caught up with him as Brian bent down to examine a scorched area of ground near to where the back of the hall had been. “What have you found?”

“Shush.”

Brian carefully shifted more debris and thumped loudly on the sheet of metal he’d exposed. He placed his ear on the plate and then thumped three more times. Ron listened as carefully as his sixty-year-old ears would allow.

“Did you hear it?”

Ron nodded as comprehension slowly dawned on him. “Could there, could there possibly be someone still alive down there?”

“I think so. Go into town as quick as you can and see if you can find anyone with some excavating equipment.”

By the time Ron returned with a backhoe, Brian had cleared a substantial area with his bare hands. He’d remembered now that, when the school was being built, underground chambers had been dug to provide a hiding place in the event of an imperial inspection, but there had never been any need for them and eventually the staircase leading down had been panelled over and forgotten.

“See if you can shift that sheet of iron,” Brian said as Ron moved the machine into position. “Careful now, you don’t want to cause a cave-in.”

It was painstakingly slow work, but finally they’d cleared enough of the opening to the stairs for Ron to squeeze into. He crept down, flashing his light around and looking for potential weaknesses, but when he reached the first landing and turned he found the way blocked by fallen rock.

“Hello... is there anyone down here?” he called.

“Yes, we’re here, but there’s too much rock blocking the way,” came the faint reply.

“Hold on, we’re going to get you out.”

By the time he’d crawled back out, word had spread and many of the townsfolk had come to help. They formed a bucket brigade, lifting the rubble out rock by rock, until there was one large boulder remaining in the way.

“We’ll need to shore up the ceiling before we try to shift it,” one of the volunteers said. He’d worked in a mine on Ignus and knew what he was talking about, so everyone set about gathering suitable timbers from amongst the rubble of the classrooms.

It was late in the afternoon when they finally had everything in place, and cutting tools were hauled down into the opening to try to break the rock into smaller pieces. Ron took hold of the silver dolphin and said a quiet prayer to Loria as the sound of the diamond-tipped saw cut through the silence.

An hour later three substantial pieces of rock were dragged from the hole, and a line of dirty and dishevelled children began emerging into the sunshine. The anxious parents, who’d been milling around since word of the discovery had spread, dashed forward to claim their offspring.

Following the children were the teaching staff, and Ron embraced each one in turn.

“We all survived,” the headmistress said as she emerged at the end of the line. “We received warning of the approaching bombers and got the dungeon open just in time. There was plenty of

drinkable water stored down there, but most of the food had long since gone off and we're all pretty hungry."

"We can soon fix that," Brian said, pointing to the catering van that had just pulled up.

* * *

Mary opened the door to find Aaron standing there with a young blonde woman.

"Mum, this is Lorina," he said. "She's from Bluehaven."

"Hello grandma," Lorina said.

"Oh my goodness, you're Kevin's daughter!"

"You know Kevin?" Aaron asked.

"He's my son," she finally admitted. "He was born just before I left Bluehaven on my calling to Earth."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"No, that's the truth, honey."

"Geeze, Mum, I always knew you had some deep dark secret hidden away in your past, but I never imagined that you'd turn out to be Kevin's mother. So you and Ron Simmons were, um..."

"We were lovers while studying together at the Delphinidae Temple, and were intending to marry until the Dolphins told us of my role in the Prophecy."

"Oh wow. That must have been hard, leaving him with the baby and coming all the way here."

"Harder than you can imagine, son."

Aaron gave her a hug and she kissed him on the nose.

"Ron sends his regards," Lorina said, "and I have a letter for you from my mother."

She handed her a large envelope which she quickly tore open.

Dear Priestess Mary,

I send you greetings from the Bluehaven Temple and trust you and your husband are well. I had the pleasure of meeting your son and grandson recently, and I can assure you that the Temple, and

indeed the entire population of the galaxy, owes you an enormous debt of gratitude.

On behalf of the Temple, I take this opportunity to invite you and your husband to visit us for both a formal debriefing and a celebration of the unqualified success of your mission.

Ron Simmons and Brian Lachlan have also asked that you and Bobby accompany them for an all-expenses-paid two week holiday on Shimmel, at the resort of your choosing. I am enclosing an assortment of brochures for you to look at.

Lorina will make all the arrangements for you on our behalf, including transport to and from Earth. Kevin and I are looking forward to meeting you at long last.

Yours truly,

*Lorett Simmons
High Priestess*

* * *

Mary gazed out the window at the planet below, with its numerous small islands scattered across sparkling blue seas. The journey from Earth in the Endeavour had taken close on thirty-six hours, but the ship was built for luxury and she'd arrived feeling refreshed and eager to be on the ground.

She gasped as Dolphin Island came into view. Down there, somewhere, Ron would be waiting for her. When they had last been together they'd been but eighteen years of age, and now they were sixty. *'Will I even recognise him?'* she wondered for the umpteenth time, and tried to drive the thought from her mind. She'd seen numerous photographs of him over the years and recognition was going to be the least of her worries.

"We have received clearance from Dolphin Island control and will begin our descent shortly," the pilot announced. *"Please remain in your seat and make sure your seat belt is secured."*

The real-space engines roared into life and the planet loomed up towards them. Mary found that she'd tensed every muscle in her body and forced herself to relax. She reached out and took hold of Bobby's hand, and he smiled at her.

"This must be exciting for you," he said, and she felt like saying no, it was all rather boring actually, but didn't. This was going to be a difficult enough time for him as it was.

Once the ship touched down, its passengers were escorted across the tarmac and into the customs hall where the officials took forever to check their paperwork and baggage. For a wild moment, she feared there was going to be some documentation error and she'd be sent back to Earth to have it corrected, but eventually the inspector relented and allowed her to pass through into the arrivals lounge.

A tall thin man, dressed only in the plain white shorts of a Delphinidae priest and wearing a silver dolphin around his neck, stood and stared at her for a moment before running forward and embracing her. She held him tightly, and the forty-two years since they'd last touched seemed to vanish as if they had never been.

"You're looking good, Ron," she said, taking in the slight tinge of grey in his otherwise blonde hair.

"So are you, Mary," he said. "So are you."

They separated at last, and Mary suddenly remembered that Bobby was standing behind her.

"Ron, this is my husband Bobby."

"It's great to meet you at last," Ron said as he shook his hand.

"Mary's been telling me all about you," Bobby said.

"Nothing too bad I hope."

Another man walked up behind Ron and for a moment, Mary didn't recognise him.

"Aren't you going to say hello to your other lost friend?" he asked.

"Brian!" she cried. "The last time I saw you, you were heading off to Cornipus to study law. Look at you now, mayor of Dolphin Island!"

“Only because no-one else wanted the job,” he said, laughing. “I met your son Aaron a few weeks ago. He’s a fine looking lad, Mary, and he’s got your eyes.”

“Everybody keeps saying that,” she laughed. “No wonder he always keeps them covered with that mop of hair of his.”

“Come on, let’s get back to the Temple,” Ron said. “Kevin and Lorett have prepared a feast, and they’re dying to meet you both.”

Outside the air was warm and humid, with a certain Bluehaven smell that carried her straight back to her youth. She glanced around at the terminal buildings, and little had changed since she’d fled here with Ron, Brian and Eric all those years ago. She took another deep breath before being bundled into the waiting car.

Lorett stood at the head of the table and tapped her glass.

“Tonight we have two special guests with us. Forty-two years ago, Priestess Mary Anderson, having just given birth to my consort Kevin, accepted her calling from the Dolphins and undertook a perilous journey to a world in a distant galaxy. Her mission was to bear the child of an Earth man, a child who would grow to become the guide for the boy destined to bring about the downfall of Morgoth. As we all know, this was successfully accomplished and now we welcome her, along with her husband Bobby, back to Bluehaven.

“The years since her departure have been tumultuous for us to say the least, but thanks to the heroic efforts of her son Aaron and grandson Christopher, we have at last been freed from the legacy of Morgoth’s rule and can look forward, we hope, to a new era of peace.

“Please, could you all be upstanding and raise your glasses to Mary and Bobby.”

“To Mary and Bobby,” the assembled Delphinidae cheered, and Mary stood.

“It’s so wonderful to be back here again after such a long time away. Many things have changed, and many of the faces I knew have aged or departed, but at a deeper level, nothing has changed at all. The Order, and all that it stands for, is still the same, if not

stronger than ever, and, um, the coffee in the cafeteria is still just as bad.

“Seriously, though, it’s wonderful to be back and I thank Loretta and Kevin for giving us this opportunity to visit. I have to say I’m very tempted to stay and make this my home, but I have a wonderful family and group of friends back on Earth and really, that’s where my true home is now. Nonetheless, I’ll be making the most of my time here and hope that in the future I might be able to visit again. Thank you.”

The crowd cheered as she sat, and then Kevin rose.

“I’ll be brief as there’s much food still to be eaten. This is the first time since I was a baby that I’ve laid eyes on my real mother, although the late Priestess Hilda filled that role admirably for me in every conceivable way.” He glanced at Ron who nodded and wiped a single tear from his eye. “Welcome home, Mum, and I hope you and Bobby have a wonderful time here. If there’s anything Loretta or I can do for you, just ask and we’ll be only too happy to oblige.”

“Have you decided which resort you want to go to yet?” Brian asked as they were sipping hot chocolate in the common room.

“I’m not really sure,” Mary said. “They all look so good, and it’s difficult to choose. Is there anything that takes your fancy, Bobby?”

“What’s this one here?” he asked, pointing at the photograph on one of the brochures. “I can’t read any of the writing, but is that a golf course?”

“What’s golf?” Brian asked.

“It’s a game where you hit a ball with a metal stick and try to get it in a distant hole with as few hits as possible.”

“Here, let me show you,” Mary said, placing her hand on Brian’s forehead.

“That looks very much like the game we call divot,” he said, “and yes, that’s a divot course in the photograph you’re looking at. So, is that where you’d like to go?”

