



CRY OF THE BUNYIPS

Jeff Pages

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BY

JEFF PAGES



CRY OF THE BUNYIPS
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By the same Author

*Barefoot Times, Call of the Delphinidae
and The Mind of the Dolphins*

Acknowledgements

This story had its genesis in 2007 when I was visiting my friends Peter and Usha Jeremy. Their son's boundless enthusiasm for the series was so awesome and humbling, I just didn't have the heart to say *no* when he asked with pleading eyes if there was to be a fourth book. So many thanks, Jashank!

I'm indebted to my blind friend Ray Foret Jr, who once again has been a literal sounding board for me as the story unfolded. His constant feedback and suggestions were vital in extricating me from the frequent holes I'd dug for myself.

To Karen Olliver, tireless Office Manager at Innes Corporation, thanks for her help with the blurb and for suggesting the name of my character Mog. I hope her daughter's friend who shares that nickname isn't too offended.

Thanks also to the fantastic group of friends who attended the launch of *The Mind of the Dolphins* and made it such a memorable experience. I was simply blown away by their support.

The novel *A Parallel Path* mentioned at the end of this story is a real book published by my good friend Marco Peel. I recommend it as a captivating read, but only after finishing this book of course!

Finally, a big thank you to the wonderful staff at Zeus Publications, whose patience, helpful advice and attention to detail is exemplary, and to Daniel White of Skytopia for allowing me to use his awesome Mandelbulb images on the book's website.

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, where he can frequently be found body-surfing or just walking along the beach.

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

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

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

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Florence Pages (1923-2010) who sadly passed away just three weeks prior to its completion. Her inspiration, support and love will be greatly missed.

The author also pays tribute to Professor Benoit Mandelbrot (1924-2010) for his pioneering work in chaos theory and fractals, particularly the Mandelbrot set. Its three-dimensional extension, the Mandelbulb, inspired the time nexus at the heart of this story.

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Part One

Blood Sport

The Honey Smugglers

The snow-capped mountains glistened under dawn's first light as the sun, bigger and brighter than yesterday, crept over the horizon. Roaring streams, fed by melting ice, cascaded into hidden valleys before disappearing beneath the rainforest canopy of what had just a few months earlier been a frozen wasteland.

To the north, fluffy white clouds, their bellies painted pink in the early light, foretold of the storms to come later in the day, bringing short relief from the oppressive heat and humidity.

The nervous young man in a grey business suit jumped to the ear-piercing cry of a red-tailed hawk as it answered the call of its mate further up the valley.

"Flaming bloody birds!" he yelled, pulling out a large white handkerchief and mopping his brow. "How much further do we have to go in this wretched jungle?"

"Not far now, no sir, we're almost there." Their guide, a short wiry man who looked as if he'd be just as much at home in Frizian's forty year winter as he was in its short steamy summer, quickened his pace.

Grey Suit dabbed at his brow again, while Clem and Russell followed a discreet distance behind, stooping to balance the earthenware pots strapped to their backs. Soon the smothering rainforest canopy blocked off all sight of the mountains and the rising sun.

Clem heard the sonorous hum of the Frizian honey wasps long before they reached the clearing. The tree before him, a giant amongst giants in this ancient forest, would have been impressive enough in its own right, but it was the dozens of conical nests hanging from its branches, the source of the humming he felt more than heard, that had captured his gaze. Each one, at least a metre across at the top, seemed

to quiver and dance hypnotically in time with the noise, and he felt himself pulled towards them, drawn up to join the humming denizens in their never-ending song.

“Put this on.” Clem was vaguely aware of their guide speaking, and forced himself to turn away from the cones. Grey Suit took the yellow plastic suit and face mask from the guide, who showed him how to secure all the zips and tabs before pulling his own protective garment from his pack and sliding into it with practised ease.

“What about us?” Clem asked. Russell gave him a frightened glance.

“Did you hear something?” Grey Suit asked the guide.

“Don’t worry,” the guide said to Clem. “The sting of a honey wasp is a most pleasant death. First there is beautiful music, then the sweet smell of honey, a golden light, the gentle caress of a dozen young virgins, and before you know it, you’re dead.”

“Porters are expendable,” Grey Suit said. “Don’t waste your time talking to them.”

“As you wish, good sir.” The guide pulled a canister and rubber hose from his pack. “Would you be so kind as to hold this for me?”

Grey Suit took the canister from him while the guide pointed the hose towards the nearest cone. “Open the valve please.”

A thick white smoke enveloped the hive while the droning intensified tenfold. Hundreds of orange specks flittered through the cloud before dropping to the ground.

“Are they dead?” Clem asked the guide.

“No, only stunned. Quickly now, bring your pot over here, and try not to step on them if you can. They can still sting even while unconscious.”

Clem inched his way forward, carefully brushing away the tiny wasps with the sides of his feet to clear a path for himself.

“Teach you to wear shoes next time, won’t it?” Grey Suit said. “Now hold it under the hive, just there.”

The guide pulled a long serrated knife from his belt, using it to cut a small hole in the base of the hive. Clem adjusted his grip on the pot as a viscous golden syrup oozed into it, quickly weighing it down until he thought it might slip out of his hands.

“Right, you’re done,” the guide said, plugging the hole with a wad of cloth. “Watch those wasps on your way out.”

Clem moved clear of the hive as Russell eased his way in to replace him. “Keep a firm hold,” he said as his friend shuffled forward with his pot. “It gets heavy very quickly.”

The guide removed the wad of cloth and began filling the second pot as soon as it was in position. Russell shifted his feet slightly to keep its increasing weight balanced, but as he did so, one of the stunned wasps began to flutter, bouncing along the ground next to his foot as it tried to become airborne.

“Russell, look out!” Clem yelled. Without thinking, Russell lifted his foot, but the liquid in his now almost-full pot shifted, throwing him off balance. For a moment he wavered on one foot in defiance of gravity, but as he began to fall he had no choice but to plant his other foot back down, right on top of the wasp.

Grey Suit, realising what was happening, grabbed the pot as it started to tip, but its weight was more than he’d bargained for. As Russell slumped to the ground with a look of puzzled bliss on his face, Grey Suit staggered backwards, the pot of honey held at arm’s length as he tried to regain his balance. He may have done so had a tree root not caught the heel of his shoe, and as he fell the pot dropped onto his chest, winding him before rolling over and cracking open on a rock, its precious contents oozing out across the ground.

“Do something!” he tried to yell, but little more than a wheezy whisper came out.

Clem, ignoring him, dashed to Russell’s side, pulling something from his pocket as he knelt and checked his vital signs.

“You’re wasting your time,” the guide said, also ignoring Grey Suit’s plight, but Clem began resuscitation nonetheless.

“Damn you!” Grey Suit said to no-one in particular. “Damn you all!”

The guide turned towards him to inspect the damage. “I’m afraid that pot is beyond redemption.”

“You’ll be beyond redemption if you don’t shut it! How am I going to explain coming back with only half our quota?”

“It’s better than having none at all.”

“All right, you can tell the boss then. Now help me up!”

By now the wasps were beginning to regain consciousness, the smell of spilt honey perhaps arousing them.

“Leave him before you get stung yourself,” Grey Suit said to Clem as he saw him still working on Russell. Clem turned towards him, a look of utter contempt on his face.

“Do as he says,” the guide said, stepping over and placing a hand on Clem’s shoulder. “Your friend’s in a better place now.”

Clem placed his fingers on Russell’s neck, checking vainly for any sign of life, before shaking his head and standing.

“Mind the wasps,” the guide said as Clem made his way back to his pot and began strapping it onto his back.

* * *

The town of Karmetz bustled with sweaty people as Grey Suit, Clem and their guide approached the *Exotaroma Bar and Grill*. Itinerant workers from all over the galaxy had been arriving for the start of the spice harvest, and for the business owners in the many small towns scattered across the planet, it was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to turn their investments into profit. With the high prices Frizian spices fetched on the open market, those profits more than made up for the forty lean years in between.

“You sure took your time, didn’t you?” the tall no-nonsense woman said as she strode out of the bar to meet them. “I was about to send out a search party.”

Grey Suit glanced at the guide, who shrugged.

“Where’s the other pot? There were supposed to be two.”

“That stupid Cornipean got himself stung and broke it,” Grey Suit said.

“What do you mean, *broke*?”

“It cracked open and spilt. There was nothing I could do.”

“The porter?”

“Dead.”

She turned to Clem. “You, bring your pot over here.”

She removed its stopper and inserted a glass pipette.

“It has a good colour. We can water it down and no-one will notice.” She looked up at Clem. “Would you like a taste?”

Clem shook his head.

“Don’t worry, it’s perfectly harmless to humans, but the taste, well, it makes you wonder what bunyips see in it.”

She placed a drop on the tip of her finger and brushed it across Clem’s lips. Reluctantly, he dabbed at it with his tongue, but immediately turned his head and spat into the bushes.

“Remember that taste. It may save your life some day.”

Clem turned back to her, his expression as bitter as the honey.

“The porter who died, was he a friend of yours, a close friend perhaps?”

Clem nodded.

She stepped over to her vehicle, rummaging around in the back for a moment before pulling out a shovel and handing it to him.

“Go and give him a proper burial before the carrion birds take him.”

Clem glared at her, but took the shovel.

“Go, now!”

He turned, pausing for a moment as if tempted to challenge her, before lowering his head and walking back in the direction of the forest.

“Who is he?” she said to Grey Suit once Clem was out of earshot.

“A former Delphinidae scholar I believe, now unemployed since the dolphins jumped ship. There are lots of them here looking for work.”

“Well I don’t trust him. There’s something about his eyes, don’t you think?”

“They looked Elvish enough to me. Do you want me to pay him out?”

“Either that or kill him; it’s your choice.”

Grey Suit smiled. “When’s the big event?”

“Tuesday week, but keep it quiet.”

“My lips are sealed.”

* * *

Russell opened his eyes as something tickled the side of his face, the bright sunlight causing his headache to flare. He closed them

again as he eased himself up onto his elbow. All around him droned the humming of the honey wasps, while a couple of metres away a small furry animal sniffed at a patch of spilt honey.

“No, don’t,” he said, pushing himself up into a sitting position. “Come away from that.”

The bunyip looked up at him, a sad and puzzled expression on its face.

“That’s bad poison; you don’t want to go touching any of it.”

The bunyip looked back down at the honey, sniffing it again before trotting over and climbing onto his lap.

“Good boy,” Russell said, scratching it behind the ears and grimacing a little as the smell of bunyip pheromones wafted into the air.

The bunyip suddenly tensed. Russell looked around to see a shadowy figure emerging from beneath the forest canopy.

“I guess I won’t be needing this after all,” Clem said, smiling as he leaned on the shovel he was carrying. “Who’s your friend?”

“I caught him sniffing around some spilt honey. What happened?”

“You were stung.”

“Ah, that explains it then.”

“It looks like this antidote really works,” Clem said, pulling the small phial from his pocket and twirling it between his fingers.

“Pip will be pleased. What’s with the shovel?”

“I was supposed to bury you with it.”

“You’d better start digging, then; make it look like someone really is buried here.”

“It’s your grave,” Clem said, handing him the shovel. “You dig it.”

Clem picked up the bunyip as Russell began attacking the hard-packed ground. “I think you’d better come with us, little fellow.”

“Did you get a date for the meet?” Russell asked as they ambled back down through the forest.

“No, she sent me off with the shovel before I could hear too much. I don’t think she trusts me.”

“I don’t think she trusts anyone.”

“It must be soon, though, as the honey doesn’t keep too well in storage.”

“I can do a bit more snooping around the bars if you like.”

“No, it’s too big a risk now you’re supposed to be dead. You’d better go back to Huntress, and take your little friend with you.”

The bunyip lifted its head, giving Clem a questioning look, while Russell scratched it behind the ears again.

They emerged from beneath the canopy into a clearing alongside a shimmering lake. On the water’s edge stood two small tents, while further back sat a shuttle craft hiding beneath camouflage netting. Russell stepped over to it, pulling the netting away before opening the hatch. “What about you?”

“I’ll hang around for a few more days. It’d look suspicious if I disappeared without getting paid.”

“Be careful; they’d just as soon shoot you as pay you.”

“I know.”

Clem helped Russell dismantle his tent while the bunyip looked on in satisfied amusement.

* * *

“What are you drinking?” the guide asked as he sat himself down alongside Clem at the bar.

“Goldwater Ale.”

“Two schooners of Goldwater!” he called to the bartender after catching his attention.

“Look, I’m sorry about your friend,” he continued to Clem. “If it were up to me I’d make sure you porters had protective suits as well, but –”

“Don’t worry about it.” Clem raised his glass. “To Russell.”

“Yeah, to Russell, may he rest in eternal bliss.”

“Is it, um, is it true what you said about the wasp sting being a pleasant death?”

“I really have no idea, but that’s the story I was told as a youngster doing the portering. He did look happy in death though, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, he did.” Clem fell silent.

“I was looking for you ’cause the boss wants a bit more honey, only half a pot this time. Would you be interested in porting again?”