“It’ll do me,” Bobby said, and Mary agreed.

“Right, it’s settled then. I’ll make the booking and we should be able to go in a couple of days.”

The car pulled up on the side of a dirt road in Bringal Vale, and Mary walked hesitantly up to the house and knocked on the door. An elderly man opened it and stared at her.

“Can I help you?”

“Dad, it’s me, Mary.”

“Mary? Oh my goodness! Tanya, come quickly, Mary’s home.”

A frail old lady came to the door and Mary swallowed her in a bear hug.

“Well don’t just stand there,” her father said, “come on in.”

“Mum, Dad, this is my husband Bobby.”

“Bobby, huh. Are you the boy Mary was keen on as a teenager?”

“No, that was Ron, Dad,” Mary said. “Bobby’s from Earth, the place I’ve been for the last forty-two years.”

“Yes, I remember now from your letters. I’m pleased to meet you, Booby.”

“It’s Bobby.”

“That’s right, sorry. I’m not too good with names these days.”

“Do you still have the vegetable garden out the back?” Mary asked as they walked through to the kitchen.

“Sure do, and they’re still the best veggies in the whole of Bringal Vale.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.”

Mary looked up at the wall and saw the painting she’d done just before her excursion to the palace that had changed her life.

“I remember doing that!” she said with a tear running down her cheek. “I thought it was destroyed in the fire.”

“No, we found it amongst the rubble and Mr Wiggins, the art teacher at the school, managed to restore it,” her father said.

“Old Wiggly Wiggins, I remember him too,” she said dreamily. “We must go by the school on the way back, Bobby.”

“Here, have some cake and scones,” Tanya said as she set the table. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

* * *

The Contessa Resort looked beautiful as the shuttle craft approached the landing pad. Set on the west coast of a tropical island, as well as the divot course it also boasted three swimming pools, a white sandy beach, a coral reef and over twenty kilometres of walking tracks through spectacular natural bushland.

After checking in, the four of them wandered down to the beach. As soon as his feet touched the sand, Ron grinned from ear to ear and yelled, “Last one in’s a rotten egg!”

“You used to say that on the beach in Golding,” Mary said as she sprinted towards the water.

“Is that when the three of you were working on the farm?” Bobby asked.

“That’s right,” Brian said. “You should’ve been there, it was great fun.”

“It was until the weather turned foul,” Mary said.

“Yeah, and those bloody harvesters kept getting bogged.”

“That was the fun part,” Ron laughed, but then his expression darkened.

“What’s wrong?” Mary asked.

“I’m sorry; it’s just that that’s where I first met Hilda.”

She gave him a hug and a kiss on the nose, and he smiled again.

“It’s going to take me a while to get used to her being gone, I guess.”

“I understand, Ron, I really do,” she said.

Bobby dived to the bottom and came up underneath her, knocking her over backwards.

“I’m sorry about your wife, Ron,” he said. “I don’t know how I’d manage if I lost Mary.”

Ron gave him an awkward look and Bobby realised he’d just put his foot in his mouth and taken a good sized bite in the process.

“Sorry mate, I seem to be suffering from foot in mouth disease.”

“Huh?” Ron said, looking even more puzzled.

“I’d forgotten that, well... that you did lose Mary, back when, when she left to go to Earth.”

“Don’t worry about it, Bobby. That was a long time ago.”

A wave rolled in, threatening to break right on top of them, and that saved Bobby from further embarrassment.

The outdoor restaurant overlooked the beach and they watched the spectacular sunset while feasting on the local seafood specialties. When the waiter brought them the dessert menu, Ron noticed the quanga pie and asked if he knew where their fruit came from.

“There’s a little farm near Golding on Sontar that specialises in them,” he said. “They’re the best in the galaxy.”

“Eric’s!” Brian and Mary said in unison, and they each ordered a generous serving.

“You know this is really nice,” Bobby said as he made quick work of demolishing his. “I wonder if they’ll grow on Earth.”

“We should give Eric a call and see if he can give us some seeds to try,” Mary said.

“Customs will probably seize them when we get back, though,” Bobby said. “You know, exotic species and all that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It was a nice thought though.”

The next day Brian took Bobby for a round of divot while Ron and Mary decided to explore one of the walking tracks.

“You know, Bobby seems like a decent enough man,” Ron said as they ambled through a lush rainforest glade. “He’s nowhere near as bad as I’d imagined from your letters.”

“I guess I must have painted a rather bleak picture of him,” Mary laughed. “He’s pretty good most of the time, particularly now that he’s off the grog.”

“Grog?”

“It’s a slang term for alcohol.”

“Ah, I see. So you’re pretty happy with your life on Earth then.”

“Yes, it couldn’t be better, really, what with Aaron and Chris always getting themselves into mischief and keeping me on my toes.”

“Young Chris is certainly quite a character. I would imagine he’d be rather a handful for Maleena.”

“Yes, but he’s a good kid at heart, and that’s what counts.”

There was a noise in the bushes beside them, and a moment later a small furry animal with a long snout wandered out onto the track.

“What’s that?” Mary asked.

“It’s a bunyip,” Ron said as he bent down to scratch it behind the ears. It looked up at him with big brown eyes.

“I wanted one of those when I was a kid, but Mum wouldn’t let me.”

“I remember that. You cried for days.”

“Oh, what’s that smell?”

“Bunyip pheromones. They’re pretty strong, aren’t they?”

“I know now why Mum didn’t want one in the house. Phew!”

The bunyip looked at her, poked its tongue out and wandered back into the bush.

“They reckon they can understand a lot of what we say,” Ron said, and Mary laughed. On impulse, Ron kissed her on the nose, but then blushed.

“I, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, it’s okay, really. I’m a big girl now and I’m not going to run off and leave my husband because of a peck on the nose.”

He took hold of her hands and looked into her eyes. “I still love you, Mary.”

“I know.”

Bobby swung the club a few times, getting a feel for it. The balance was slightly different to the ones he was used to, but he thought he could soon get accustomed to it.

“After you,” Brian said.

“No, after you. I’d rather see what I’m up against.”

“I haven’t played for years, so don’t expect too much.”

Brian placed his ball on the tee and looked down towards the first hole. It was an easy par three, with the flag clearly visible at the end of a short straight fairway. He struck the ball and it soared high before dropping just short of the green.

“Not bad,” Bobby said as he prepared to tee off, taking a few more practice swings before striking the ball. It flew high and true, but overshot the green by what looked to be at least fifty metres.

“You might need to ease back a bit,” Brian said.

“Yeah, these clubs seem to have a bit more oomph than I’m used to, either that or the balls fly further.”

Brian’s second shot placed him a metre from the pin and he putted in for a par. Bobby overshot the green again going back the other way, but only by about ten metres, and his third shot landed within putting range of the hole. He finished with a bogey.

By the time they reached the ninth hole, he was getting the feel for the clubs and was only three over par, neck and neck with Brian.

“If you like we can grab some lunch now before tackling the back nine,” Brian said and Bobby was agreeable. They wandered across to the clubhouse and found an outside table overlooking the course.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Brian asked. “I’ve heard the beer here is particularly good.”

“Nah, just some water for me,” Bobby said. “I’m supposed to stay off the grog.”

“Grog? Ah, right, I get it. What about some quanga juice?”

“Yeah, that sounds nice.”

Brian wandered across to the bar and returned with two glasses of juice.

“Did I hear Mary say you’re the mayor of Dolphin Island?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah, Loretta talked me into it after the fall of Morgoth.”

“Have you always been involved in government?”

“I guess so. I joined the Department of Justice on Bluehaven after finishing my law degree and ended up Director. There was a

bit of, well, unpleasantness I guess just before the death of Morgoth, and I stood down after the regime collapsed.”

“I’ve heard a little bit about this Morgoth person. What was he like?”

“In a word, ruthless. He’d string you up and eat your guts for breakfast if he thought you were no longer useful to him.”

“He sounds terrible. Why’d you go and work for him in the first place?”

“It was my wife who got me the job with the Department originally, and once you’re in there’s no way you can get out again.”

“I didn’t realise you were married.”

“Shirley died a short while ago. She turned against me and was having an affair with the leader of the imperials, a bastard named Brett Farley. He or one of his minions shot her.”

“I’m really sorry, Brian. It seems every time I open my mouth today I put my foot in it.”

“No, that’s okay Bobby, you weren’t to know. Farley was in my class at school and was the school bully, although he really didn’t have enough bulk to be terribly effective in that role. From what I’ve heard, your grandson killed him by pushing him through that portal he’d built.”

“So that’s what all the fuss was about. I knew Chris had done something pretty special but I didn’t know what.”

“Yes, he’s quite the young hero, that’s for sure.”

“So what do you think’s going to happen now?”

“Well most of Farley’s troops died when the palace fell in on them, and the Delphinidae have teams of investigators going through the military bases on Nimer and Pulper, weeding out any remaining sympathisers. But there’s still a power vacuum at the top and it wouldn’t surprise me to see more instability ahead for us.”

“Well I hope you’re wrong.”

“So do I, but this galaxy is somewhat renowned for its political uprisings.”

The waiter arrived with their meals and they ate in silence while Bobby pondered what life would have been like under Morgoth.

“So how’d you go?” Mary asked as Bobby and Brian returned to their rooms.

“Bobby beat me,” Brian said. “Once he got the hang of our clubs and balls he was unstoppable.”

“Good for you, honey,” she said as she gave Bobby a kiss. “Someone needs to pull Brian back down occasionally.”

“How was your day?” he asked her. For a moment, Ron blushed.

“Great. We had a wonderful walk and even saw a bunyip.”

“A what?”

“A bunyip. They’re a bit like a small dog, only much more intelligent. They’re native to Cornipus but are found in most parts of the galaxy now, except on Bluehaven where exotic animals are strictly forbidden.”

“It sounds cute.”

“They are, but they’re, um, a bit on the nose.”

“To put it mildly,” Ron added.

“So, what’s it like being back with your old boyfriend?” Bobby asked Mary after they’d gone to bed.

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

“No. Well, maybe a little.”

“I still have feelings for him, yes, certainly as a friend, and I feel sorry for him over the loss of his wife.”

“How did she die?”

“She was killed in battle about a month before Chris and Mark came here. One of Farley’s men took a shot at Ron but it missed him and hit Hilda instead.”

“Oh my God. That must be so hard for him, I mean the guilt he must be feeling.”

“Yes, Lorett was very worried that he might have taken his own life, particularly after the school he and Hilda had set up on Sontar was destroyed by the imperials.”

“They really had it in for him then.”

“I don’t know if Farley was particularly targeting him or just the Delphinidae in general, but Brett was in the same class as us at school so there may have been something personal in it.”

“Yeah, Brian was telling me about that. He sounds like a real loser.”

“Dare I say it, but I once thought your friend Graham reminded me of Brett, but now that I’ve heard what he’s been up to lately I think that was too severe a comparison.”

Bobby didn’t respond, and she realised too late that she’d struck a raw nerve.

“Well I’m glad you’re having fun playing golf, I mean divot, with Brian.”

“Yeah, he’s challenged me to a return match tomorrow.”

“You’d better get some sleep, then, and build up your strength.”

“I guess so. Sweet dreams, honey.”

“You too.”

* * *

The remainder of their holiday passed much like the first day, with Brian and Bobby trying to get the better of each other at divot, and Mary and Ron getting to know each other again while walking in the bush or swimming in the sea. They were both careful, though, not to let their feelings for each other overwhelm them.

“Have you had a nice time here, Mary?” he asked as they walked back towards the bungalows.

“It’s been perfect. I couldn’t have asked for anything better, honestly.”

“Me too. This has been the happiest two weeks of my life and I don’t want it to end.”

“But end it must, and Bobby and I will be off home soon. What are you going to do with yourself then?”

“Brian and I will be rebuilding the school on Sontar, with lots of help from the locals no doubt, and I imagine that will keep me

busy for a while. Beyond that, well I really haven't given it much thought. Perhaps I could come and visit you on Earth."

"You'd be most welcome any time. There are heaps of things I'd love to show you there."

"I'll do that, then, definitely, once the school is up and running again."

"Good, Ron. I don't want you getting depressed or anything."

"No, I'm fine; you don't have to worry about me."

She kissed him on the nose and he gave her a quick hug.

Bobby turned and walked back inside after seeing Mary and Ron kissing. He paced up and down across the room, trying to make sense of the conflicting emotions that were racing through him. He loved Mary, and wanted nothing more than to spend the remainder of his life with her, but he was also sympathetic to the hardship Ron had suffered and was aware that, after all, he'd had first dibs on her before fate had intervened and separated them.

Their last dinner on Shimmel was a subdued affair. Bobby was sullen, more so as Brian had resoundingly beaten him at divot, while Mary was feeling guilty for spending almost the entire time with Ron. Ron himself was struggling with his own feelings for Mary at a time when he thought he should still be grieving for Hilda. Only Brian was his usual cheerful self, but before long, even he sensed the discomfort and slipped into an uneasy silence.

After the meal, Bobby pulled Ron aside and took him out of earshot of the others.

"You're very fond of Mary, aren't you?" he asked.

"Um, yes I suppose I am a bit," Ron said, expecting to be wearing Bobby's fist in his mouth at any moment.

"It's more than just a bit, I expect. Look, Ron, I know you and Mary were lovers long before I ever came on the scene, and I just want you to know that if, well, if you two really want to rebuild your relationship, I, um, I won't stand in the way."

"Oh Bobby, I can't let you do that!"

"You can and I will. I mean it, Ron."

“No, Bobby, I couldn’t live with myself if I broke up your marriage. I love Mary, I won’t deny it, I’ve loved her all my life, even while I was married to Hilda, but to take her away from you would go against everything I’ve fought for and devoted my life to in the Order.”

Bobby was stunned. “You’re a true gentleman, Ron, if ever there was one.”

“Thanks, Bobby. Mary’s invited me to come and visit you on Earth after I’ve finished rebuilding the school on Sontar, and I’d like to very much if that’s okay with you.”

“Certainly, come as often as you like. You’re always welcome.” He patted him on the shoulder and led him back to the others.

* * *

Ron and Mary hugged each other as the boarding call for the *Endeavour* rang out through the Dolphin Island spaceport.

“Take care of yourself, Ron, and promise you’ll come and visit soon.”

“I will, just as soon as everything’s back in order on Sontar.”

“You should tag along too, Brian,” Bobby said. “You can try out the course back home.”

“I’ll look forward to it, most definitely.”

Bobby shook hands with Ron and Brian, and then took Mary by the hand and led her through the boarding gate and onto the waiting ship. In spite of the promises they’d made, he would never see either of them again.

Damon

Frank Halliday glanced up as he heard a knock on the door to his office. He'd been viewing the security footage taken just before the collapse of the palace on Bluehaven, watching in amazement as Jason's Barefooter powers were revealed.

"Cloe, what are you still doing here?" he asked as he saw his young serving girl standing in the doorway.

"My car won't start, and I'm supposed to be going to the Green Bunyips concert tonight and now I'll never get there in time." She burst into tears, and Frank immediately dashed out from behind his desk and offered her a tissue.

"Don't worry, I'll take you home and get Anton to have a look at your car first thing in the morning."

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"Of course. Now wipe your face and come along. We can't keep those Bunyips waiting now, can we?"

Frank pulled up in front of the Enderling house. Standing outside and looking anxious was a young teenaged boy dressed only in a pair of scruffy brown trousers. His blonde hair hung down to his shoulders in what was the current fashion for Meridian boys of Elvish descent.

"Sir, this is my brother Damon," Cloe said nervously as she introduced him.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Damon said as he shook his hand, but in the moment he made contact with the boy, Frank was almost overcome by a powerful aura emanating from him.

"Well, run along now and enjoy the concert," he managed to say, and slipped back into his car as quickly as he could. He took several deep breaths as he tried to calm himself.

“Jeeves,” he said to his elderly butler once he was back in the safety of his office, “what do we know about the Enderling family?”

“Cloe’s parents emigrated from Bluehaven about ten years before the time freeze was placed on Meridian, along with many others who were fleeing Morgoth’s battle with the remaining Barefooters. Cloe has a brother, Damon or Damien I think his name is, and he’d be about thirteen years old.”

“What did you say?”

“I said he’d be about thirteen.”

“No, the boy’s name.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Damon.”

“But you said it could be Damien, didn’t you?”

“Quite possibly I did, sir, but now that I think of it I’m pretty sure it’s Damon.”

“Thank you, Jeeves. I’ll be going to the Central Library for the next few hours, if anyone’s looking for me.”

“Of course, sir.”

Translations of the *Journals of Damien* into the common tongue were easy enough to find, but Frank wanted a copy of the original High Elvish version and that took a bit more searching. With perseverance, though, he eventually found what he was looking for and settled into a comfortable chair in the reading room.

“Yes,” he muttered to himself some time later. He was looking at one of the final entries in the journal, ‘*Er bede um dominae enderling*’, which translated to ‘*I may return as a humble fisherman*’.

“Enderling,” he said, “yes, it just might be.”

Anton was working on Cloe’s car when Jeeves approached him and cleared his throat.

“The master would like to see you,” he said.

“I’ll just wipe my hands and be right there.”

He followed Jeeves into the mansion and waited outside Frank's office.

"Come in, Anton, and take a seat."

"Thank you, sir. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, but before I begin, how are you going with Cloe's car?"

"It's a fractured crystal in the subspace power module, and I've just about finished fitting a replacement."

"Excellent. Now once you've done that I have another task for you. Do you remember how to get to Earth through Sheol?"

"Of course, sir."

"I'd like you to go there to this address," he said as he handed him a card, "and speak with a Dr Jason Collins. His son Mark is currently studying on Bluehaven with Lorina, the daughter of the Delphinidae High Priestess, and I need you to convince Jason to come back here with you. Tell him his son's Barefooter DNA is regenerating and he's in danger."

"Is it really regenerating? I wouldn't have thought that possible."

"It isn't, but I'm sure you can convince him that it is."

"I see, yes of course."

"Make sure a young boy named Christopher Smith is present when you tell him this and, without making it obvious, try to get Chris to come with him."

"Consider it done."

Frank sat back with his hands behind his head as Anton left the room. The wheels were in motion, and now all he could do was watch and hope for the best.

* * *

Anton sat in the corner of Jason Collins' living room, waiting on the arrival of the Smiths. So far, at least, everything had gone according to plan. In a flash of inspiration, he'd even asked the Smith boy for directions to Hampton Road when he'd passed him in the street, instilling in him a seed of concern for his friend Mark.

He had been a forensic psychologist in the old Department of Justice on Bluehaven, but with the fall of Morgoth he'd resigned, believing, quite rightly as it turned out, that the new administration would soon fail. For a short while he'd been unemployed, but then a colleague had put him in touch with Frank Halliday, and he'd been carrying out what he described as troubleshooting work ever since.

A car pulled up out the front and a few moments later Jason brought the Smith boy and his parents into 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?" Maleena 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 Mark's Barefooter genes were destroyed when he set off that pulse," Aaron said.

"Are you sure?" Anton asked. *'Like a bunyip to a honey pot,'* he thought.

"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 Collins 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?”

Anton held his breath while Jason looked around at the others, seeking inspiration, but none was forthcoming.

“Very well, I’ll go with you.”

“I’m coming too!” Chris said.

“Oh Chris,” Maleena cried.

“Forget it, kid,” Anton said, knowing that nine times out of ten you got what you wanted by asking for the opposite.