“I, um, I really don’t –”

“She said she’d pay you double, on account of what happened.”

“You people really are heartless.”

“It’s business, Clem, and being sentimental never put food in your belly.”

“I, I guess so.”

“Grey Suit won’t be coming; it’ll just be you and me, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Great!” He stood, slapping Clem across the shoulders. “Meet me out the front at dawn.”

* * *

“So what do they do with the honey?” Clem asked the guide as they ambled into the forest.

“Surely you’re not that naïve, are you?”

“Well I know it’s used for bunyip-baiting, but, um, I don’t know much about it, that’s all.”

“It changes the placid little bunyips into mad and mean fighting machines. They go at each other tooth and claw until only one’s left alive.”

“And people bet on the outcome?”

“That’s the whole idea, lad. There’s big money riding on them bunyips, real big money.”

“How, um, how do they go about picking a winner?”

“That’s the tricky bit now, isn’t it? Some reckon they can train their bunyips beforehand, like, but it ain’t easy, you know? A sober bunyip has a mind of its own and they don’t take kindly to training.”

“You’re right there,” Clem chuckled. “A friend of mine has one as a pet and, well, it reckons it’s the master of the house.”

“Damn clever little beasts, that’s for sure. Frizian honey’s their weakness, though; a couple of mouthfuls and they’re gone. Fresh honey’s the best, that’s why there’s so much interest now, but they can use synthetic stuff when it’s out of season.”

“So, um, when’s the next meet, do you know? I wouldn’t mind having a look.”

The guide glanced around through the thick bushes surrounding them, as if making sure they weren’t being overheard. “I wouldn’t

have thought you'd be one for blood sports, what with being an ex-Delphinidae and all."

"I'm not, not really, I suppose, but all the same I'd be curious to see what goes on."

"Those that run the meets don't want all and sundry knowing about them, so you'd have to swear never to tell another soul."

"I swear, I promise."

The guide again glanced around. "They hold them on Cornipus, at Longville in southern Benzania. Do you know where that is?"

"Yeah, I've been there a few times."

"There's an old warehouse down by the river, used to be *Macadam and Sons*. The next meet's Tuesday week."

"How do I get in?"

"Well that's the tricky bit. They won't let you in wearing just your Delphinidae shorts, that's for sure. Get yourself a dinner suit, put some shoes on your feet and cut your hair short. Dye it brown, if you can, and your eyebrows too; it'll make you look less Elvish. Give the doorman fifty bucks and try not to draw attention to yourself."

They'd reached the clearing and the wasps' nests. The guide readied his smoke canister while Clem unstrapped the pot, setting it gently down as he stared at the mound of disturbed soil. The guide stepped over to him, placing his hand on his shoulder.

"You did the right thing, Clem. Many a time they just leave them to the birds."

"How, how many get stung?"

"Too many, way too many. That's why they always use two porters."

Clem nodded. "Porters are expendable."

"Those that die don't have to be paid."

"Business."

"Yeah, business; nasty business."

"Let's get this over with before I lose my nerve entirely."

The guide checked the smoke canister, slipped into his protective garment and began cutting into the nearest hive.

* * *

“Wait here a moment,” the guide said as they approached the edge of the forest on the outskirts of town. “Give me your pot.”

“What?”

“Just give me your pot.”

After unstrapping it and placing it on the ground between them, Clem turned back to the guide, only to find himself looking down the barrel of a handgun.

“The boss wants you dead.”

“What? Why?”

“She doesn’t trust you, and with good reason I suspect. Who are you, Clem?”

“I was a Delphinidae scholar until –”

“Don’t lie to me!”

Clem looked down at the pot. He’d known from the outset there was always a chance this would happen. “You’re right, I’m not a Delphinidae, but I can’t say any more than that.”

The guide raised the gun slightly, centring it on Clem’s forehead.

Clem closed his eyes, his thoughts turning to his family and friends back on Huntress, of all they’d achieved and all that lay ahead of them; of Russell and the bunyip too, now safely back there he hoped. The thought of bunyips brought him back to the reason he was here in the first place; the terrible cruelty inflicted on them, the only creatures in the whole galaxy susceptible to the neurotoxin in Frizian honey. A quirk of nature, he’d been told, but he wondered how that could be, given that bunyips were native to Cornipus and Frizian honey wasps were, well, Frizian. Surely the wasps couldn’t have – he almost chuckled out loud as he realised he was having an internal debate about biology while a gun was pointed at his head.

Why was he still alive?

He cautiously opened his eyes again. The guide still stood before him, staring at him, but the gun had disappeared.

“You’re a very brave man, Clem, far braver than I ever was.”

The guide ran his hands over his face, sighing and shaking his head.

“Long ago, the last time it was summer here, a young lad like yourself did some portering and became involved in this terrible trade, too involved to ever get out again. I don’t know who you are,

Clem, and to be honest I really don't care, but if what you're doing will bring an end to this business, well you won't find me standing in your way."

Clem chanced a smile but remained silent.

"I'll tell the boss that when you saw the wasps again you got cold feet and bolted, and I suggest you get yourself off world as quick as you can."

"I will, and thank you."

Clem was about to walk away when the guide called him back.

"One more thing; if you go to the meet, make sure you wear tinted glasses or contact lenses. Your eyes are a dead giveaway."

Clem nodded and waved as the guide hoisted the honey pot onto his back and moved off down the path.

Longville

Longville was an old city, even by Cornipean standards where anything less than a thousand years old was considered new. Clem was unsure how long it had been since Mr Macadam and his sons had plied their trade here, but from the look of their building it had been many centuries. The flaking layers of paint, each in a colour deemed fashionable in its time, created rainbow patterns across the walls, while crumbling masonry told of a legacy of storms and weathering. That it was still standing at all seemed remarkable, and he couldn't help wonder if a fortuitous collapse might provide an elegant solution to the bunyip-baiting problem.

He turned to Russell, who'd chauffeured him in an expensive black hire car, and waved, trying to look as cheerful and confident as he could. Russell, being Cornipean himself, blended in perfectly, while Clem was sure his own dyed hair and tinted contact lenses would be immediately obvious to anyone giving him more than just a passing glance. It had taken all of Clem's charm and persuasive skills to convince Russell not to go in his place, but he knew what he was about to witness would be simply too much for his friend's innocent nature.

Walking uncomfortably towards the door in the dinner suit and black leather shoes he'd been outfitted with, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the small wad of notes he hoped would gain him admittance.

"Who are you?" the gorilla dressed as a doorman said.

"The name's Edwinson," Clem said, pushing the wad into his huge palm. "Your boss is expecting me."

"She said nothing about no Edwinson to me. It's by invitation only tonight on account of you-know-who; now scram if you know what's good for you."

Clem gave him his most appealing pleading look, but to no avail.

“It’s okay, Horace, he’s with me!” a voice called out from the other side of the foyer just as Clem was about to walk away. He turned to see the guide from Frizian waving him over. Horace grunted before focusing his attention on the next in line.

“Maybe I should’ve given him a banana instead,” Clem said as he shook hands with the guide.

“I should’ve warned you about him. Raised in the jungle by a family of apes, they reckon. My but you have polished up well; I’d have hardly recognised you.”

“Do I look the part?”

“Yeah, but if you could stop pulling at your collar it’d help.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry too much,” the guide said as he led him through to the arena. “You won’t be the only one here unused to formal dress.”

Clem almost tugged at his collar again before pulling his hand back and scratching his shoulder instead. In the centre of the room they’d entered stood a fenced-off ring floored with sawdust and surrounded by row upon row of elevated seating, while in the far corner, stacked cages held what must have been dozens of bunyips. A musky stench, a mixture of sawdust, urine and bunyip pheromones, filled the air as bookmakers in their loud jackets plied their trade, while well-dressed, and no doubt well-heeled, men and women huddled in groups discussing likely winners and losers. Their cavalier attitude to the carnage about to unfold sickened Clem to the stomach.

“Come and see if you can pick a winner,” the guide said, leading him over to the cages. Clem reluctantly followed.

“These are the house bunyips used in the preliminary bouts. The big players breed their own, and you’ll see those later in the evening if you make it that far.”

Clem wasn’t really hearing him, though, as he looked through the wire at the sad little faces, the hopelessness in their eyes revealing a foreknowledge of what was to come. Whatever lingering doubts he may have had, he was now utterly convinced Pip was right; right about the bunyips, right about the government, right about everything.

Still, he couldn't act, not yet. He must wait and let them suffer, let them die; wait for you-know-who, as the doorman had called him, to play his part.

"Pick one," the guide said.

"Huh?"

"See the numbers on their collars? Pick one and place your bet."

Clem looked again at the bunyips, each pleading with its eyes – *let me out, save me, take me away from this place*. How could he possibly choose?

"Number five."

"Come on then, let's find a bookmaker."

Clem sat alongside the guide as the lights dimmed, his betting ticket squeezed tightly in his hand. Spotlights over the ring came on as handlers selected four bunyips from the cages and placed them inside the enclosure. The bunyips politely sniffed each other in what Clem now knew to be bunyip-speech; exchanging pleasantries perhaps or, he suddenly thought, apologising for what they were about to do to one another.

The woman Clem had worked for on Frizian stepped up to the ring, holding high a glass bowl containing the amber honey he'd collected, watered down no doubt to make up for Russell's broken pot. He took a deep breath as she placed the bowl in the centre of the ring.

The bunyips looked at each other before stepping forward together and lapping up the honey. Clem wanted to cover his face but knew that he shouldn't. He tugged at his collar instead.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the woman said, "the first elimination bout is between numbers four, six, nine and ten."

Clem felt a slight relief that his bunyip wasn't amongst the four, before chastising himself for thinking that these bunyips had any less right to live than the one he'd bet upon. He wanted so much to cover his face again; or to leave this place, this planet, this galaxy even, and never return.

One of the bunyips howled, not loud like a dog but a soft mournful cry. Clem wished he could block his ears. The second one joined in, then the third and fourth.

There was a flurry of movement in the ring as the last howl ended in a strangulated screech. Clem's eyes closed in what was a completely involuntary action, while at the same time cheering erupted all around him. He knew, without even opening them again, that the first blood had been spilled.

"Number ten's out!" the woman said.

Another screech followed, and again the crowd cheered.

"Six is gone so it's between four and nine now!"

Clem, his eyes still clamped tightly shut, heard people around him getting to their feet. The guide poked him in the ribs and he stood, trying to look excited without opening his eyes.

Now the remaining two bunyips were growling at each other, and Clem chanced a peep. The handlers had already removed the bodies of the first two victims, so that was one sight he didn't have to endure.

The larger of the two kept trying to attack, but each time the smaller and more agile one ducked out of the way. Forgetting for a moment what was at stake, Clem found himself almost rooting for the little bunyip. *'Why not?'* he thought, and whooped out loud when it once more ducked beneath its larger opponent. The guide smiled at him.

The large bunyip lunged again, but as the smaller one ducked, it suddenly turned, anticipating its move and locking its jaws around the little one's throat. After a sudden surprised squeak it was all over. Clem gasped, holding his hand over his mouth as the full horror of the sport wrenched his heart. He slumped back into his seat, trying to close his eyes but unable to, forced to watch the victor pawing at its vanquished opponent until the handlers separated them.

"A win to number nine!" the woman said. "Do we have a new champion in the making?"

Sections of the crowd cheered while Clem sank lower into his seat, hoping it would swallow him up and consume him.

A scantily-clad waitress appeared in front of him. His body now on autopilot, he accepted the offered drink with a mumble of thanks

and took a big sip. The alcohol bit his throat before setting fire to his belly, but it was just what he needed if he was to have any hope of making it through the evening and fulfilling his assignment. He took another large sip.

The victorious bunyip now back in its cage, the woman took the bowl of honey away to be refilled while handlers swept up the bloodied sawdust and replaced it with fresh. Music played softly from overhead speakers while the audience huddled into groups, talking excitedly about the action they'd witnessed and speculating on what was to come. Clem wandered aimlessly around; his almost empty glass gripped tightly in one hand and his crumpled betting ticket in the other.

Without meaning to, he found himself alongside the cages, looking at his bunyip, number five, hunkered down in the back corner. He had no doubt it knew what was going on and the fate that would soon befall it; the smell of spilled blood would be enough to do that. He reached out with his mind, trying to touch its thoughts and ease its suffering, but couldn't. No-one had ever touched the mind of a bunyip, and it seemed he wasn't about to become the first.

The lights dimmed again and Clem followed the crowd back to their seats.

"In this round we have numbers one, five, eleven and thirteen," the woman said as the spotlights came on. This was it, then. Clem looked again at his ticket. *Number Five*.

The four buniyps lapped up their fill of honey, inexorably drawn to it by some ancient instinct programmed into their brains. Clem suddenly thought of the scene he'd witnessed on Frizian, when he'd entered the clearing to see Russell calling the bunyip away from the spilt honey. That shouldn't have been possible. He made a mental note to mention it to Pip later on.

A screech drew him back to the present; the first blood had been spilled. Not his bunyip surely, he hoped.

"Number one is out!" the woman said. Several people in the crowd moaned.

He gulped down the last of his drink as the handlers removed its bloodied corpse, and within moments the waitress was in front of him

offering him another. He accepted, taking advantage of her presence to block his view of the ring.

Another screech and he held his breath.

“Number thirteen’s gone!”

Relief washed over him as he took another sip; just his bunyip and number eleven now, growling at each other as he leaned forward to watch.

Eleven leapt, catching five on the leg, but five retaliated, biting off eleven’s ear. They separated, both bleeding now although five’s injury looked minor. Clem let out the breath he’d been holding.

The bunyips circled each other, snarling. Eleven feigned an attack, but when five sidestepped the real attack came. In an amazing act of contortion, five pulled its neck back moments before eleven’s jaws snapped on thin air. Then, taking advantage of eleven’s momentary confusion, five twisted around and kicked it in the groin. As eleven yelped, five’s powerful jaws found their mark, crushing its opponent’s throat and ending the bout. Clem covered his face, simultaneously sighing with relief and cursing himself for doing so.

“Come with me,” the guide said. “You look like you could do with some fresh air.”

They passed out through the back door onto a wooden deck overlooking the river. Steps at one end led down to a pier where several people in the same uniform as the doorman were busying themselves. On the decking itself groups of participants had gathered, with clouds of smoke accompanying their chatter, but the guide ushered Clem away from them, finding a relatively secluded table and chairs. From inside came the woman’s voice announcing that the third bout would be between bunyips two, seven, eight and twelve.

“Congratulations,” the guide said.

“Huh?”

“Your bunyip has survived the first round. Do you intend claiming your winnings now or will you remain in the game?”

“I have a choice?”

“Of course, you always have a choice; until perhaps you’re drawn into this unsavoury mess as far as I am.”

“What they’re doing to those bunyips is disgusting.”

“I agree, but can you honestly say you didn’t feel the excitement of the sport? I was watching you; I know you did.”

Clem paused before nodding with a sigh. “You’re right; and I’m not sure whether I’m more disgusted by the sport itself or my own reaction to it.”

“You see how it was for me? And remember I didn’t have the benefit of your Delphinidae training; I was just a poor Cornipean boy looking for an exciting way to earn some money.”

Clem nodded again, glancing down to the end of the pier where a boat was pulling in. “Is this him?”

“Yes. Watch carefully, Clem, and you may learn something of what you’re up against.”

The first to leave the boat was a security guard who ran up across the decking and into the building, before emerging a minute or two later and giving a signal to those still on board.

Next came two handlers carrying a cage containing the biggest bunyip Clem had ever seen. The thought that his little *number five* would be up against this monster wrenched his heart, until he realised that, monster or not, this bunyip was just as much a victim as all the others. He tugged at his collar again.

All heads turned towards the pier as four more security guards ascended the steps, casting their eagle eyes over all and sundry. Following them and looking resplendent in his top hat, white coat and tails, came the man himself, Supreme Councillor Alistair Blunt. Clem’s finger pulled again at the collar that felt tighter and tighter with every passing moment.

Clem had argued long and hard with Pip about what to do with Blunt. The bunyip-baiting aside, his administration had been reasonably competent and no more corrupt than any of its predecessors, and Clem could think of many other things more worthy of the Black Delphinidae’s attention. Pip had been adamant, though, his tingling foresight warning of calamitous consequences if the blood sport were allowed to continue, and Clem, whose own foresight had led to the reformation of their creed, had eventually acquiesced.

But bringing down a government was no mean feat, and the consequences of such an act were often unpredictable and counterproductive. That ruled out a simple assassination or coup, not that Pip was ever likely to go down that path anyway, so after many months of observation and deliberation, their plan had been hatched and the pieces moved into position. Now the last remaining piece had arrived.

“So what do you think of Chopper?” the guide asked as he led Clem back inside.

“Who?”

“Blunt’s bunyip. It’s been champion seven times running and a nice little earner for him.”

“To be honest I don’t want to think about it.”

“You can still cash in now and be out of here before your number five’s turned into minced meat.”

“Is there any way I could, um, buy my bunyip and set it free?”

“Another bunyip would just die in its place. Is that what you came here for?”

Clem shook his head.

“I bought the first bunyip I bet on,” the guide said as they took their seats, “using my winnings to try to save it. It went on to be champion for five meets, until, well, never mind. That’s how they hook you, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the woman said, holding high the bowl of fresh honey, “you’ve seen the cunning and guile of our three challengers this evening, but will it be enough? I present to you our reigning champion, seven times victor, our one and only Chopper!”

The crowd leapt to their feet, cheering wildly as the handlers lowered Blunt’s bunyip into the ring. Clem followed suit.

“Our challengers tonight are numbers nine, five and two. You have three minutes, ladies and gentlemen, three minutes in which to collect your winnings or place new bets.”

Several of the crowd sought out bookmakers while the excited chattering grew louder all around them.

“You’re sticking with number five?” the guide asked as Clem nervously folded and unfolded his ticket.

“Either way I lose.”

Other handlers brought the earlier winners from their cages and placed them in the ring. Clem was sure number five winked at him, and he tugged at his collar once again.

The bunyips, having lapped up their honey, stood staring at each other, the three challengers on one side of the ring and Chopper on the other. Chopper growled, glaring condescendingly at each of his opponents in turn.

Number five barked, a short sharp yap, and in what looked like a prearranged move, the three challengers leapt at Chopper. Everyone stood except Clem, who remained frozen in his chair, trying to comprehend what he’d just witnessed.

The centre of the ring became a blur of tails, claws and snapping jaws as the four bunyips spun and tumbled. One of them yelped as blood splattered across the sawdust, but the mauling continued unabated. Another whined as a bunyip’s ear flew out of the ring and landed at Clem’s feet. He stared at it, trying to figure out which animal it had come from, while the fighting continued. From amidst the tangle of fur and limbs came the unmistakable sound of teeth crushing bone as more blood washed out across the sawdust.

“Holy shit!” someone shouted from the crowd, and Clem finally stood, his curiosity overpowering his shock. A bloodied mass of fur and bone, barely recognisable as a bunyip, fell away from the melee as the fighting continued. A handler deftly scooped it out of the ring, dumping it unceremoniously into a black plastic bag.

“Number nine’s down!” the woman said.

A pained yelping followed another crunch, silencing the chatter in the audience, and Clem couldn’t stop himself watching as more blood sprayed across the ring. With a ripping, tearing sound, the fighting suddenly stopped, and Clem stared open-mouthed at the scene before him.

Chopper lay on his side, his throat torn open and one ear missing, while pinned beneath him were the other two bunyips, their fur soaked with blood. Clem wondered what would happen if all three

were dead: would there be a playoff amongst the unused house bunyips to find a new champion?

A leg twitched, and with a look of excruciating pain, one of the challengers pulled itself out from beneath Chopper. A handler reached into the ring with a damp cloth, wiping the blood from its collar. The bunyip turned and snapped, almost taking his finger off.

“Our new champion still has some fight left in him,” the woman laughed before turning and whispering to the handler. “Ladies and gentlemen, the winner is – number five!”

Clem sat heavily, covering his face as he realised he was crying. Detached voices rose out of the crowd –

“I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“There’ll be an inquiry for sure.”

“Did you see the look on Blunt’s face?”

“Someone’s sure made a killing; they say the odds on five were a hundred to one!”

“Mr Edwinson?”

“Mr Edwinson? Sir?”

Clem uncovered his face to see a bookmaker’s loud jacket in front of him.

“Your winnings, sir.” He handed Clem an envelope stuffed fat with notes. “Congratulations.”

“Um, thank you.” Clem pushed it into his coat pocket before turning to the guide. “What, what happens to the bunyip now?”

“It goes up for auction. The bidding will start shortly.”

“I want to buy it.”

The guide looked him in the eyes and sighed.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the woman said, “tonight we have witnessed a spectacle not to be repeated for a long time to come. A new champion has emerged unbidden, raising courage and determination to new levels in his defeat of Chopper. Hail our glorious winner!”

The crowd cheered, although when Clem glanced at Blunt he looked decidedly uncheerful.

“Let’s open the bidding, then. What do I hear for our new champion?”

“One thousand,” Blunt said.

“Fifteen hundred,” another voice called out from across the room.

“Two thousand.”

“Three.”

“Five.”

The other voice fell silent.

“I have a bid of five thousand from Mr Blunt,” the woman said. Clem pulled out the envelope, quickly counting his winnings. “Are there any further bids?”

He raised his hand. “Six thousand.”

“Seven,” Blunt said.

“Eight.”

“Ten.”

Clem looked again into the envelope, hoping there might be a few more thousand hiding in the bottom.

“Do I hear any advance on ten thousand?” the woman asked.

Clem shook his head.

“Second call.”

The room remained silent.

“Third and final call?”

Clem glanced at the guide who shook his head while pulling out his empty pockets.

“Sold to our Supreme Councillor for ten thousand! Congratulations, sir.”

Clem stepped down to the ring where his battered bunyip lay crouched in the corner. “I’m sorry. I tried, honest I did.”

He was sure the bunyip winked at him again.

Clem tugged at his collar as one of Blunt’s handlers lifted number five from the ring and placed it in Chopper’s cage.

“We’d better get it to the vet before it loses too much blood,” the handler said to his companion. “The boss’ll be furious if it dies on him now.” Clem groaned.

The guide pulled him aside. “Whatever you were planning you’d better do it soon. Blunt’s about to leave.”

Clem watched, tugging at his collar again as Blunt picked up the cage and walked out the back door, closely followed by his handlers and security guards. “There’s nothing more I can do, not now.”

“Well if nothing else you’re ten thousand richer than when you started. Will you be coming again?”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

They walked out of the building, giving Horace the doorman a wide berth.

“Thanks for all your help and advice tonight,” Clem said as they shook hands.

“Don’t mention it. Are you sure you won’t join me for a drink?”

“No, my driver will be waiting for me.”

Clem waved as they parted company. Ahead, hiding in the shadows, was the black limousine with Russell sitting patiently behind the wheel.

“How did it go?”

Clem sighed, removing his bow tie and unbuttoning his collar. “Horrific, but I hope this will bring an end to it.”

He pushed the tie into his pocket as Russell turned the car around.

Superintendent Scott Davies was waiting for them at the front desk of the Longville police station.

“I hope this thing worked,” Clem said, pulling out the bow tie and handing it to him.

“We’ll know soon enough. Help yourselves to some coffee while I take it up to forensics.”

“You’re as white as a ghost,” Russell said as he stepped over to the coffee machine. “What happened?”

“I bet on one of their house bunyips and it won, but Blunt, Blunt outbid me for it in a goddamned auction.” Clem sat, covering his face as the tears began to flow. In his mind’s eye he could still see the bunyip winking at him.

“Don’t worry; by this time tomorrow he’ll be history.”

“But, but the bunyip...”

Russell patted him on the shoulder while handing him his coffee.

“The photos are fantastic!” Scott said, beaming as he walked into the room. “The Argus will have them on the front page of tomorrow’s first edition.”

Clem forced a smile. “Pip will be happy.”

Russell glanced at Scott, who looked at him for a moment before nodding.

“You should get some rest now, Clem.”

“Did we, did we do the right thing?”

“Of course,” Scott said as Clem stood and turned to leave. “Now don’t forget to take those contact lenses out before you go to sleep.”

Clem paused, pulling each eyelid back as he popped them out. “I hope I never have to wear them again.”

Act of Kindness

“In breaking news, Supreme Councillor Alistair Blunt has left the Longville police station after a day of questioning following the publication this morning of photographs implicating him in the outlawed sport of bunyip-baiting. Police spokesman, Superintendent Scott Davies, had little to say other than to confirm that his officers are continuing to search both the Blunt residence in Benzania and an old disused warehouse in Longville.

“Lawyers representing Mr Blunt have released a brief statement refuting the evidence as fabricated and confirming he will strenuously deny any charges that may arise. Already a writ for defamation against the Argus has been lodged with the Supreme Court of Cornipus.

“With me in the studio tonight is Emily Hindmarsh, President of the Bunyip Protection Society and seasoned campaigner in the fight against bunyip baiting. I would imagine you’re quite pleased with today’s turn of events.”

“Yes naturally, but it’s still early days and we won’t be celebrating until those involved in this despicable activity are behind bars.”

“Do you know who took the photographs?”

Emily laughed. “Even if I did I wouldn’t be telling you, but no, this morning’s revelation was a complete surprise to us.”

“You had no idea any of this was about to unfold?”

“None whatsoever, but whoever it was must have had a lot of inside knowledge and connections with the right people. We’ve been trying to infiltrate their meets for decades without success.”

“Some would say all the more reason to suspect these photos are a hoax.”

“No, not at all; I’m sure they’re genuine.”

“Do you expect to see many arrests?”

“That’s really a question for the police, but we believe there are other prominent people involved and this is really just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Time will tell I’m sure. We cross now to Meridian and our reporter at Government House. Steve, I know it’s early morning there, but has there been any reaction so far?”