“But I have to,” Chris 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 Chris’s parents while Anton tried to keep his face impassive. Aaron nodded ever so slightly, and Maleena gasped.

“The boy comes with me or the deal’s off,” Jason said.

“Well, whatever,” Anton said. “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.”

* * *

Frank sat back and sighed with relief as Jeeves escorted Jason and Chris to their room to freshen up before dinner. Anton had delivered them to him an hour earlier, and he’d steered the conversation around the challenges those carrying the Barefooter

genes faced in dealing with their extremely long lives, suggesting ways that Jason could fill in the millennia ahead of him. This was nonsense, of course, as it was perfectly clear that Jason didn't carry the part of the Barefooter genes that disabled the aging process, but Chris had taken the bait and he'd had no trouble sowing the seeds that would be needed if the boy was to aid Damon in discovering his true identity.

He stepped out into the kitchen and spoke to Cloe, making sure she knew the role she had to play, before retiring to his room to dress for dinner.

"Come in and take a seat," he said as Jason and Chris entered the dining room.

Jeeves offered them wine, but as he'd expected, Jason declined and settled for grape juice instead.

Jason took a sip and then said, "May I ask where my son is?"

"You may ask," Frank said, "but I think for the moment I will decline to answer, other than to reaffirm that he's in no immediate danger."

"I see. 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 impassive, and Frank let them stew for a moment before continuing. "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, you would be placing your son in, how should I say it, in a position of extreme prejudice."

"I see," Jason said, and the look of horror on Chris's face told Frank he'd all but won.

After they'd finished eating, Frank leant back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head.

"Let me be frank," he said, and the boy exploded with laughter. Frank watched with satisfied amusement as he kept trying

unsuccessfully to control himself. He blushed bright red and Frank thought he might be about to crawl under the table and disappear, but eventually he was able to regain his composure.

“Yes, very well, Frank by name and *frank* by nature, as Tom Collins was fond of saying to me,” Frank said, almost setting the boy off again. “As I’m sure you know, 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.” The latter was blatantly false, but he didn’t think either Jason or Chris would know 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 naïve and too unfamiliar with our politics to take on such a role. He would be used, by those who would 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.”

That, at least, was true enough, and he paused and sipped his liqueur while letting his words sink in.

“There’s no doubt the passing of Morgoth has left a power vacuum that’s not been completely filled by the new government. 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.

“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 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.

“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, and Frank breathed a barely-concealed sigh of relief.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some work to catch up on before I too retire. Jeeves will escort you back to your room.”

A moment after Jeeves had led them from the room, Cloe entered.

“Now you know what it is you have to do?” Frank asked.

“Yes,” she said nervously.

“Excellent. Everything’s running according to plan so far.”

“But I don’t understand what this is all about.”

“It’s better that you don’t at this stage, but soon you will, and I can assure you it’s all for the best.”

“Thank you, sir.”

* * *

“Do you want to stay for dinner, Damon?” Pip’s mother asked.

“No, I’ll be fine,” Damon said.

“Damon doesn’t eat,” Pip said, causing his friend to glare at him. The trouble was, though, of late it was becoming increasingly true.

He’d never been a big eater at the best of times, but now his appetite seemed to be diminishing at an ever increasing rate. He’d stopped having breakfast at around the time he’d started high

school and his school lunch had always ended up in the rubbish bin uneaten. Now he was having to find more and more devious ways of avoiding dinner as well and even if he only ate twice a week it still felt like too much. Yet in spite of this he hadn't lost any weight, quite the contrary actually, and that more than anything was what was scaring him.

He'd studied the history of the Barefooters who had once ruled the galaxy, and knew that their autothermic genes allowed them to draw energy directly from subspace, giving them characteristics very similar to what he was now experiencing. For, in addition to his non-existent appetite, he'd never been able to wear shoes and avoided wearing a shirt as much as possible. Even the old threadbare trousers he now constantly wore were starting to make him overheat in the warmer weather and he thought he'd soon have to abandon teenage fashion and start wearing shorts or even just swimming trunks instead.

Yet he'd read that the traits of the Barefooters and the Elves, derived from the Dolphins' gifts to Damien and Lorna respectively, were mutually exclusive, which meant he couldn't possibly be a Barefooter. For an intelligent and thoughtful boy, this unresolved paradox only further fuelled his anxiety.

"Mum will have dinner waiting for me," he lied, bidding farewell to his only friend as he began his nightly ritual of wandering the streets for a few hours until it was safe to arrive home and pretend he'd already eaten.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow then," Pip said cheerfully, and Damon smiled. Of all the kids at school, Pip was the only one who hadn't ostracised him, and he supposed he should be grateful for that. They'd been close friends since kindergarten, long before Damon's strangeness had become apparent, and its manifestation had actually drawn them closer together. Part of the reason, he thought, was that Pip himself had never been a particularly popular boy with the other students, due to his occasional stutter and slight physical disability, and it was probably true to say that they'd each sought refuge in the other's company.

He wandered slowly through the quiet streets until he came to the riverside park, where he made his way to the bank and sat on a rock. Although Meridian had no moon, Elfstar was high in the sky at this time of year and he had no trouble finding his way around by its light. Orbiting that star was Bluehaven, the world his parents had fled at the beginning of the War of the Barefooters. They'd taken refuge on Meridian, but four years after Cloe's birth the fighting had come to that world and it had been frozen in time for a million years.

He'd often asked his elders what it had been like during the time freeze, but the only answer he'd received was that it was like being asleep and unable to wake up. He suspected there was more to it than that, though, other horrors perhaps that no-one wished to speak of, and he thought his sister's testy nature may have stemmed from her experience of the freeze at such a young age.

As he looked skywards, his vision came to him again, of a burnt-out village whose smouldering embers still glowed in the pre-dawn grey, the pungent smell of smoke and death hanging accusingly in the air. With it came the knowledge that, had he come sooner, he could have saved his people. But then it faded and he found himself crying, alone and afraid in a world where he no longer belonged.

At length he rose and returned home, the coolness of the night air lifting his spirits a little. Lights were still on inside his house, and when he opened the front door, he heard an unfamiliar voice coming from the living room.

Before him sat a boy of similar age to himself, dressed only in brightly coloured shorts and sipping hot chocolate. He stood as Damon entered.

"This is my brother Damon," Cloe said, her contempt for him clearly audible in her voice. "Damon, this is Christopher."

"Um, you look kind of familiar," Damon mumbled as he tried to remember where he'd seen this boy before. "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,” Chris said.

“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?”

Damon listened in wonder as Chris described the chain of events that had led him firstly to Frank Halliday and now to his home, and at that moment, he wished more than anything that he could play a part in such an adventure.

“Can I go to Bluehaven with Chris?” he asked on an impulse, knowing as soon as he’d opened his mouth that the answer would be no.

“Don’t you have school tomorrow?” his mother asked.

“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, totally flummoxed that his mother had given in so easily. “Thanks Mum, thanks.”

* * *

Frank Halliday smiled to himself as he hung up the phone. He’d just been speaking to Sophie Enderling, Damon’s mother, and she’d informed him that Damon had left for Bluehaven with Chris and Cloe. He picked up the phone and made another call.

“Kevin, it’s Frank. The boy’s on his way now, and so far everything’s going as planned. Are you right at your end?”

“Yes, we’re ready for him here.”

“Excellent.”

“So do you really think he’s, you know?”

“I have no doubt at all.”

“We live in interesting times.”

“Indeed we do.”

* * *

Damon's eyes opened wide in amazement as they crested the ridge that separated the western and eastern sides of Dolphin Island, and he beheld the Delphinidae Temple for the first time in his life. Its white towers gleamed in the late morning sun and from the top of each flew banners depicting the Temple's standard, a golden dolphin on a turquoise background.

The flight from Meridian to Bluehaven had been a bit of an anticlimax for him. He'd expected something special and exotic to happen when they made the transition to subspace, but instead there was nothing more than a flash of blue light from outside the ship, and moments later another flash had accompanied their arrival. Still, it was the first time he'd travelled further than the nearest town and nothing could mute his excitement for long.

Cloe led them down and into the Temple, then across the courtyard and into a reception room.

"We're looking for Mark and Lorina," she said to the young woman who greeted them.

"Take a seat just over there," the receptionist said after noting their names.

A few moments later Damon saw for the first time the young man whom he'd idolised his entire life, the legendary Mark the Bewildered who had defeated Morgoth and released Meridian from the time freeze. He and Cloe both bowed before him.

"Arise, my friends," Mark said. "Please, come join us for lunch." They followed him and Chris at a respectable distance behind.

Although Damon had seen numerous pictures of Mark, the reality was quite different to the expectation. He supposed he'd imagined some tall god-like being dressed in fine robes, but instead sauntering before him was an ordinary-looking young man wearing only a well-worn pair of shorts, his shoulder-length black hair hanging lank and damp as if he'd just emerged from the sea (which he had, and if he'd looked closer he would have seen the tell-tale sand on his feet).

Mark and Chris entered a room to the left, while Damon and Cloe waited at the door as a young woman in a plain white gown leapt up and embraced Chris. Damon guessed that this was Lorina, daughter of the High Priestess and destined to become the High Priestess herself upon her marriage to Mark.

“Chris, it is you!” she said. “I couldn’t believe it when Mark got the call saying you were here.”

“Come on in,” Mark said as he turned back to Damon and Cloe. “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.”

“We were expecting you home days ago,” Chris 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.”

“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?”

Damon nervously sat and helped himself to a glass of water while he listened to Chris describing all that had happened with Frank Halliday and someone named Anton. He still wasn’t the slightest bit hungry, but with everyone engrossed in what Chris was saying nobody noticed he wasn’t eating.

At the end of his tale, Chris’s lip began trembling, and he covered his face with his hands and began crying. Damon was suddenly overwhelmed with sympathy for him, and reached out and wrapped his arm around his shoulders. A moment later Mark had appeared on the other side of him, likewise comforting him.