“In a word, stunned silence. The Council are in an emergency meeting behind closed doors, and we won’t have any official reaction until they adjourn, but the pervasive atmosphere here is one of shock and disbelief.”

“Do you think it likely Blunt will resign or be forced from office?”

“It’s far too early to speculate, but from what I know of Alistair Blunt I’d expect him to tough it out. He won’t let go of power until the judge sends him to prison, and even then I’m sure he’ll go down fighting.”

“We’ll have some interesting times ahead of us, I’m sure. Joining me in the studio now is our legal affairs expert, Stuart Hillman. Stuart, what do you make of the evidence we’ve seen so far?”

“Of course a lot will depend on what the police investigation uncovers, but if it’s just the photos, well anyone could have doctored those. Blunt’s no fool, and even if he was involved in this activity, he’d make sure not to leave any incriminating evidence lying around.”

“Do you think the bunyip-baiting itself took place?”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute, and I’m sure there’ll be a few go to prison as a result of this, but I can’t see Blunt or any of the other prominent names that have been mentioned allowing themselves to be caught up in it. Given the previous allegations against him, Blunt would have to be an absolute idiot to go anywhere near a bunyip-baiting meet.”

“Well there you have it. Is Blunt an absolute idiot, or are the photos fakes? Go to our on-line poll to register your opinion.”

Pip turned off the television as the phone rang. He spoke for a few minutes before hanging up and turning back to Clem.

“That was Scott Davies. He said Blunt’s been released without charge.”

“What?”

“They need more evidence than just the photos. They’ve found traces of bunyip blood and fur at the warehouse but nothing to specifically incriminate him.”

“So what was the point of getting the photos? Did Russell and I risk our lives for nothing?”

“Of course not; they’ve brought this horrific sport into the public eye, which is really what we were trying to do. The ring’s been exposed, and whether or not Blunt’s convicted hardly matters now.”

“How can you say that? I was there and saw what they did. He’s a monster; they’re all monsters.”

Pip sighed again. “I suppose I was pretty naïve, thinking he’d do the honourable thing and resign. What we really need is a witness who’ll testify he was there.”

Clem scratched his chin. “Let me go back to Frizian and find that guide. Perhaps he’ll do it.”

“That’d be far too dangerous, you know that.”

* * *

Clem almost choked on his Goldwater Ale as a hand fell on his shoulder.

“I didn’t expect to see you back here,” the guide said.

“I need to speak with you.”

“How did you take those ... oh, I know, the camera was in your bow tie, wasn’t it, and every time you tugged on your collar –”

“It took a photo, yeah. A fat lot of good it did us though.”

“Our supreme ruler is a bit harder to topple than you thought, perhaps?”

“Stubborn bloody bastard and his accursed lawyers.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“What are you having?”

“Same as you, I guess.”

Clem downed the rest of his ale before catching the bartender’s eye and ordering two more.

“We need witnesses who’ll confirm Blunt was there,” Clem said to the guide. “I want you to testify.”

The guide chortled into his beer. “A nice way to die, I’m sure, but I’m not quite ready to meet my maker yet.”

“We’d provide protection for you, of course.”

He chortled again. “There’s no protection you could offer that’d be proof against the people you’re up against. Find another way, Clem, trust me. There’s a good assassin I know who I’m sure –”

“No; no assassins, no killings.”

“Who are you working for, Clem?”

Clem took another swig while looking him in the eyes. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

The guide stared into his glass for several minutes before taking a long slow drink. “Let me make a few phone calls and I’ll meet you back here in an hour.”

He put his glass down and left the bar before Clem could say anything else.

“Do you really think he can be trusted?” Russell asked. “I mean, he might be going to just hand you over to the smugglers.”

“No, I don’t think he’d do that. Perhaps he’s trying to convince someone else to testify.”

“Horace the doorman perhaps.”

Clem chuckled. “Imagine the poor lawyers trying to question him – *‘answer one grunt for yes or two grunts for no!’*.”

“Was he really that bad?”

“Worse. Calling him a gorilla would be an insult to gorillas.”

“Is there anyone else who might testify?”

Clem shook his head. “They all seemed to be enjoying it too much.”

“Well you be careful and don’t let him lure you into any dark corners.”

“What kept you?” the guide asked. “I was nearly going to leave.”

“Sorry, I lost track of the time.”

“Two schooners of Goldwater,” he shouted to the bartender, and handed one to Clem. “To your health.”

“And yours,” Clem said, raising his glass.

“I once knew a man who owned a farm on Sontar,” the guide began after taking a few sips. “His main crops were corn and maize, but he also did a brisk trade supplying quanga fruit to the resorts on Shimmel.”

“Not Eric Chandler?”

“Indeed, but I’d have thought you’d be too young to have known him. He died, what, ten years ago?”

“No, I never met him, but two of my associates spent some time working on his farm.”

The guide raised his eyebrows. “I really must meet these people you work for someday.”

“So how did Eric fit into this, um, business we’re discussing?”

“He once mentioned a property not far from his where they were breeding a lot of bunyips. They claimed they were for pet shops, but Eric wasn’t entirely convinced and got one of his friends in the Sontar Land Titles’ office to find out who actually owned the place. He said it was a maze of holding companies spread right across the galaxy, all seemingly owned by each other, and he’d almost given up when a document surfaced identifying the real owner.”

“Who was it?”

The guide just looked at him.

“Blunt,” Clem said. “So where is this property?”

“Well that’s the tricky bit. Eric never told me, but his nephew Michael inherited his farm and when I spoke to him just now he said he’d take you there if I thought you could be trusted.”

The guide pulled a card from his wallet. “This is Michael’s address on Bluehaven. Go and have a talk to him, and perhaps you might find something that’ll sufficiently incriminate our friend Mr Blunt.”

Clem took the card and was about to leave, but the guide waved him back down. “Don’t look now, but there’s someone sitting over near the door who’s been watching you with more than just a passing interest.”

“One of the honey smugglers?”

“It’s no-one I’ve seen before, but you’re probably right. Finish your drink then follow me. I’ll distract him while you make a run for it.”

Clem stood and followed a few paces behind the guide. As they approached the door, the guide suddenly tripped, falling against the man sitting in the corner and spilling his drink all over him.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the guide said as Clem dashed around him and out the door. “No, don’t get up; here, let me dry you off with these napkins...”

* * *

Nestled on the banks of a sedately-flowing river, Bringal Vale looked exactly like the timeless backwater Clem had always imagined it to be. Painted gold by the late afternoon sun, fields of grain swayed in gentle waves drifting north to the wooded highlands, while beyond the village to the west, a line of yellow sand bordered the sparkling waters of Bringal Bay. Southwards, plots of vegetables and fruit trees formed a quilt-work pattern disappearing off across the floodplain towards a hazy horizon.

Widely spaced timber houses lined the road now signposted as the Bringal Highway, although most of the locals still referred to it as Etford Road, or just simply The Road. Bicycles remained the predominant mode of transport on Bluehaven and it had been built accordingly, with little room for vehicles to pass each other should the need arise. Russell, born and bred on the freeways of Cornipus and expecting at any moment to be forced off the road by an oncoming truck, breathed a sigh of relief as their destination finally came into view.

Michael Chandler’s office was in the central business district, three blocks of two-storey shops, government agencies and a school from which flocks of blonde-headed barefoot children were emerging. Russell parked the rental car nose-in to the kerb and stretched as he stepped out onto the pavement, taking a deep breath of the warm salty air.

“It’s a nice place, don’t you think?” Clem said. “I wouldn’t mind retiring here after we’ve finished with this business.”

“You’d be bored senseless within a week.”

“You have no imagination, Russell.”

“You’re right, and that’s how I like it.”

“Well Mr Chandler must like it here,” Clem said as he pushed open the glass door leading into the offices of Chandler Holdings Pty Ltd. The young lady behind the reception desk looked up as they entered.

“Mr Edwinston? Just take a seat and Michael will be with you shortly.”

Clem studied the numerous awards hanging on the wall behind the receptionist; mostly for their renowned quanga fruit but with a few more recent ones for Chandler Wines as well.

“My late uncle planted the vineyard some sixty years ago but it’s only just started to receive the recognition it deserves,” said a voice from beside him, and he turned to see a smiling middle-aged man offering him his hand. “Michael Chandler.”

“I’m pleased to meet you. I’m Clem Edwinston and this is Russell, my associate.”

“I’ve been expecting you, and curious as to what brings you here. Come on through to my office.”

Michael led them up a flight of stairs to a spacious room overlooking the river. Upon the large oak desk sat a bottle of wine and three glasses, which he filled with the dexterity of a barman.

“To a bright and prosperous future,” he toasted before inviting Clem and Russell to sit. “This is one of the best reds from my uncle’s vineyard. Do you like it?”

“Very nice,” Clem said, although he’d never acquired much of a taste for wine.

“When my uncle first established the vineyard, he had three young Bluehaven people working for him. One of them, Brian Lachlan, went on to become mayor of Dolphin Island for many years, while the other two became the parents of our former Supreme Councillor, Kevin Simmons. Quite remarkable, don’t you think?”

Clem nodded hesitantly.

“Those three teenagers were on the run from Morgoth and his minions at the time my uncle met them on the Etford Road and offered them safe refuge on his farm on Sontar. I want you both to

take a moment to ponder the enormous impact that simple act of kindness had on the future of our galaxy.”

Clem closed his eyes. He'd heard the story first hand from Ron and Mary Simmons, of how Morgoth had sensed something of Mary's role in his downfall and had tried to have her and baby Kevin eliminated. But for Eric Chandler, he might well have succeeded and if so, would in all likelihood have still been ruling the galaxy. Meridian would still be frozen in time, Damon and Pip would not have been born, and none of what Clem and his people had achieved on Huntress would have occurred. He shuddered, and when he opened his eyes Michael was staring at him, smiling.

“Now here you are, two young men on a mission, sitting before Eric's nephew and seeking perhaps a simple act of kindness that might once more change the course of our galaxy's history. Am I right?”

Clem closed his eyes again, wishing Pip were here.

“If what you say is true,” Russell said, “I owe your uncle my life.”

Michael turned to face him.

“I was a prisoner in the Colony on Huntress, and would have died there had Mark and the others not come.”

“If you don't mind me asking, what was your crime?”

Russell ran his hands over his face.

“It was a long time ago, back when I was young and silly. I saw a couple of boys beating up a homeless Elf in the park near home, and it made me think of the beatings I'd gotten from the bigger boys when I was little, you see, so I ran in and made them stop. Perhaps I was a bit heavy-handed, or perhaps I wasn't, but I didn't know their father was a policeman, did I? He arrested me, said I'd beaten up his kids for no good reason, and they sent me to Huntress.”

Michael stood and moved over to the window. “Simple acts of kindness work both ways it seems,” he said, leaning on the sill and looking out across the river. “I, um, I was that homeless Elf in the park.”

“But...”

Michael raised his hand to silence him. “I'd been a Delphinidae acolyte at the time of the Farley massacre, studying at the Temple here on Bluehaven, and when they called for volunteers to retake the

old palace I was one of the first to step forward.” He closed his eyes as that fateful night flashed back to him as clear as if it were yesterday.

“What’s happening?” Michael asked, taking in all the solemn faces as he entered the dining hall.

“Kevin Simmons is putting together a strike force to take back the old palace,” Guardsman Avis said. “Are you with us?”

“I, um...”

All eyes in the room had turned to him; young eyes, most barely out of school, but in each of them he saw that terrible mix of excitement and fear. He’d hoped to have left the violence and bloodshed behind on Cornipus when he’d joined the Order, but it was determined to follow him, it seemed.

“Count me in.”

“Right, that’s fifteen so far,” Avis said, “but nowhere near enough.”

“If Mike’s fighting then I guess you can count me in too,” his friend Richard said.

“And me,” Paul said.

“What about you, Phil?”

“Uh, um, yeah okay I suppose.”

Phil looked anything but okay though, Michael thought.

“Thanks lads,” Avis said. “We’ll be marshalling in the courtyard straight after dinner.”

The sun had set and a cold dampness descended on the band of Delphinidae warriors as Brian Lachlan stepped forward to address them. Michael wrapped his arms around his chest and shivered.

“Tonight we go to reclaim Bluehaven for the Delphinidae,” Brian said. “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 implore 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.”

Michael shuddered. He’d known Shirley Lachlan since childhood; her son Owen had been in his class at the Bringal Vale school and

she'd been a regular helper there, always with a smile and a kind word for the children. How could she have possibly taken sides with the enemy? He shuddered again at the thought of coming face to face with her and having to kill her.

"Are you okay?" Phil whispered, but he didn't look all that well himself.

"We are Delphinidae," Brian continued, "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."

Michael knew if he stayed in the courtyard a moment longer he'd be physically sick.

"I can't, I, I just can't," he whispered to Phil before stepping away from the group. Phil scurried after him, but it was the last thing Michael wanted.

"Michael, Phillip, a moment please," High Priestess Loretta said, and Michael stopped. "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," Michael and Phil said in unison, before bowing and walking as quickly away as they could.

"What are you doing?" Michael said to Phil.

"I should be asking you the same question."

"I knew Shirley Lachlan at school."

"Oh shit."

"Exactly."

Running footsteps from behind caused them to stop, and a moment later Paul caught up with them.

"Not you too?" Michael said.

"I guess I'm not as heroic as I thought, not by myself at any rate."

"I've let everyone down."

"Mike knew Shirley Lachlan," Phil whispered to Paul.

"Oh mate, no wonder you walked."

“Those three hours spent waiting in the common room were the longest of my life,” Michael said, more to himself than to Clem and Russell. “One side of my brain wanted me to be out there, doing battle for the Delphinidae, but then I’d see myself cutting off the head of a smiling Shirley Lachlan and I’d have to swallow hard to stop my gorge from rising.

“And so we waited in that darkened room, peering out the window at the starlit sea, hoping against hope that our friends would return unscathed, but worse was to come, much worse.”

“They’re coming back!” Paul said.

“Where?”

“There are boats coming in down on the beach. Let’s go and see what happened.”

Michael pulled up short as they approached the jetty and it became obvious the operation hadn’t gone well. Medics from the Temple were kneeling beside the wounded, tending their injuries as best they could, while in the furthest corner lay several others who could have been sleeping but weren’t.

“Wh-what happened?” Paul asked one of the walking wounded.

“It was an ambush. They were waiting for us, hiding amongst the boulders with guns. It was a massacre.”

“Who –”

“Avis is dead, Redding and Hill too. Brian Lachlan took a bullet to the head but is still holding on.”

Another of the acolytes joined them. “We’ve lost Taylor.”

Michael’s legs turned to rubber as the dazzling floodlights began to spin. He’d known Marianne Taylor, known her very well, but hadn’t been aware she’d been amongst the volunteers. If he’d known, if only he’d known, he wouldn’t have, would never have...

“...chickened out, weren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I said you were the three who chickened out!”

Michael looked up to see an angry acolyte marching towards him with fists raised and blood streaming from a head wound, but at that moment his legs buckled at the knees and he fell back against Phil.

“Come on Mike, we’d better split.”

“The rest of that night was a daze,” Michael said. “I remember being in my room, throwing things at random into my backpack, then crossing the ridge above the Temple and heading for the western road. I was in a car smelling strongly of fish, then boarding a flight to Cornipus. I woke up on a bench in Benzania, blinking water from my eyes in a torrential downpour.

“I spent some days or weeks trying to find work, but Benzania was in one of its economic downturns and jobs were scarce, at least for off-worlders. I must have looked a pretty sorry sight by then, sleeping rough in the park, and I guess it’s no wonder I was kicked from factory door to factory door.

“I was woken one morning by the sound of nearby voices, and it soon became apparent I was the subject of their conversation.”

He placed his hands over his face, rubbing his eyes as the shattered memory of that morning came back to haunt him once more.

“What’s that?”

“Where?”

“On the bench, stupid.”

“I dunno.”

“It must be an Elf. Look at its yellow hair, and it’s not wearing shoes either.”

“Elfs are dangerous. Tony’s dad says they should never have been allowed to come here.”

“Well that one don’t look too dangerous to me. We should teach it a lesson; make it think twice about sleeping in our park.”

“I dunno, Greg.”

“You’re not scared of no scrawny Elf, are you?”

“Me scared? Course not!”

The one called Greg picked up a dead branch from under a tree and whacked it into his palm a few times, testing its strength, while the younger one scouted around for rocks and lumps of clay. Michael glanced about, seeking any avenue of escape, but was hemmed in by the trees and gardens surrounding him. Retribution for his cowardice on Bluehaven was about to be served, he conceded, bracing himself for the onslaught.

He didn't have long to wait. Something stung his right cheek, and as he raised his hand to inspect the damage, another rock struck the back of his head. He staggered, covering his face with both hands as the barrage intensified.

Pain exploded across his shoulders and suddenly he was face down in the dirt. He chanced a glance upwards to see Greg heaving the tree branch around to inflict another blow. Pulling his knees up into his chest, he curled himself into as small a ball as possible in what he knew was a vain attempt to minimise the target area. His arms covering as much of his head as they could, he braced himself for the blow.

It came, but Greg overbalanced slightly during the downswing, causing the branch to glance off Michael's shoulder before thudding harmlessly into the ground. Michael's relief was short-lived, though, as from amid Greg's cursing came another barrage of rocks and clay from his brother.

Michael cowered as Greg raised the branch again, but from the corner of his eye he saw someone running towards them. Greg heaved the branch anyway, bringing it crashing onto Michael once more. Pain exploded as his forearm broke, but Greg, in his haste to get away, tripped over the rebounding branch and fell to the ground. Grimacing, Michael turned his head as a young Cornipean man with long black hair towered over them both.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled at Greg while pulling him up by the shirt collar. "Are you stark raving mad?"

He shook him by the shoulders before throwing him back onto the ground. Greg tried to crawl away backwards as the man picked up the tree branch.

"You could've killed him with this, you know that? Killed him dead!"

Hearing more footsteps running towards them, Michael turned to see a policeman approaching.

"Put that branch down and raise your hands above your head," the officer said, pointing his gun at the Cornipean man. "Nice and slowly now if you don't want a bullet through it. Greg, go find your mother and tell her she wants you, while I deal with this bastard."

Greg scampered to his feet and ran, while the last thing Michael saw as his consciousness ebbed away was his rescuer being led off at gunpoint by the man in blue.

Michael turned away from the window, running his hands over his face before sitting back down. “It was your selfless intervention that snapped me out of my downward spiral of despair. I spent weeks trying to find you but couldn’t – well I now know why that was – and in the end decided the best way I could repay you was to make something of my life. So here we are at last, and now everything’s come full circle.”

“I, um, I don’t know what to say,” Russell said.

“You don’t have to say anything. You’re interested in a certain bunyip farm on Sontar, I gather, and perhaps I can help you.”

“We have to put an end to Alistair Blunt’s bunyip-baiting,” Clem said.

“That won’t be easy,” Michael said with a sigh. “My uncle was an old man when he died, and it may well have been due to natural causes, but let’s just say I’m not entirely convinced. Just before his death he’d been planning to blow the whistle on Blunt and his associates.”

“Do you know where the farm is?” Clem asked.

“Yes, and I have the documents linking it to Blunt safely secured.”

“Will you take us there?”

“It’ll be well guarded, I’m sure, particularly after those photos were published.”

Clem and Russell both nodded.

Michael stood. “I turned away from battle once before, but I’m not about to do the same thing again. Yes, I’ll take you there and join in your fight.”

The Bunyip Farm

Crickets chirped in the undergrowth as Clem, Russell and Michael walked down the narrow dirt laneway. The full moon, now well above the horizon, bathed everything in its soft silvery light, but the shadows on either side remained impenetrably dark, making Clem wonder if they weren't easy marks for hidden foe.

"It's certainly well out of the way," he said. "How did your uncle ever find it?"

"It may have been by accident, or perhaps he'd heard rumours of it, I really don't know."

"I still think we should have sent the police in."

"No, no police, not yet; Blunt has too many ears inside the force. You can call them when we see what's here."

A sagging wooden gate marked the entrance to the bunyip farm. Clem, expecting something more substantial – a gatehouse and armed guards at least – scratched his head.

"Obscurity is his main defence," Michael said. "There may well be guards further in; at least there will be if he suspects anyone knows about this place, but not on the boundary."

Clem climbed over the gate, still expecting an alarm to be triggered the moment he set foot on Blunt's land, but everything remained quiet.

"This way," Michael said, leading them off the driveway and uphill into the scrub. "There's a hidden vantage point from where we can see what we're up against."

Below them, three rusty metal sheds bordered a rectangle of cleared land. A chain wire fence, looking to be no more than a metre high from where they were standing, surrounded the area, while

within the enclosure a dozen or more small dark animals sauntered about; sniffing the ground, scratching at it or just looking bored.

“Bunyips,” Russell whispered.

Clem pulled out his miniature camera to record the scene. “They’ll probably just say these are faked along with the ones from Longville, but at least I’ll have something to show Pip.”

“Who?” Michael asked.

“Um,” Clem said, wishing he could turn the clock back just ten measly seconds. He took a deep breath and sighed. “Russell and I are agents of the Black Delphinidae, acting on behalf of the Emissary himself.”

Michael nodded. “Pip Ingle, of course; Richard and Patricia’s son.”

“You know them?”

“Goldwater’s a small town. Actually I know them quite well, as I handled the transfer of land to them seven or eight years ago.”

Clem looked bewildered. “But, but then, you must know –”

“I acted on behalf of your grandfather, Clem son of Edwin. Yes, I recognised you the moment you came into my office.”

“You, you’re not a member of the Order, are you?”

“No, well not yet at any rate, but let’s just say your grandfather and I shared a common purpose.”

Clem shook his head. “This is really such an amazing set of coincidences, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps, or perhaps not. So Pip’s trying to overthrow Blunt, is he?”

“No, he’s trying to save the bunyips.”

Michael nodded, gazing down at the compound below. “Well we’d best go do that then.”

The bunyips looked up, sniffing the air and backing away slightly as Clem, Russell and Michael approached the compound. Clem held his finger to his lips, hoping the bunyips would recognise his signal for silence, but at that moment one of them dashed forward, yipping with delight.

“Number Five!” Clem said, running up to the fence and reaching over to pet what he still thought of as *his* bunyip. It licked his hand as he rubbed its muzzle and scratched it behind the ears.

“We’re going to put an end to this, I promise,” he whispered, now climbing over the fence.

“No Clem!” Michael shouted, but as he spoke intense floodlights illuminated the compound. The other bunyips yelped, backing away from Clem as he picked up Number Five and held it against his chest, while at the back of one of the sheds a door slammed and moments later he heard the sound of heavy boots running towards him.

“Freeze!” someone shouted as Clem was halfway back across the fence. He turned, shielding his eyes from the lights to see three men approaching him, two with weapons raised.

“Mr Edwinston I believe,” the third man said. “Come to steal my bunyip, have you?”

Alistair Blunt stepped forward, taking the bunyip from him. “I think it’s time we had a little talk.”

Michael and Russell watched on from the cover of the scrub as Blunt and his guards led Clem at gunpoint into the building.

Clem immediately recognised the two men waiting inside. The one holding the gun was the man the guide had distracted in the hotel on Frizian, while the other, the target of his weapon, was the guide himself.

“Your friend suggested you might be paying us a visit,” Blunt said to Clem.

Clem glared at the guide, but he just glanced at the gun pointed at him and shrugged.

“Search him,” Blunt said, and one of the other guards frisked Clem, rifling through his clothing and pockets with practised ease.

“He had this,” the guard said, handing Clem’s camera to Blunt.

“Well, well, well, I’m guessing this isn’t the first time you’ve been carrying a concealed camera in my presence. Am I right, Mr Edwinston?”

Clem said nothing.

“Answer him!” the guard said, slapping him across the face.

“Now, now,” Blunt said. “I don’t think we need get violent with our esteemed guest; not yet at any rate.”

The guard grunted, reminding Clem of Horace the doorman. He stared down at his feet, trying his hardest to suppress the urge to chuckle.

“I hope the newspaper paid you well,” Blunt continued. “Who put you up to it? Was it Wilkins?”

Clem again remained silent.

“No matter; his demise is long overdue anyway. Just what do you people have against me? What has my government done to upset you?”

“It’s not your government; it’s you and this bunyip baiting.”

Blunt looked surprised. “You haven’t been listening to that crazy Hindmarsh woman, have you? Surely this is just a harmless pastime, no different to any other sport.”

“It’s hardly harmless for the buniyps.”

“You were at the meet. Did you see anyone holding a gun to a bunyip’s head, forcing it to drink the honey? Of course not; they take to it of their own accord, fully aware of what it does to them. It’s what they’re designed for, it’s in their genes.”

Something stirred uneasily in the back of Clem’s mind. *Why were Cornipean buniyps susceptible to Frizian honey?*

“We treat our buniyps very well here. They’re only kept in the pen at night to protect them from predators; by day they’re free to roam the property, or to leave it for that matter if they wish. They don’t, though, because they like it here.”

“What about the fighting? Do they like that too?”

“Of course; it’s in their nature.”

Again Clem’s ears pricked up. *It’s what they’re designed for.*

“Did you know scientific studies have proved beyond doubt that the buniyps feel no pain while under the influence of the honey?”

Clem shook his head, trying to recall what he’d witnessed at the meet. The buniyps in the cages had been scared, he was sure, but once in the ring, even before they’d drunk their fill of honey, he’d sensed something else; the anxiety of a honed athlete facing the ultimate challenge perhaps? *It’s in their genes.*

“I saw you there,” Blunt continued. “I know you felt the excitement of competition, the fight to the death, that gladiatorial instinct that’s part of us all. I saw it on your face when this bunyip killed my Chopper.” His eyes suddenly lit up. “Perhaps I can offer you a share in this bunyip. How does five thousand sound for a fifty-fifty split of the winnings?”