“Oh Chris,” Mark said, “I had no idea any of this was happening, no idea at all.”

“But your father,” Chris whimpered, “he’s still back there, with Halliday.”

“Yes, and we’ll have to rescue him.”

“No,” Chris said, having regained his composure, “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.”

Damon shuddered as he saw the look of determination in Chris’s eyes and caught a glimpse of the man he would become, his own feelings of inadequacy threatening to overwhelm him in the light of Chris and Mark’s obvious bravery and strength. His head dropped as he wondered what had possessed him to tag along on Chris’s mission, and he wanted nothing more at that moment than to be sitting alone on his rock beside the river.

“Before we do anything, I wonder if you could both answer some questions that have been bugging me,” Chris asked, snapping Damon out of his introspection.

“Fire away,” Mark and Lorina answered in unison, causing them both to giggle.

“Okay,” Chris asked Lorina, “is it true that after 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,” Mark said patiently like a parent explaining something obvious to a child. “Do you remember where the pulse generator was hidden?”

“Yeah sure, it was in a stud in your board shorts. Oh I see, yes, your genitals would have been right in the firing line, so to speak.”

“So to speak.”

“Okay, one more,” Chris said, taking a deep breath and chancing a worried glance at Damon. “After the wedding, will you both be living here permanently?”

Mark looked at Lorina, who nodded her head after a few moments thought.

“We were going to wait until we were back on Earth to tell you,” Mark said, “but now that you’ve asked I can’t lie to you, Chris.”

“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.”

Chris looked stunned while Mark grinned from ear to ear in an open display of friendship that moved Damon deeply.

“I thought you’d be pleased,” Mark said, “but don’t tell anyone back home, will you. We want to surprise them.”

“Yeah sure,” Chris whispered. “Wow, that’s great, just wonderful!”

Damon glanced at both of them, wondering if he should pipe in now with something that was bugging him.

“I have a question, if you don’t mind,” he squeaked.

“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.”

“I know someone who works 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, clearly believing him to be making the whole thing up.

“Pip’s father.”

“Yes, of course, Richard Ingle, his name is. You should give him a call.”

Mark picked up the phone in the corner of the room and put the call through, but by the time he’d hung up he’d turned pale.

“What did he say?” Damon 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.”

“That can’t be,” Lorina said, now turning pale herself. “The Temple’s own travel agent made the booking for us.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Damon said, his own self-doubt now totally forgotten.

“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.” He didn’t really think he or Cloe would be in any danger, but there was no way he was going home just now.

“I think you’re right,” Mark said. “I’ll make the call.”

“They said I could keep you here for as long as I want,” he said after hanging up, and Damon couldn’t help grinning.

“I think we should go and see my parents now,” Lorina said and Mark nodded. She led them back out into the courtyard and headed diagonally across to the opposite side. Damon moved up alongside Mark.

“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 placed his hand on Damon’s shoulder. He flinched for just a moment, but then looked Mark directly in the eyes for the first time and saw something he’d hoped for but hadn’t dared believe possible. He smiled.

“I was once more powerful than Morgoth, or so I’ve been told,” Mark said, “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.”

Damon nodded. He’d been right about what he’d seen, and for the first time in his life he felt wanted and worthy of his existence. At the same moment, something welled up inside him, something powerful, and he was overwhelmed with a feeling of wonder and triumph. Then it passed, and he was just plain old Damon Enderling again.

Lorina led them through the shrine and into the anteroom where she introduced Damon and Cloe to her parents. Chris quickly recounted the events of the past two days and then Lorina and Mark told them of the confusion over the status of the *Endeavour*.

“Someone is playing games with us,” Mark said.

“Frank Halliday. Just who the hell is he?” Kevin asked.

At that moment, the lights went out, replaced a few seconds later by the dull emergency lighting. Several guards came running into the room.

“Someone’s cut the power and all communications to the Temple,” one of them said.

Kevin reached under his desk and pressed a hidden button. A panel behind him slid aside, revealing an opening filled with a dull shimmering light.

“The five of you, go through there into Sheol. Lorett, summon the Dolphins and tell them we have five to transport to Earth.”

As soon as they’d all passed through, Kevin closed the portal and a few moments later the normal room lighting flickered back on. He picked up the phone and placed a call to Meridian.

“They’re on their way to Earth,” he said.

* * *

Damon looked around in wonder as they emerged into the kitchen of Chris’s home on Earth. His journey through Sheol with the Dolphins had been amazing enough, but after an indeterminate time in total darkness, the brightly-lit room with its big windows looking out over the sea was almost overwhelming.

He had never been in Sheol before, and indeed hadn’t even been aware of its existence, and yet from the moment he’d passed through the portal in the Temple it felt oddly familiar, to the point where he’d been sure he could have led them to Earth without any help from the Dolphins. As they’d flown through the darkness, vague images had come to him of worlds that could be accessed through other portals along the way.

The reaction of the Dolphins also struck him as a little odd. He’d never had any contact with them before, and yet they seemed to know him and treated him with what was almost reverence.

The strangest thing, though, was when he happened to glance at his feet after the Dolphins had set them down and realised he was glowing slightly in the darkness. The Dolphins themselves glowed quite brightly, which was why he hadn’t noticed it earlier, but there was no hint of any light coming from Mark, Lorina, Chris or even Cloe. He wondered what it all meant.

Maleena was standing in the kitchen when the five travellers emerged from the portal that had formed in the wall, and Chris

quickly introduced everyone. Soon other family members and friends began arriving, and Chris's father quickly had the barbecue stoked up. Damon sat down on the grass away from the others, watching all the activity going on around him. Through his Elvish empathy he sensed the strong love amongst the Smith and Collins families, as well as the concern everyone was feeling for Jason.

Chris came and sat alongside him, and then Cloe handed each of them 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, unable to resist the temptation to stick another barb into her brother, and Damon obligingly cringed.

"Dig in," Chris said, and Damon cut off a small piece of meat and started chewing on it. It seemed tasty and tender enough, but when he tried to swallow, it almost caught in his throat and his stomach gurgled alarmingly. He tried a little lettuce, thinking it looked innocuous enough, but his body simply didn't want to be fed. With a sigh, he sat the plate on the ground and sipped a little water while Chris made short work of his.

"I guess I'm still not hungry," he said miserably as Chris glanced at his uneaten dinner.

"Tell me, did you eat anything in the Temple at lunch time?"

Damon shook his head.

"So when was the last meal you had?"

"Three, maybe four days ago."

"And you're still not hungry?"

Damon again shook his head.

"You sound just like Jason." Suddenly Chris's face lit up, as if he'd just solved a particularly troublesome problem.

"Damon," he whispered, "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."

For Damon those words fell on him like a lead weight, confirming everything he'd feared and dreaded for most of his life. There was no doubt now, he was an outcast, a freak, perhaps even a monster.

“Maybe I am,” he finally said, “but that’s supposed to be impossible. I’m an Elf, and from what I know of the history of our people, no Elves were ever autothermic.”

At that moment a raucous noise unlike anything Damon had ever heard began building in the distance, drawing closer and closer until it seemed to stop just outside the front of the house. Chris grabbed him by the hand, pulling him up, and dragged him around the side to see what it was.

The source of the noise was a two-wheeled machine, and sitting upon it were two men. The one on the back, a short, dark-skinned man wearing only yellow shorts, cautiously stepped off and removed his helmet, handing it to the man on the front who strapped it to the handlebars, turned the machine around and charged off back down the street.

“Dad!” Mark cried as both he and his mother ran out to embrace Jason. Damon was overwhelmed by the strong emotions flowing around him and reached over, placing his arm around Chris’s shoulder.

“Only love now, all the worry has gone,” he whispered, but then he saw again the vision of the burnt-out village and wondered where all the love had gone. “Strong love,” he said as it faded and he found himself staring into Chris’s eyes, unsure of where he was or what was happening to him.

“Are you okay?” Chris asked.

“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.”

Chris continued to gaze into his eyes and Damon felt something stir within him, as if a resolution of everything that had troubled him was close at hand but still tantalisingly out of reach.

Everyone gathered around as Jason told how, after he’d woken, the mansion had seemed deserted, but then Jeeves had finally appeared and escorted him outside to where Anton was waiting alongside his shuttle. He’d been taken to the spaceport and led

through Sheol back to Earth, still none the wiser as to what any of this had been about.

After he'd finished, Chris waved Mark over to him. "Mark, we need to talk, just the three of us alone."

"Yeah, sure. Here or at my place?"

"Actually I was thinking down on the beach may be better." Chris glanced at Damon who smiled back.

"Good idea," Mark said. "I'll go and let the others know what I'm up to, then we can wander down there."

"Thanks Chris," Damon said.

Chris led them down the road to the beach and found a comfortable spot on the sand. The night was cool and clear, and the sound of the small waves breaking on the shore put Damon in a relaxed frame of mind.

"I think Damon might be autothermic," Chris said to Mark.

"So do I," Damon said, "even though it's not supposed to 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."

"Is there anything else you've noticed?" Mark asked.

"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 going 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 older."

"How old are you now, Damon?"

"I'm thirteen, but I turn fourteen in a few months time."

“Yes, I thought that might have been 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,” Chris said.

“Yes,” Damon said. “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,” Chris said.

“Yes, the dream.”

“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 have been like?”

“The Delphinidae say that an unborn child is like an empty book, waiting for life’s experiences to be written into it,” Damon said.

“Exactly,” Chris 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 Damon really didn’t hear him, for what Chris had said

had struck a powerful resonance deep within him and once again, he felt he was on the verge of discovering his true nature.

“But he’s right, absolutely right,” he whispered.

“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,” Chris 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 asked, and the final barriers inside Damon’s mind shattered. He broke out into uncontrollable laughter, a laughter so pure and innocent it recalled a moment in his childhood long ago when he and his twin sister had waded into the water on their new home world and discovered the Dolphins for the very first time. Had he been capable of analysing his thoughts he would have realised it wasn’t his childhood at all, but in his state of mirth such analysis was quite beyond him and he simply basked in those memories that weren’t his own.

Chris and Mark each put an arm around him, cementing a bond of friendship that would last a lifetime, and while Damon chuckled and the stars and galaxies wheeled overhead, they were each consumed with a sense of joyful renewal, of a universe reborn and full of promise.

And so it came to pass that the spirit of Damien, twin brother of Lorna and cofounder of the Delphinidae, returned to the physical realm, and as Damon slept that night in the tent Aaron had pitched in the back yard for him and Chris, Damien's memories and knowledge passed into him and made him whole. The next morning the local Dolphins gathered around the shore and Damon swam out amongst them, receiving their blessings and words of wisdom, and afterwards Kevin and Loretta, having been forewarned by Frank Halliday, arrived in their golden shuttle to escort him and Cloe back to Bluehaven.

* * *

"So do you really think the boy will fill the power vacuum left by Morgoth?" Kevin asked as he sat in Frank's office, sipping a liqueur.

"As strange and unlikely as it sounds when you put it like that, I really believe he will. Although he is soft-spoken and humble, the antithesis of Morgoth, he has a strength of spirit that touches and moves people in a way Morgoth never could."

"Yes, I've felt it too, even in the short time he's been with us. I hope, for the sake of the galaxy, that you're right."

"We must remain vigilant, though, if we want to avoid a repeat of what happened on Meridian."

"I know, and I really think the Temple needs to play a much greater role in government now."

"Cornipus and Hazler will oppose you," Frank said.

"Yes, but Meridian will support us, and maybe Damon can help swing the others."

"You are not to use the boy as a political tool, Kevin."

"No, of course not, but already he's becoming a focal point for public opinion, and we need to make sure it is, well, suitably directed."

"You're walking a dangerous path, my friend."

"Haven't I always?"

Call of the Delphinidae

In the early hours of the morning Bobby slipped into an uneasy dream, finding himself walking hand in hand with Mary across a field of green, his heart filled with happiness and joy.

The air was crisp and cool, but the bright sunshine warmed his back and shoulders while the dew-laden grass gently massaged his soles. He turned to Mary and kissed her, but as he did the sky began to darken, and there came from within the ground a deep and sinister rumbling. He stepped away from her and looked around as a terrible feeling of impending doom engulfed him, and then a fissure suddenly opened in the ground between them, throwing them in opposite directions and separating them.

“Quick, Mary, jump across before it gets too wide,” he cried.

She stood and took a few steps towards the growing chasm, but faltered.

“I can’t, Bobby, it’s too far!”

He watched on helplessly as the fissure widened and she disappeared into the darkness, but then, incongruous as it seemed in the context of the dream, a telephone started ringing.

He woke and stumbled out to the kitchen to answer the phone, but when he picked it up there was nothing but an icy silence. Perplexed, he hung up and returned to bed.

“What’s wrong honey?” Mary asked.

“The phone was ringing, but there was nobody there.”

“I didn’t hear it. I must have been sound asleep. It was probably just kids.”

“At four-thirty in the morning?”

“Yeah, it sounds a bit odd. Anyway, I’m sure if it was anything important they’ll ring back.”

Bobby lay staring at the ceiling, still disturbed by the coldness he'd felt when he'd picked up the phone, but sleep soon snared him and he found himself back on the edge of the chasm.

"Hello Bobby," a voice said, and he turned to see a woman in a white gown standing beside him.

"What's happening?" Bobby asked, gesturing at the chasm that was continuing to widen before him. "Mary's trapped on the other side!"

"Don't worry about her, she's safe and in good hands. I'm going to be looking after you from now on."

Before Bobby could say anything more, the ringing began again, pulling him up into consciousness.

By the time he'd woken and dragged himself out to the kitchen, Mary had answered the phone.

"It's bad news, honey," she said. "Your father was taken ill last night and has been rushed to hospital. Your mother said it doesn't look too good."

"Oh God," he said as he sat heavily on a stool, almost knocking it over. Mary passed him the phone.

"Hello, Mum. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. It's your father you need to be worried about."

"We'll come as soon as we can."

"Thanks, Bobby."

"Do they know what's wrong with him?"

"Not really. He started feeling crook last night and the doctors are still doing tests, so it's all a bit of a mystery."

"Well hold tight, Mum, and we'll be with you shortly. Oh, was it you trying to ring a little earlier?"

"No, I've only just returned from the hospital."

"That's strange then, because I'm sure the phone was ringing about an hour ago but when I answered it there was no-one there."

"No, it wasn't me. It must have been a wrong number, or kids playing a prank."

"I guess so. Now go and get some sleep, and we'll be there as soon as we can."

* * *

Ron looked up as Kevin and Damon entered his room.

“Can you spare a moment, Dad?” Kevin asked.

“Certainly. Moments are in plentiful supply for me these days, it seems.”

The reconstruction of the school in Golding had been completed well ahead of schedule, thanks largely to the dedication of the local community, and he’d returned to Bluehaven to assist Mark and Lorina with their studies. Following their departure to Earth, he’d found himself at something of a loose end.

“I trust you are well, Father Simmons,” Damon said.

“I am indeed, thank you, and please call me Ron. Now, take a seat and tell me what I can do for you.”

“Thank you, Ron,” Damon said as he sat. “I’ve been hearing wonderful things about your work on Sontar.”

“Well most of the credit should go to my late wife Hilda.”

Damon saw a flash of grief on Ron’s face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to reopen old wounds.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ve come to terms with her loss, and I’m happy now to see that her life’s work has not been in vain.”

“You have my most sincere sympathies, Ron,” Damon said, bowing his head. “Now, as I’m sure you know, Mark and Lorina will be establishing a Delphinidae college on Earth immediately after their wedding.”

“Dad was the one who first suggested the idea,” Kevin said.

“I should have guessed,” Damon said, grinning broadly. “Now I have no doubt they are fully committed to the task that lies ahead of them, and I’m sure they are skilful enough to bring it to fruition, but Kevin and Loretta have suggested to me that it may be wise for the Temple to appoint someone with experience to oversee the construction and day-to-day management of the college. I was thinking that, um, that you would be ideal to fill such a position, given your experience on Sontar.”

“I’m flattered, of course,” Ron said, “and I’d be happy to help in any way I can. I suppose, well, I can’t think of any reason off the top of my head why I wouldn’t be able to do as you ask, assuming of course that Mark and Lorina would have me.”

“Don’t be silly, Dad,” Kevin said. “They both think the world of you.”

“Well I suppose, if you put it like that, I can’t very well refuse, can I?”

“Thanks Ron,” Damon said. “I knew I could count on you.”

“I’ll do what I can. When do you want me to start?”

“Construction won’t begin until after the wedding, so there’s probably little point in you travelling to Earth before then, but I’ll ask Lorina to send you their plans so you can acquaint yourself with what they have in mind.”

“That sounds fine to me.”

“Thanks Ron. I appreciate your help, I really do.” Damon stood and shook Ron’s hand, then bowed and dashed from the room.

“What an amazing young man,” Ron said to Kevin after he’d disappeared. “How old is he?”

“He turns fourteen next month.”

“Incredible.”

“We’re trying very hard not to overburden him, but his enthusiasm seems almost unbounded and there’s no doubt he’s a born leader. Yet in many ways, he’s still a thirteen-year-old boy, and we constantly have to remind ourselves of that. Thankfully his parents and sister have been very supportive, and his young friend, Pip Ingle from Meridian, has recently joined us as an acolyte.”

“Ah yes, the disabled boy, I’ve seen him about the Temple.”

“Don’t let him hear you call him disabled, Dad. His enthusiasm and strength of spirit more than make up for his physical limitations.”

“I know. I’m sure he’ll be a great asset to the Temple.”

“Yes, he will.”

“To change the subject, I hear you and Loretta are considering standing for the Galactic Council.”

“Yes, with Lorina about to take over as High Priestess, we’re looking to broaden our horizons.”

“Well, good luck, but be mindful of what happened to Lariate.”

“Don’t worry, Dad, the security’s much stronger now, and the political climate in the galaxy is much more settled, particularly now that Damon has appeared. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure you will. I’m just a foolish old man who has nothing better to do with his time than worry about his children.”

“After all you’ve been through you have every right to worry, but I really think the worst is now behind us.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Thank you, Damon,” a voice seemed to whisper from right behind him, and as Damon turned his head he thought for a moment he’d seen the woman in white who’d been visiting him in his dreams of late. There was no-one there, though, and he shook his head briefly before continuing on his way back to the library.

That night, for the first time in many months, Ron dreamt of Hilda. She was standing in a lush green field on the edge of a broad river, and on the far bank stood a city of gleaming white towers.

“Hilda?” he asked.

“Grieve for me no more, Ron, for I have found my place here,” she said, gesturing towards the city.

“But I miss you so much.”

She grimaced for a moment, but then her expression hardened as she seemed to reach a difficult decision.

“I love you, Ron, and it is from that love that I now do what I must. Find happiness in what lies ahead, and all will be well.”

The dream faded, and by morning, it had been forgotten.

* * *

Bobby, Mary, Aaron, Maleena and Chris arrived in Narrabri late in the afternoon and took a taxi directly to the hospital.

“Thanks so much for coming,” Madeleine said as soon as she saw them, and they each gave her a hug.

“How is he, Mum?” Bobby asked.

“Still pretty crook, and the doctors haven’t figured out yet what he’s got, but he’s hanging in there for now.”

She led them towards the lift and took them to the sixth floor. At the end of a narrow corridor that smelt strongly of antiseptic was a private room, and lying flat on his back beneath a starched white sheet was a haggard old man that Bobby barely recognised as his father.