Clem hesitated, scratching his chin as he weighed up his options. “You want me to give you five thousand for half that bunyip’s winnings?”

“Chopper earned me fifty thousand before this little beauty made minced meat of him. He has a great future ahead of him, a great future.”

Clem shook his head. “You people are just so sick.”

The guard with the gun slapped him across the face, his ring cutting a gash across Clem’s cheek.

“Clem! No!” the guide yelled as Clem raised his fists.

“Clem?” Blunt said. “Mr Edwinston, of course, I thought you looked familiar the first time I saw you. You’re Clem, son of Edwin from Huntress, aren’t you; young Ingle’s lackey?”

Clem remained silent while Blunt scratched his chin.

“So Ingle’s trying to stop the bunyip-baiting, is he? It’s a bit rich, don’t you think, the Black Delphinidae going after us given what you do to dolphins. Grilled or battered, hey Clem, with a squeeze of lemon?”

“That’s a lie!” Clem yelled, raising his fists again, while Blunt tut-tutted and shook his head.

“It’s time young Ingle learnt not to interfere in matters that are none of his concern. Take our guests outside and show them the full extent of our hospitality.”

“With pleasure,” the guard holding the gun at Clem’s head said. “Now move it!”

“No wait!” the guide said as his guard started ushering him towards the door. “I have nothing to do with Ingle!”

Blunt just shook his head and shrugged. “That’s life, or should I say death, old friend.”

Clem looked up at the starry sky. He couldn't see Huntress's star, it just wasn't visible at this distance, but even so he still stared in the direction of home, his thoughts turning again to his family and friends as he found himself once more with a gun at his head. This was fast turning into a habit, he mused, and a none-too-healthy one at that.

His mind turned back to his twelfth birthday, the day he'd been inducted into the Black Delphinidae and sworn the sacred oaths.

'I am a seeker of truth.'

'I seek the truth about my world.'

'I seek the truth about my people.'

'I seek the truth about my past.'

'I seek the truth about my future.'

His grandfather had removed the sacred amulet, hanging it around Clem's neck as he recited those words. The ebony dolphin felt icy cold against his chest before warming to its new guardian.

'Do you, Clem son of Edwin, take this talisman of the Emissary, to keep in trust as steward of our creed until the day of his return?'

'I do.'

'In the dimming of the stars shall the truth be found.'

'And the exiled shall be redeemed.'

'So say we all.'

Twelve years later the stars had dimmed, the exiled were redeemed and the Emissary came to receive his amulet, yet to achieve those goals the Black Delphinidae had sold their souls to the military. The price of their support had been the unopposed election of Alistair Blunt, and now Clem was about to pay that price with his life. He felt the echo of the dolphin's icy coldness as he drew in what must surely be his final breath.

"Hey!" Blunt called from inside the building. "What the —"

A dark shadow dashed out the door towards the guard holding the gun at Clem's head, followed a moment later by a cry as it clawed its way up his body and latched its jaws around his nose. The guard, perhaps in surprise as much as morbid stupidity, turned the gun on the bunyip and fired.

The bunyip released its grip, dropping out of harm's way at precisely the right moment and leaving the bullet to complete its

journey by taking the guard's nose off. He howled in pain, dropping his gun as he rammed both hands over his shattered face.

The second guard fired at the bunyip as it fled back towards the building, the shot striking it before ricocheting off a rock. Blunt, who by now was emerging from the doorway to see what all the screaming was about, fell limply to the ground with a bullet hole in the side of his head.

"Clem, come on!" the guide called as the guard holding him dashed to Blunt's side, but Clem turned instead to where the bunyip lay motionless in a growing pool of blood. He ripped off his shirt, wrapping it around the bunyip before gently picking it up and cradling it against his chest.

Glancing one final time at the fallen Supreme Councillor, Clem followed the guide into the bushes and headed for the gate.

"Clem, you're alive!" Michael said as he leapt out in front of them. "I, I'm sorry, I should've tried to rescue you from those men but I couldn't see any way of doing it without getting us all killed." He took a step backwards and sighed. "Once a coward always a coward, that's me."

"Don't be stupid. Right now I need to find a vet."

"A what?"

Clem showed him the wounded bunyip.

"Follow me; there's one not far from here."

"Where's Russell?"

"I sent him to fetch the police."

"That's good; I'm sure they'll be most interested in what they find back there."

Michael led them down a shadowy laneway to an unlocked gate a few hundred metres from the main road. In the moonlight Clem caught sight of a stately manor nestled amongst the trees at the end of a short driveway. Making sure his bunyip was still securely wrapped, he ran up to the portico entrance. An elderly man opened the door in response to his pounding.

"Are you the vet?"

"Yes, but surely –"

“My bunyip’s been shot! You have to help him, you have to save him.”

The man sighed. “Come on in and I’ll do what I can.”

The vet’s wife came and offered them each a brandy while her husband toiled in the next room. Clem sipped, trying to make small talk, but his mind was elsewhere, replaying Number Five’s heroic deeds over and over again. She offered him a tissue as his tears began to flow, while Michael and the guide watched on in awkward silence.

“He mustn’t die, not now,” Clem whispered.

“Hush; my husband’s doing all he can, I’m sure, and if anyone can save your pet, he can.”

Clem glared at her with unbridled hatred before controlling himself and blushing. “He wasn’t my pet, was never anyone’s *pet*.”

“Clem rescued him from the bunyip-baiters,” the guide said.

“Oh my goodness! Such terrible people, and the lies the newspapers have been spreading about poor Mr Blunt, it’s awful!”

“That bunyip belonged to Blunt,” Clem said, again glaring at the woman with murder in his eyes.

“Oh my! You can’t stay here; you must leave at once –”

“Madam, a word in private if you don’t mind,” Michael said with all the charm he could muster, before placing an arm around her shoulder and leading her from the room.

Clem covered his face and moaned.

Michael and the vet’s wife returned smiling and chatting to each other while at the same moment the vet emerged from his surgery.

“Michael here is Eric Chandler’s nephew, did you know that, Stephen? He’s just been telling me the most horrid tales about Alistair Blunt, and to think I voted for him when he was standing against Kevin Simmons!”

“I told you he was up to no good, but oh no, you said he had an honest face.”

“It was his voice too, so warm and reassuring, whereas Simmons just looked like a bumbling politician.”

“Which he was –”

“Um, excuse me,” Clem said, trying not to lose his temper, “but how’s my bunyip?”

“Oh, sorry, yes; he’s lost a lot of blood, but I’ve stitched and bandaged him up and he should be okay in a few weeks. I must say that’s one tough little bunyip you have there.”

“Thank you so much.” Clem tried to stand, but slumped back down as his legs turned to rubber. “What’s the damage?”

“Fifty will cover it, I’m sure.”

“Michael said it had been a bunyip-baiting champion,” the vet’s wife said as Clem pulled the notes from his wallet, causing the vet to turn as white as a ghost.

“Did it eat the honey?”

Clem nodded.

“I’m sorry,” the vet said, waving away Clem’s money. “It must be put down.”

“What?”

“Any bunyip that’s consumed Frizian honey must be destroyed. It’s the law.”

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary,” Michael said, now suddenly with a large gun in his hand. “Clem, go get your bunyip and give the man his money – no, give him double for his trouble.”

The vet muttered something unintelligible before escorting Clem into his surgery. His wife’s eyes kept darting up and down between Michael’s face and the gun in his hand, as if unsure which she feared most.

“Here’s another hundred to help you forget this ever happened,” Michael said as Clem and the vet returned with the bunyip sitting forlornly in a plastic carry-cage. The vet gave him a disparaging look but still took the money.

“Where’d you get the cannon from?” Clem asked once they were back on the street.

Michael looked around, even though the street was quite obviously deserted. “It was my father’s, but it’s not loaded and I don’t even know if it still works. He was in the military, many years ago; he opposed the early stages of the Farley uprising and died as a result.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s okay; it was a long time ago and those responsible ultimately died when the palace collapsed.”

Michael paused, wondering whether the need to tell outweighed the pain of recollection, and decided in the end it did.

“We’d been stationed in Longville on Cornipus – funny how such places keep coming back like a bad smell. Dad’s work was mostly training and civil defence, as there wasn’t really much need for an armed contingent there, but all that changed when the militias started appearing. The generals were divided and Dad’s squadron got caught in the middle of a show of strength. I can’t remember now who won the skirmish, well it really doesn’t matter anyway, but the end result was I became an orphan.”

“Your mother also died?”

“No, she ran off with a sailor when I was five and was never seen or heard from again.” Michael chuckled. “Dad never did have a high opinion of the navy.”

“I can see why.”

“Anyway, after he died I came here to stay on Uncle Eric’s farm for a while, but once the harvest ended I grew restless and Priestess Hilda at the school suggested I join the Temple on Bluehaven. The rest you know.”

“Well let’s hope this is the end of it and you can go back to your quiet life in Bringal Vale.”

“We can hope, yes.”

A car pulled up alongside them and Russell rolled down the window. “Thank heavens you’re all okay! The police are on their way to the farm now.”

“Thanks Russell,” Clem said as they climbed in. “You did great.” He was in no mood for celebration though.

Long Shadows

“The galaxy remains in shock following today’s untimely death of Supreme Councillor Blunt in what police have described as a tragic firearms accident. Implicated just days ago in renewed bunyip-baiting allegations, Blunt had gone to his rural retreat on Sontar to escape the media attention, but his spokesman firmly denied any suggestion he may have taken his own life. ‘Police ballistics tests and eyewitness accounts have confirmed he was struck by a ricocheting bullet accidentally fired by one of his assistants,’ he told reporters at a press conference earlier today.

“Cornipean police superintendent Scott Davies, who’s heading the bunyip-baiting investigations, issued a brief statement saying that, in light of this tragedy, no further action will be taken regarding Blunt’s alleged involvement.

“Alistair Blunt took office two years ago following the calamitous end of Mark the Bewildered’s reign, and was widely acclaimed for bringing economic and political stability to the galaxy. There’s been no indication yet of a likely successor.”

“Someone at the top has been pulling strings and doing deals,” Scott said as he sat sipping hot chocolate in Pip’s living room, while Snooky, Pip’s pet bunyip, raised an inquisitive ear from his favourite sunny spot on the window sill. “In return for turning a blind eye to Blunt’s involvement, a number of witnesses have come forward to testify. One in particular, a bouncer named Horace Tansey, has been most forthcoming and I expect his evidence will lead to several high-profile convictions.”

“Not Horace the doorman?” Clem laughed.

“That’s him. Do you know him?”

“Let’s just say we exchanged grunts.”

“Off the record, Clem, there’s something still puzzling me about Blunt’s death.”

“Yes?”

“Your account tallies well with that given by his two employees, who by the way will be pleading guilty to several firearms offences, but the bullet the pathologist extracted from Blunt’s head doesn’t match any of the guns we found on the property.”

“Huh?”

“Forensics reckons it’s a military bullet, fired by a silenced tactical response weapon.”

“You mean he was assassinated?”

“By someone in the military, we think, but as I said, this is entirely off the record.”

“I thought Blunt was highly in the military’s favour,” Pip said. “He’s certainly increased their budgets since taking office and everything I’d heard suggested the relationship was cosy.”

“I would’ve said the same thing,” Scott said, “but the forensic evidence doesn’t lie.”

“It’d have to be someone who knew what was happening at the farm,” Russell said. “Either that or they just got lucky.”

“Coincidences are rarely coincidental,” Pip said.

“I agree,” Scott said, “which is why I’m telling you, since whoever did it must have known what Clem was up to.”

Pip nodded thoughtfully, but his ponderings were interrupted by Snooky’s sudden yapping. Moments later the front door slammed, followed by the sound of heavy boots pounding down the hallway.

“Just what the hell are you up to, Ingle?”

“General Gallagher,” Pip said, standing to greet his latest visitor. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Of course not. What the hell are you up to?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean.” He handed Pip two newspapers, the first with the bunyip-baiting photos on the front page and the second reporting Blunt’s death. “This has your signature all over it.”

“We had to stop the bunyip-baiting, but we certainly didn’t kill him.”

“You expect me to believe this nonsense about a ricocheting bullet?”

Pip glanced at Scott.

“The bullet that killed Blunt was fired from a military assault weapon, a Triton 250 to be precise.”

“That’s preposterous!”

“I thought so too, but it’s true enough.”

“Send me the bullet and I’ll find out who pulled the goddamned trigger.”

“I’m not sure –”

“Just do it! Bloody civilians!”

Gallagher turned on his heels and departed, slamming the front door again on his way out.

“What a terribly rude man!” Russell said.

“Gallagher’s not too bad once you get used to him,” Pip said. “At least he’s predictable, not like some of the other generals.”

“That’s something I meant to ask,” Clem said, now looking very serious.

“Yes?”

“I know that for a long time there’s been a sort of cooperative agreement between the Black Delphinidae and parts of the military, and I know they played an important part behind the scenes in helping you defeat Drago –”

Pip raised his palm. “They almost had me killed in the process!”