“Do I really look that bad?” Terry asked as he saw the expression on Bobby’s face.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Nah, if I look half as bad as I feel your reaction is perfectly understandable.”

“Do they know what’s ailing you yet?”

“They have no idea, son, but I reckon I’m just worn out, that’s all.”

Mary reached out with her healing skills, but she knew straight away that what she faced was way beyond anything she could treat.

“I’ve had a good innings and I can’t complain, not really,” Terry continued. “Now where’s that crazy grandson of mine?”

“I’m right here, Granddad,” Aaron said as he stepped forward.

“Look at you, all grown up and with a wife and kid of your own now. How the time flies.”

“It sure does,” Aaron said, feeling awkward and out of his depth.

“Is that my great-grandson hiding behind you? Come over here where I can see you. I won’t bite.”

“Hi,” Chris said even more awkwardly than his father. “I’m sorry you’re sick.”

“So am I, kiddo,” Terry laughed, but then started coughing. One of the instruments alongside his bed began beeping more aggressively.

“Can you see her?” he said, his eyes now staring at the corner of the room. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

He coughed once more, and then an alarm sounded and a nurse came running into the room.

“Could you wait outside, please,” she said as she pulled a curtain around the bed. Mary took hold of Bobby’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

The funeral service was well attended. Terry had joined the lawn bowls club when wielding a cricket bat had become too strenuous for him, and had been a popular member. Many had come to pay their respects, not only from Narrabri but from a number of surrounding towns as well.

The day was hot and oppressively humid, unusual for Narrabri which was more accustomed to a dry heat in summer, and the weather men were predicting storms for later in the day. Bobby had presented the eulogy and survived the ordeal without passing out or forgetting what he’d meant to say, although Mary thought he’d come close to both on more than one occasion.

Afterwards a light luncheon was served, organised by Madeleine and the ladies from the bowling club. Mary and Maleena had offered to help but she had insisted everything was under control, and indeed it was, although in light of the weather the cool drinks were in short supply whereas the hot food went largely uneaten.

“Long time no see,” a voice said as a hand fell on Bobby’s shoulder, and he turned to find himself face to face with Graham MacDonald. He hadn’t seen Graham since moving to Coolum Beach, and the passing of the years had not treated him as kindly as it had Bobby and Mary. His face was deeply lined and marked with the signs of a lifetime of alcohol consumption, while what little hair remaining on his head had turned almost completely white. A cigarette dangled precariously from the corner of his mouth.

“Since when have you taken up smoking?” Bobby asked as the shock of seeing what had become of his friend began to pass.

“To be honest I can’t remember,” Graham said, his voice husky and dry. “You should try it.”

Mary bristled, and Graham shot an icy glance at her.

“I think I’ll pass,” Bobby said. “So, what are you up to these days?”

“I took an early retirement from Unlimited Energy about five years ago and joined the bowling club. Do you remember Ron Edwards from school?”

“Ron the dork?”

“Yeah, that’s him. He moved back here soon after you disappeared off to the coast, and he’s not a bad bloke now. He invited me to join the club and, well, that’s what I’ve been doing ever since. Your parents were members as well, of course, and we had some good times together. I’m going to miss old Terry.”

“Yeah, me too. I feel kind of guilty not having seen much of him and Mum since we moved. I should have made an effort to come back here more often.”

“Say, they’re putting on a bit of a wake for your father back at the club later this afternoon, so why don’t you come along?”

Bobby glanced at Mary, but she just shrugged.

“Yeah, why not?” he said.

“Are you staying at your Mum’s place?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll pick you up around three then.”

“Great, I’ll see you then.” Bobby patted him on the shoulder as he turned and disappeared into the crowd.

“Don’t you dare take up smoking,” Mary scolded.

“I’m not that stupid,” Bobby said, and she smiled.

* * *

The South Narrabri Bowling Club was well patronised when Graham led Bobby into the lounge.

“Everyone, this is Bobby, Terry’s son,” he said as they entered, and over the course of the next ten minutes, numerous people

whom Bobby had never met came up to him and offered him their condolences.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he turned to see a familiar face. "I'm so sorry about your dad," Ray Marshall said. "He was one of the best, laddie, without a doubt one of the best."

"Thanks Ray."

"Come over to the bar and I'll buy you a Guinness."

"I, um, I'm not supposed to..."

"Oh Bobby, for Pete's sake, you've got to have a drink at your father's wake," Graham said.

"Well, okay, yeah I guess so."

"Here, get this into you," Ray said as he handed him a schooner of the black ale. Bobby took a sip and nodded. "Same for you, Graham?"

"But of course."

"Do you think it was a good idea letting Dad go to the wake with Graham?" Aaron asked.

"No, but I could hardly stop him, could I?" Mary said.

"Maybe I should have gone to keep an eye on him."

"If you had, you'd have felt like a fish out of water the whole time and Bobby would've either been annoyed with you or got you drunk."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"Of course she is," Madeleine said. "Just let your father handle his grief in his own way, Aaron." He gave her a hug and she instinctively brushed his hair away from his eyes.

"How are you feeling now, Gran?" he asked.

"I'm okay. I guess the heat was a bit too much for me at the service." At that moment there was a flash of light from outside and a loud rumble of thunder shook the house.

"Looks like the storm's arrived," she said. "I suppose we should be thankful it didn't come any earlier."

The rain drummed loudly on the roof of the bowling club, making conversation difficult. Bobby, Graham and Ray had taken over one

corner of the bar, and the stack of empty glasses was continuing to grow.

“The river’ll be lapping at the door before long if this keeps up,” Ray said. “It’s been a good while since we’ve had rain like this.”

“It’s about time it let go,” Graham said. “The humidity we’ve been having is bloody unnatural.”

“I can’t say I noticed it,” Bobby said, “but I guess I’m used to it over on the coast.”

“Bloody coasty,” Graham said. “I’ll never know why you let that woman of yours drag you away from where you belong.”

“Now laddie, I’m sure he moved with the best of intentions,” Ray said. “So how’s my old mate Billy Collins these days?”

“Fine,” Bobby said. “He and Julia are still going strong.”

“I still find it hard to believe that you went to work for him of all people,” Graham said.

“He’s not a bad bloke once you get to know him.”

“One of nature’s gentlemen,” Ray added.

“I guess I’m outnumbered,” Graham said, and took another swig of Guinness. At that moment, the windows rattled as a particularly loud clap of thunder shook the building, and the lights went out. Ray dashed off to check out the subspace power converter.

“The inverter’s snuffed it,” he said when he returned some ten minutes later. “I guess there’ll be no more drinking here tonight.”

“It’s probably time I headed back home anyway,” Bobby said.

“I guess so,” Graham said. “It sounds like the rain’s starting to ease off a bit.”

By the time they turned onto Parkland Road the rain had intensified again, and Graham’s wipers were barely able to keep up.

“Looks like this rain’s set in,” Bobby said. “The farmers will be happy.”

“No they won’t,” Graham said. “Farmers are never happy. You watch, by tomorrow they’ll be complaining about the floods.”

Bobby was suddenly overwhelmed with an intense feeling of *dèja vu*. Almost half a lifetime ago he'd had this same conversation on this same piece of road, just before they'd knocked Aaron off his bike, and a shiver ran up his spine. On that day thirty years earlier, in weather similar to this, he'd been drinking with Graham and Ray, celebrating the awarding of the British Aerospace contract to Unlimited Energy, and all the years in between seemed to vanish as if they'd never been. As they rounded the bend, he fully expected to see Aaron pedalling along the edge of the road, his yellow rain jacket glistening in the headlights, and felt his stomach begin to cramp.

"Are you okay?" Graham asked.

"Yeah, this bit of road gives me the – hey, watch out for that woman!"

A middle-aged lady in a white gown was standing on the road right in front of them, her blonde hair seeming to glow in the stormy light.

"What woman? Where?" Graham asked.

"Are you blind or something?" Bobby yelled as they bore down on her.

"There's no-one there!" Graham yelled back.

At the last moment, Bobby grabbed hold of the steering wheel and pulled it hard to the left, causing the back of the car to spin out on the wet road. He swung his head around to see if they'd hit her, but as he did the car's wheels dropped into the ditch causing it to flip into the air, before an ancient gum tree brought its brief flight to an untimely end.

* * *

"The rain's getting heavier again," Aaron said as he looked out the window.

"The farmers will be pleased," Madeleine said, and an unexpected shiver ran up his spine.

"What's wrong, Aaron?" Mary asked.

"Just a goose walking over my grave, I guess."

"Don't you mean turkey?"

“Huh?”

The sound of the doorbell brought a thankful end to the conversation.

“That’s probably Dad,” Aaron said as he walked out to answer it, but even before he opened the door, he could sense trouble standing on the other side.

“Mr Smith?” asked one of the two drenched policemen waiting on the porch. Aaron nodded.

“May we come in?”

Aaron guided them through to the living room.

“Say, aren’t you Aaron Smith, the cricketer?” the younger officer asked.

“Yeah, I used to be.”

“Do you think I could have your autograph?”

“Not now, Blake,” his superior scolded.

“Oh, yes, sorry sir.”

Mary stood as they entered the room. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Is Bobby in trouble again?”

“I’m afraid I have some bad news for you,” the senior officer said. “I think you’d better sit down.”

“What’s happened?” Mary whispered.

“Your husband was involved in a motor vehicle accident a short while ago.”

“Is he hurt? Is it bad?”

The lightning flashed again and the roar of the thunder drowned out the policeman’s answer, but it didn’t matter, she knew anyway that her Bobby was dead.

* * *

Mary and Madeleine stood alone in front of the crematorium. Aaron, Maleena and Chris had wandered over to chat with Jason, Jenny, Mark and Lorina, who’d flown up from Coolum Beach to attend the service, while the other mourners returned to their cars.

“How are you holding up?” Mary asked.