“Well yeah, but that was just how it was meant to play out. My grandfather had foreseen it all, so you were never in any real danger.”

“I suppose that’s nice to know after the fact.”

“What bothers me, though, is the price we had to pay for their help, and are still paying for all we know.”

“You mean Blunt’s shooting?”

“I think that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Was Blunt killed to silence him or pacify us?”

“Or both?” Russell added.

Pip steepled his hands under his chin. “Once you sell your soul to the devil it’s very hard to buy it back.”

“Exactly,” Clem said. “We need to distance ourselves from them without making it look like we’re doing it.”

“I must talk with your grandfather, if he’s feeling up to visitors.”

“Yes, he’s a lot better now.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

* * *

Clem settled himself in front of the ultranet terminal and opened the search engine, keying in *bunyip* and *Frizian honey* for starters. That combination scored twenty thousand hits, so he threw in *biochemistry* as well, knocking it back to seventy-eight.

‘On the iso-enzymic neural hyperactivity induced by Frizian honey in bunyips.’

Lovely; he couldn’t even understand the title, let alone the paper.

‘Wilson Bunyip and Pamela Frizian score top marks in biochemistry.’

No, not exactly what he was looking for.

‘Bunyips and Frizian honey – a paradox in biochemistry.’

Bingo! His hand shaking with nervous excitement, he clicked on the link.

‘Access denied.’

He almost thumped the terminal before stopping himself; after all it really wasn’t its fault and he couldn’t afford to buy a new one. Fine, what else was there?

‘Frizian honey toxicity in bunyips – why the interplanetary biochemistry barrier is broken.’

Click.

‘Access denied.’

‘Wilson Bunyip and Pamela Frizian score top marks in biochemistry.’

Click.

‘Teenage sweethearts Wilson Bunyip and Pamela Frizian topped the state in this year’s biochemistry finals, much to the delight of their parents. “They’ve spent every night for the last three months swatting up together,” Tom Bunyip said. “We’re so happy for them.” Has this young Bunyip found his Frizian honey?’

Right, so the ultranet was still working.

'Frizian honey biochemistry riddle – can bunyips really be Cornipean?'

Click.

'Access denied.'

This time Clem really did thump the terminal.

He stood, sighing in frustration, and was about to walk away when he remembered something else he meant to look up.

'Triton 250.'

Click.

'Manufactured by Triton Armaments on Pulper, the model 250 is fast becoming the soldier's weapon of choice. "Lightweight, quiet and deadly accurate are words most frequently used to describe this latest killing machine," military journalist Stan Gleeson said in his glowing review. "It takes strategic warfare to a new level".'

Clem stopped reading, focusing instead on the picture of the weapon. *"Oh Michael,"* he whispered, and logged out.

* * *

"Come in Pip, and take a seat," Jacob said, waving him into his darkened room.

"Clem tells me you're feeling a lot better."

"True, but I fear my respite may not be for long. Perhaps it's fortunate my curse of foresight excludes my own future."

Pip sat, unsure what to say.

"I'm sorry; I've made you uncomfortable and I shouldn't have done that, so let's start again, shall we? Yes, Clem's right; I'm feeling a lot better now."

Pip forced a grin. "I'm glad to hear it. Do you mind, um, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all, although whether I can answer it is another matter entirely."

"It's about our connections with the military."

Jacob nodded thoughtfully. "I was expecting that sooner or later, and to be honest I'm surprised you haven't asked a lot earlier."

"I guess I've had other things on my mind."

“Alistair Blunt and his bunyips, of course. Clem told me what happened.”

“Did he tell you the bullet that killed Blunt came from a military weapon?”

“Now that is interesting and not altogether unexpected, I must say. Hence your question, I presume?”

“Um, yes.”

“So how did the Black Delphinidae become entangled with the military? Let me see, where should I begin?”

“From the beginning?”

“Now Pip, you of all people should know things like this never have a true beginning, unless one goes right back to the dawn of time itself. You may think our recent trouble began with the ascendancy of Drago, but it goes back a lot further than that, and I doubt we’ve seen the last of it either, if you don’t mind me saying. Your question about the military is tied in with that, of course, but I think I’ll begin with the story my grandfather told me when I asked him the same question a long time ago.”

Pip leaned forward, nodding.

“You’ve no doubt heard the account of how Morgoth came to power.”

“Several versions of it, actually, but while we were in the City of Towers, Elko said Morgoth came across a book written by the founder of the Black Delphinidae and telling of Drago’s threat.”

Jacob smiled. “I must say that’s getting much closer to the truth than most people are prepared to admit. Did he say how Morgoth came across such a book?”

“No, he didn’t.”

Jacob smiled again. “In his early days as a student on Bluehaven, it’s said Morgoth heard rumours of an ancient people living on Huntress and came here to see for himself.”

“I thought Huntress was off-limits on account of the prison colony.”

“It was, and the security was a lot tighter back then than in more recent times, but arrive he did and found our people living in the valley here, much like we were when you first arrived.”

“Gosh.”

“It’s said that in his youth he was quite a charming young man, nothing like the monster he later became, and quickly befriended the villagers. He was no doubt the first Barefooter they’d ever encountered, so I’m sure the curiosity was mutual.

“With his historian’s nose for detail, he managed to weave together fragments of our mythology and legends into a fairly coherent account of Drago and the apocalypse, and figured out the origin of the Dolphins’ collective mind. With a lot of help from our people, Morgoth actually wrote that book himself.”

“G—” Pip said before covering his mouth and blushing. Jacob smiled. “Yet, um, yet he told Damien it was an ancient text he’d stumbled across.”

“Naturally, as to do otherwise would have landed him in serious trouble with the authorities. As it was, Damien forced him to burn the book and cast its ashes into the sea while denouncing everything he’d read.”

“That’s what Elko said, and Morgoth’s parents wouldn’t listen to him either so he and his Barefooter mates overthrew the government.”

Jacob again smiled. “That’s where the connection with the military comes in, for some of those mates, as you call them, were actually young officers in the services. Indeed, it’s likely they were the ones who facilitated his initial visit to Huntress, and Morgoth presumably convinced them strongly enough of Drago’s threat that they were willing to go behind the backs of the generals and launch their coup.”

“The generals wouldn’t have been too pleased about that.”

“Most were slain by those loyal to Morgoth, and his supporters quickly rose in rank to replace them. Perhaps wishing to avoid any questioning of his motives, Morgoth put in place certain arrangements between his military operatives and our people, in order to keep our existence a secret, and they have remained in effect ever since.”

“So, um, how do we go about untangling ourselves from them?”

“That, my dear boy, is something only you can do.”

Pip grimaced.

“There’s one whose guidance you should seek, though, one who was there when all those deals were done.”

Pip stared into space for a moment. “Damien?”

“Yes. Have you heard from him or your friend Damon lately?”

“Actually no; I hope they’re okay. I’ll send them a message as soon as I get the chance.”

Jacob closed his eyes. “Yes, you should; indeed it’s vital that you do.”

“What? Why?”

“My foresight’s no longer very specific, but this much is true. *If you cannot contact them, all will be lost.*”

“Gosh.”

Jacob switched on the television news after Pip had left his room.

“With nominations for the new Supreme Councillor now officially closed, the galaxy faces an unprecedented constitutional crisis with no candidates on offer for the election. The Council are currently in an emergency meeting behind closed doors on Meridian, but reports so far have indicated no resolution is in sight.

“‘I’d have to say this was a rather blatant oversight by the lawyers who drafted our constitution,’ legal affairs reporter Clive Monash said. ‘Apparently it never occurred to them that no-one might want the top job.’

“With the trail of shattered careers and now a death in its wake, there’s little wonder candidates are in such short supply. Many are saying the position of Supreme Councillor is jinxed, and with good reason.”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head in despair at how quickly everything had soured. “You’re walking a dangerous path, young Pip, a dangerous path indeed.”

* * *

Pip found Clem waiting outside his office as he wandered back, still mulling over everything Jacob had told him. Pushing aside those thoughts, he smiled and waved him in.

“Just the man I want to see,” he said, perching himself on the corner of his desk.

“What have I done now?”

Pip laughed, before realising with a shock just how long it’d been since he’d last done that. The days were growing dark indeed. “No, nothing like that,” he said, forcing a smile. “I just wanted to tell you that your friend Michael Chandler has joined the Order as a resident acolyte.”

Clem’s shocked expression was the last thing he expected. “But – when?”

“A couple of days ago. I thought you’d have been pleased.”

“I am, but –”

Pip stared at him.

“Um, look, I’m not a hundred percent sure, which is why I haven’t said anything to you before now, but, um, but –”

“Out with it, Clem, before I die of old age.”

“I think, um, well I’m pretty sure Michael fired the shot that killed Blunt.”

“Huh? How do you figure that?”

“Well, he was carrying a concealed gun, a Triton 250, which he later used to persuade the vet not to kill my bunyip, and then Scott said it was a Triton 250 that killed Blunt.”

“But why would he do it?”

“He was pretty sure Blunt killed his uncle, Eric Chandler.”

Pip stroked his chin, but before he could say anything more, the sound of heavy boots pounding towards his office heralded the arrival of an all-too-frequent visitor.

“General, what an unexpected pleasure,” Pip said, standing and offering his hand. “We were just talking –”

“Shut up, Ingle! Where is he?”

“I’m sorry, but where’s *who*?”

“You know damn well who I mean! Where’s Chandler?”

Pip picked up his phone. “Karen, could you send someone to fetch Michael Chandler for me please? Yes, he’ll be in the library or the dormitory.”

“He’d better be,” Gallagher said, “but just in case he tries to make a run for it, know that I have this place surrounded.”

Pip nodded. “Perhaps while we’re waiting, you’d care to enlighten me on what you want one of my acolytes for.”

“No.”

“Some refreshment then? Tea, coffee, or perhaps something stronger?”

“Just shut up, Ingle.”

Pip picked up a random document from his desk and pretended to read it, while Clem squeezed himself into the corner and tried to be invisible. Gallagher stood by the window, drumming his fingers on the sill while glaring out at the seminary grounds with a look of utter contempt on his face. The couple of minutes before Michael knocked on the door seemed like hours.

“Come in,” Pip and Gallagher said in unison, and Michael entered, wearing just the white shorts with black trim of a Black Delphinidae acolyte. He flinched slightly at the sight of General Gallagher before straightening himself and turning to face Pip.

“You wanted to see me?”

“What in blue blazes made you kill Blunt?” Gallagher said before Pip could respond. “Are you utterly mad?”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Pip said, now standing. “As a member of the Order you’re entitled to claim sanctuary.”

Gallagher scowled at him but said nothing.

“It’s all right,” Michael said, now smiling. “Yes, I shot him.”

“Michael told me Blunt killed his uncle,” Clem said.

“Is this true?” Pip asked.

“Yes,” said Michael, while at the same time Gallagher said, “No.”

Pip turned to face him. “General?”

“Nothing I say leaves this room, is that clear?”

Pip glanced at Michael before nodding.

“Eric Chandler was on the verge of exposing Blunt’s involvement in the bunyip-baiting consortium, and the political fallout of such a revelation would have had dire consequences for the galaxy. I had no choice but to act when I did.”

“What?” Michael said.

“In how much detail do I have to spell it out? I killed your uncle to protect Blunt.”

Michael's jaw dropped as it sunk in that he'd shot the wrong man, and for one terrifying moment he felt an insane compulsion to leap forward and strangle the general standing before him.

"Now you've gone and created the very thing we were trying to prevent," Gallagher said, ignorant of Michael's turmoil.

"What's that?"

"A power vacuum of course. Don't you watch the news?"

"Yes, but –"

"After the fall of Simmons, Collins and now Blunt, everyone's saying the Supreme Councillor's job is jinxed. Nobody wants to take it on."

"But surely the Council –" Pip began, but Gallagher cut him off.

"The Council's divided and inept. If any were to stand for Supreme Councillor, the others would undermine him. Without an independent head of state, this galaxy faces anarchy."

"But surely there must be someone –"

"You, Ingle?"

"Me? No, of course not."

"Why not? You're happy enough being head of this ragtag religion of yours, aren't you?"

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, General. There are things I must do as head of my Order, with my followers supporting me or not as they choose, but as Supreme Councillor I'd have too much authority."

"*Too much authority* – now that at least is a novel excuse. Do these *things* you have to do involve bunyips?"

"Yes, they do."

For a moment Gallagher flinched, but tried to cover it by turning to face Clem.

"How about you? Fancy being Supreme Councillor for a while until someone sticks a knife in your back?"

Clem shook his head.

"That's right; shake your head, just like everyone else in this goddamned galaxy is shaking their collective heads. You give me no choice."

He pulled the field telephone from his belt. "Major, begin the operation."

“What was that about?” Pip asked.

“Right now, twelve squadrons under my command are surrounding the government house on Meridian, and in a few minutes the council will be dissolved, by force if necessary, and this galaxy placed under military rule.”

“You’re joking, surely,” Pip said, but Gallagher shook his head.

“Unfortunately not, but as for you, Ingle, this compound, seminary or whatever you want to call it is now under lockdown and all of you under house arrest.”