“I’m fine, really. At least that heat and humidity has gone.” A south-westerly change the previous day had cleared the stormy

weather away and the air was crisp and cool, a taste of the autumn to come.

“Is there anything you’d like me to do?”

“Well, not really, but if you and Aaron could stay for a few more days it’d be nice.”

“Of course,” Mary said, but as she spoke, she saw someone approaching out the corner of her eye.

“Graham,” she snarled, “you have a nerve turning up here, after what you did.”

“It wasn’t my fault, I swear,” Graham pleaded. By a quirk of fate, he’d survived the accident with nothing more than a few scratches. “Bobby went crazy and thought he saw a woman standing in the middle of the road. He yanked the steering wheel out of my hands and that’s what caused the crash.”

“Don’t you ever give up? It’s never your fault, is it? You always have to blame someone else for your stupidity. You’re absolutely pathetic, you know that? Maiming my son wasn’t enough for you, was it, so now you’ve had to go and kill my husband as well. Well go back and crawl into whatever hole you live in, Graham, before I do something I might later regret.”

He turned and walked away, a picture of absolute misery, but then Mary unexpectedly remembered her father-in-law’s final words. “*Can you see her?*” Terry had said as he stared into the vacant corner of the ward. “*She’s beautiful, isn’t she?*”

A shiver ran up her spine.

* * *

Mary stood on the shore, the cold southerly wind blowing her hair into disarray and whipping up the water surface into a choppy cauldron. In her hand was the urn containing Bobby’s ashes and she held it out in front of her, waiting for the right moment to scatter them on the sea he’d once loved.

Her thoughts turned back to the first time she’d set foot on the sands of Coolum Beach. Bobby had won a holiday in a raffle at work, and they’d flown to Brisbane in an old combustion-powered

aircraft and driven up the coast to a motel opposite the beach. The whole fortnight had been an unforgettable experience, but it was the first night that she remembered now, the evening when they'd made love in the water, surrounded by dolphins. Aaron had been conceived that night, fulfilling her role in the prophecy and setting in motion the chain of events that would change her home galaxy forever.

The first few years of their marriage had been difficult, with Bobby spending much of his free time drinking with Graham, but they'd survived and, in hindsight, the bond between them had been made stronger and more resilient as a result.

Tears formed as she remembered the night she'd confessed her origins and mission to him. They had just attended what they'd believed was their son's funeral, and Bobby had been having nightmares as a result of her blocking his memory of discovering the portal in the cellar. She'd thought he would most likely bolt when he learnt he'd been married to an alien, but instead he'd amazed her by taking it all in his stride and even joked about her psychic powers.

With tears now flowing freely down her face, she turned her back to the wind and cast his ashes into the sea. For a few moments they floated on the surface, but soon the turbulent waters carried them away into oblivion. Beyond the breakers, and unseen by her, a line of dolphins watched on, paying their last respects to yet another human who had given his life for their cause.

Mary turned and left the water, joining Aaron who'd been standing close by in quiet respect. He put his arm around her and escorted her back to her home.

* * *

The wedding of Mark and Lorina was undoubtedly a joyous affair, and Mary was glad she'd been talked into coming. As Lorina's grandmother, she'd been placed on the high table for the reception and thoroughly enjoyed herself. Chris had performed

admirably as Best Man and the newlyweds themselves had been a joy to behold.

The service had been performed by a young boy named Damon who had earlier been ordained as Brother of the Delphinidae in a simple but moving ceremony. She had been told that the spirit of the legendary Damien had passed into the boy during the time Meridian was frozen, and she hoped she might have the opportunity to speak with him later on.

Whether by accident or design, seated next to her had been Ron, and at first she'd been torn between her grieving for Bobby and her feelings for him.

"I'm terribly sorry about what happened to Bobby," he said. "It was such a shock."

"It all happened so suddenly," she said, "and so soon after his father's death. Aaron, Maleena and Chris have been wonderful, though. I don't know how I would have gotten through it all without them."

"I know what it's like. Kevin, Loretta and Lorina helped me through my grieving for Hilda."

Mary shivered, and Ron cautiously took hold of her hands. She smiled.

"I hope Mark and Lorina have an easier time of it than we've had," she said.

"I'm sure they will. I've never seen a young couple so deeply in love with each other."

"Is it true that they're carrying the spirits of Martyn and Loria?"

"I believe there is a connection, and it's said Mark fulfilled a curse that Martyn placed on Morgoth a million years ago."

"Sometimes I feel like we're just pawns in some cosmic game of chess."

"Perhaps we are."

She felt another shiver run up her spine.

"Turkeys," she said. Ron looked puzzled for a moment, but then grinned.

"You were attacked by one in the graveyard in Bringal Vale," he said.

“Was I? I don’t remember.”

“We were pretty young at the time.”

“That explains it then. On Earth they have a saying about a goose walking over your grave, but I keep saying turkey instead.”

“It’s funny how the mind works.”

She laughed, and that shattered the last of the ice that had been binding her.

“Did I tell you I’ll be moving to Earth soon?” Ron asked.

“What?”

“They want me to manage the Delphinidae College Mark and Lorina are building there.”

“That’s wonderful, Ron! You’ll be perfect for the job, what with your experience on Sontar.”

“That’s what Kevin keeps telling me.”

“Well it’s true. That’s fantastic, it really is.” Without thinking, she kissed him on the nose and hugged him. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

* * *

Mary and Ron put down their paintbrushes as Lorina entered the room. They blushed as she noticed the daubs of yellow paint on their noses, and she couldn’t help wondering what they’d been up to. She’d never seen her grandfather as happy as he was now; coming to Earth had rejuvenated him, or perhaps it was Mary who’d done that. Either way, she was happy for them both.

“This is looking great,” she said as she glanced around the room.

“We should be done in about ten minutes,” Ron said.

“Well as soon as you’re finished get yourselves cleaned up, as we have guests for dinner tonight.”

“Who are they?” Mary asked.

“My parents.”

“I didn’t think they were coming until Saturday.”

“There’s been a slight change of plans. Damon wants to take them on a bit of a tour of the countryside before the opening ceremony.”

“I see.”

“Grandma, I was wondering, well, our first intake of acolytes start arriving next week and we’re still looking for someone to manage the library for us. Would, um, would you be interested in taking it on?”

She glanced at Ron, who grinned and blushed like a teenager. “I’d love to,” she said.

“Excellent. We might get you to do a bit of teaching as well, if you don’t mind. We still haven’t had much luck attracting staff.”

“I don’t see why not, although I’m a bit rusty on some of my bookwork.”

“Great. Our, um, manager will see to all the employment formalities.”

Ron blushed again.

Dinner turned out to be a veritable banquet. As well as Kevin, Loretta and Damon, Aaron, Maleena and Chris had also been invited, along with Jason and Jenny who’d been lending a hand during the construction. Lorina had snared one of the best chefs in the district to run the kitchen and the food was delightful, much better than what Mary remembered from her days as an acolyte in the Temple on Bluehaven.

“You’ve all done a fantastic job here,” Loretta said as they finished their desserts. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, as I’ve seen some of our facilities on the outlying worlds and most are, well, ramshackle would be a good description, but what you’ve built here rivals the Temple itself.”

“We’ve had lots of help from the locals,” Lorina said, casting a glance at Jason and Jenny.

“And the manager wields a big stick,” Mark added, grinning at Ron who obligingly blushed.

“As soon as word gets out you’ll have applicants queued up all the way to Brisbane,” Loretta said.

“Ron’s already working on plans for the extensions,” Mark said.

“Oh no, not more painting!” Mary cried.

At that moment, the waiter entered and invited everyone to adjourn to the lounge where coffee, tea and hot chocolate were being served. As they passed through, Mary pulled Aaron aside.

“I was wondering how you’d feel if I was to remarry,” she said.

“Who did you have in mind?”

“Oh, some old geezer I used to know on Bluehaven.”

“Well that’s all right then, although I’m sure he’s only interested in your body.”

“You don’t think it’s too soon, do you?”

“The only thing I want is your happiness, Mum. You and Ron were meant for each other, you know that.”

“Thanks, honey. I love you.”

* * *

Mary and Ron stood hand in hand on the shore, looking out to sea as the last of the sun’s rays painted the distant clouds a brilliant pink. A light sea breeze tussled their hair as small waves lapped over their feet.

“Do you think Bobby would be happy?” Mary asked.

“I’m sure he would. He once offered to stand aside for me, did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It was when we were on Shimmel. He said that if we wanted to rebuild our relationship, he wouldn’t stand in the way.”

“I still miss him so much, Ron.”

“As I do Hilda, but we must use our grief to strengthen us and not weigh us down.”

“You’re right of course.”

He squeezed her hand and she kissed him on the nose.

“Come on! The Dolphins are waiting for you!” Damon called from just beyond the breakers.

“Coming,” Mary said as they stepped forward into the water and swam out to have their union blessed.

Epilogue

Bobby found himself walking down a grassy slope. A broad river lay before him, and on the far side a city of towers gleamed under the warm sunshine. As he approached he saw banners strung between some of the towers, and across them were the words, *'Divot City Tournament – All Welcome'*.

Spanning the river was a silver bridge, and before it stood the woman he had seen on the road.

"You're just in time, Bobby. The first round is about to start, and you're the favourite for this year's championship."

"But I don't have my clubs."

"Here they are," she said, pulling his golf bag from behind her back. Bobby took it, noticing with joy that his clubs had all been polished to a silvery gleam.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I was once called Hilda."

"That's a pretty name."

"Thank you."

"A pretty name for a very pretty lady."

She took him by the hand and led him across the bridge. Beside it, hidden in the long grass, lay an old rusty sign, most of its writing long since faded. Two words remained though – *Styx* and *Farley*.

From atop one of the towers two voices could be heard above the noise of the city.

"Like a bunyip to a honey pot, my Lord."

"Yes indeed, young Brett. Now I wonder what she's up to?"