As he spoke, two armed soldiers entered the office.

“Kill them if they cause any trouble,” he said as he turned and marched out.

Internment

“People of the galaxy,” General Gallagher began in his first live address since seizing power in what had ultimately been a bloodless coup. “I ordered this morning’s dissolution of the Council to contain a serious threat to the stability of our worlds. I refer of course to the recent attacks on our Supreme Councillor, culminating in his murder, and the inept response of the Council in dealing with the situation. There are those in high standing covertly seeking to undermine our system of government, and it was essential I act before a state of anarchy could take hold.

“I know many of you will find this hard to believe, and indeed I was shocked when I learned the truth, but those behind this treachery are none other than the leadership of the Black Delphinidae. Under questioning, an acolyte has admitted to shooting Alistair Blunt in a raid on his rural retreat, a raid organised by the Holy Emissary himself, Pip Ingle. Ingle was also behind the recent publication of photographs claiming to implicate the late Mr Blunt in the sport of bunyip-baiting.

“By military decree, all allegations against Mr Blunt and other prominent citizens in relation to bunyip-baiting are unconditionally withdrawn and no further investigation of this matter will take place, other than to prosecute those who fabricated and published the so-called evidence. Furthermore, the Black Delphinidae is now an outlawed group and anyone found continuing an association with it will be dealt with harshly. I will leave no stone unturned in wiping this scourge from our galaxy, and in this I have enlisted the full support of the police forces on each world.

“Long ago our forefathers recognised the dangers of this heinous cult and instigated the Cleansing, about which much has been recently published, however this latest turn of events has vindicated

their actions entirely. Let the Black Delphinidae be erased utterly and totally this time!

“I will continue to govern until such time as this task is completed, at which point I’ll gladly return the galaxy to civilian rule. Meanwhile a select committee will investigate possible amendments to our Constitution to ensure a situation like this can never arise in the future. I welcome your input on this matter.

“Thank you for your attention. You can rest assured my officers and I are acting only in your best interests.”

* * *

“Oomph,” Clem said as Number Five leapt onto his lap before curling into a circle and closing his eyes. “If you get any heavier you’ll have to stop doing that.”

“He does appear to have grown somewhat since you first brought him here,” Pip said. “What have you been feeding him?”

“Just the generic *Bunyip Mix* from the supermarket, but yes, he does go through an awful lot of it.”

“You’ll be wanting to put a saddle on him soon.”

The bunyip forced his eyes open to give Pip a dirty look.

“He hasn’t become any more aggressive, has he?” Pip asked.

“No, quite the opposite actually; this former champion is now a committed pacifist. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason, only with the Frizian honey he’d eaten, I thought, well –”

“That reminds me – I was trying to find something on the ultranet about the biochemistry of the honey on bunyips but every link kept coming back with *access denied*.”

“Really? But your account has full clearances, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what I thought.”

Clem glanced at the two soldiers keeping watch over them. “Do you think –”

Before he could say what he thought Pip might be thinking, two military police escorted a civilian constable into the room and spoke quickly to the soldiers. One of them pointed to Michael.

“Michael Chandler,” the constable said, “I arrest you for the murder of Alistair Blunt. You don’t have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be taken down and given in evidence.”

“Michael is a member of this Order and is entitled to sanctuary,” Pip said, now standing.

“And who might you be?” one of the military police asked.

“He’s Pip Ingle, the Emissary, and you have no right to come in here,” Clem said.

The MP consulted with his companion. “Pip Ingle, you are hereby charged with treason, and under order from General Gallagher you are to be taken into custody to await trial before a military court. Come with us please, sir.”

Clem moved himself between the MPs and the door, standing with his feet apart, hands on his hips and chest puffed out to full effect.

“No Clem,” Pip said. “Let them do what they must.”

“The hell I will!” Clem said, raising his fists, but Pip shook his head.

“A time may come for fighting, Clem, but not now. Please, just let them take me.”

Clem stood aside, bowing his head.

* * *

“Superintendent, I think you’ll want to see this,” the detective said just as Scott Davies was about to leave his office.

“It’d better be quick as I’m due in court.”

“We found a security recorder at Blunt’s farm on Sontar, but didn’t pay much attention to it at the time as it seemed to be only monitoring the residence.”

“Yes, I saw that in your report.”

“There were some encrypted recordings as well, and by a lucky break I managed to guess the password.”

“What was it?”

“Chopper.”

“That’s the name of the bunyip Blunt had at the baiting meet.”

“Precisely.”

“So what did you find?”

“Watch this.”

The detective clicked on the *Play* icon.

“So Ingle’s trying to stop the bunyip-baiting, is he?” Blunt said. “It’s a bit rich, don’t you think, the Black Delphinidae going after us given what you do to dolphins. Grilled or battered, hey Clem, with a squeeze of lemon?”

“That’s a lie!” Clem yelled, raising his fists, while Blunt tut-tut-tutted and shook his head.

“It’s time young Ingle learnt not to interfere in matters that are none of his concern. Take our guests outside and show them the full extent of our hospitality.”

“With pleasure,” the guard holding the gun at Clem’s head said. “Now move it!”

“No wait!” the other prisoner said as his guard started ushering him towards the door. “I have nothing to do with Ingle!”

Blunt just shook his head and shrugged. “That’s life, or should I say death, old friend.”

“You see,” the detective said, “Blunt told his henchmen to take Clem and the other one outside and kill them, so if Michael Chandler overheard that –”

Scott smiled and scratched his chin. “It’d be a pretty good reason for taking a shot at Blunt, wouldn’t it?”

* * *

Pip emerged from the military shuttle, squinting against the brilliant floodlights bathing the courtyard and almost stumbling as his troublesome legs threatened to give way beneath him. The two military policemen grabbed his arms, keeping him vaguely upright.

“This way, Ingle,” one of them said, pulling him towards the dark brick building on their left. There was something about this place, he thought; something about the courtyard and its surrounding buildings, something familiar and haunting. A narrow passageway at the far

corner of the yard caught Pip's eye and through there, he knew with absolute certainty, through there on the other side of the building was a running track surrounding a sports oval. In his mind now he was running, running until his legs were sure to drop off, running with a rucksack on his back and a rifle in his hands, forever running around and around that miserable track.

'*Shoot him!*' echoed the voice of Sergeant Croft as the sight of David Collins' exploding head flashed across his mind's eye. It was just an image, a computer simulation, but knowing that didn't make it any less real. Feeling his gorge rising, he swallowed hard to stop himself from throwing up.

"You're not going to pass out on us, are you Ingle?" the MP said, snapping him back to the present.

"Sorry, bad memories, that's all," he managed to say while forcing his legs to keep moving him forward.

Heavy steel doors slid open as they approached the corner of the building, revealing a sterile white corridor broken only by numbered doors down each side. In what had now become a waking nightmare, Pip was escorted into room 1746.

"The bathroom's —"

"Yes, I know, it's 1799," he said without realising he was speaking.

"You'll be under constant surveillance," the MP said, glancing up at the miniature camera in the corner of the room, "so don't even think about trying to escape."

"No, of course not." Pip stared at the empty shelf above the hand basin. "Um, where are my pills?"

"What?"

"No, never mind. Wrong nightmare."

"Sweet dreams," the MP said before slamming the door behind him, and Pip let himself collapse onto what had for five years been his bunk.

'*One of these each morning will stop the cramps,*' Commander Hoskins had said while throwing him the bottle of pills; pills which later turned out to be the powerful hypnotics used to brainwash him. '*Take one a day and trust me, no more cramps.*'

With that thought, Pip cried out in pain as, for the first time in years, his legs began to cramp.

* * *

“Michael Chandler, please stand,” the committal judge said. “I understand you have chosen to represent yourself and have declined all offers of legal assistance, is that correct?”

“Yes, your honour.”

“Very well, but for the record I must strongly advise you to reconsider your position.”

“Your advice is noted, your honour.”

The judge cleared his throat. “Michael Chandler, it is alleged that on the fifteenth day of August, you did unlawfully trespass upon lands owned by Alistair Blunt and, whilst there, did wilfully discharge a firearm causing his death. How do you plead?”

“Guilty, your honour.”

The judge looked taken aback, but before he could say anything more, the door at the back of the courtroom burst open and Scott Davies ran down the aisle towards the prosecution lawyers.

“Forgive my intrusion, your honour,” Scott said, glancing up at the judge, “but I have a matter relevant to the prosecution of this case that I must raise.”

“This is highly irregular, Superintendent, but go ahead.”

Scott joined the lawyers in a huddle for a few moments, showing them transcripts and images from Blunt’s security recording, while the judge leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

The prosecuting barrister finally turned to face the judge. “Your honour, I must advise that new evidence has come to light regarding the circumstances of Alistair Blunt’s death, and with your permission the prosecution asks that all charges against the defendant be withdrawn.”

“You can’t!” Michael shouted.

“Silence!” said the judge. “In my court you will not speak unless spoken to. Is that understood?”

“Yes, your honour, but –”

“Be seated and be quiet. Would the prosecutor and Superintendent Davies please approach the bench.”

Both men nodded and huddled around the judge, showing him the documents.

“So allowing this case to proceed would be in violation of the Supreme Commander’s proclamation,” Scott said.

The judge nodded. “Mr Chandler, please stand and face the bench.”

Michael stood.

“Be it known that I concur with the prosecution’s request, and all charges against you are hereby dismissed. I declare this matter closed.”

Michael opened his mouth to protest, but the judge’s glare silenced him.

“This matter is closed, Mr Chandler. Please leave my courtroom now.”

Michael grabbed Scott by the shoulder as he walked down the courthouse steps. The prosecution lawyers moved to intervene, but Scott waved them back.

“What did you do that for?” Michael shouted.

Scott shook his head. “I thought you’d have been pleased.”

“Pleased? I shot the wrong man! It was Gallagher who killed my uncle!”

“Michael, calm down and come with me.” Scott led him to a stone bench alongside the fountain adorning the forecourt. “If Gallagher killed your uncle, it was to protect Blunt from exposure of his bunyip-baiting antics. Whichever way you look at it, Blunt was ultimately responsible.”

“But I still shot him and deserve to be punished.”

“Ordinarily I’d agree with you, but in case you haven’t noticed, these aren’t ordinary times. I’m sorry, Michael, I really am, but you have to walk free.”

“There’s no possibility of a lesser charge?”

“No, not without violating the Supreme Commander’s proclamation.”

Michael sighed. "You've condemned me to a lifetime of irreconcilable guilt."

"Then do something selfless, something honourable and good. You could, maybe, find a way to help Pip."

"Help Pip, yes. Any suggestions?"

Scott pulled a card from his wallet. "Go to Meridian and find this man."

"Frank Halliday? Isn't he the historian who wrote about the Cleansing?"

"Yes, and he was a close supporter of Pip during the Drago affair. He'll know what to do."

* * *

For three weeks Pip had been confined to the empty barracks, fed two bland meals a day and allowed only to wander up and down the corridor for exercise. For much of the time he sat in meditation, trying to suppress the memories of his military training here that kept wanting to resurface. At night, though, his dreams would take him uncontrollably back to those days of endless running, jumping, climbing and, most haunting of all, his weapons training.

"Ingle!" Sergeant Croft shouted as Pip climbed the rope netting to the flying fox apparatus. "The commander wants to see you in his office right away."

"Yes, sir!"

Pip leapt to the ground, rolling on impact to cushion his three-metre drop before running off towards the administrative wing.

"Come in, Ingle," the commander said, turning to introduce his visitor. "This is General Gallagher."

Pip snapped to attention and saluted.

"At ease, Private," Gallagher said. "Please, take a seat."

Pip, feeling suddenly confused and out of his depth, looked to his commander for guidance.

"Sit, Ingle," the commander said, and Pip finally sat. "Sergeant Croft tells me you've become quite an adept with the Triton 250"

simulator, and General Gallagher suggested it might be time for a more realistic exercise.”

“Yes, sir,” Pip said.

“The Triton 250 is rightfully renowned as the sniper’s weapon of choice,” Gallagher said, “but its mastery can be quite difficult. Your simulator scores have been remarkable, I must say, and I’d like to see how you perform in the field.”

Pip smiled.

“Go to the armoury and kit yourself up,” the commander said. “Meet us in the courtyard in thirty minutes.”

“Yes, sir!”

Half an hour later Pip found himself being ushered on board a military subspace shuttle.

“Where are we going, sir?”

“That’s something you don’t need to know, Ingle,” the commander said. “Just go and amuse yourself up the back.”

Pip strapped himself in as the craft took off, still wondering where they might be heading. He knew this particular model was mostly used for longer flights, so it wouldn’t be anywhere on Nimber or Pulper. Perhaps one of the civilian worlds, he thought, but wondered what sort of training he could possibly be doing there.

After several hours of monotonous flight he emerged from the craft to find himself in parkland under a clear sunny sky.

“Over this way, Ingle,” the commander said, and he followed him into a lightly forested area adjacent to the field. Within a few hundred metres the ground began sloping downwards, until suddenly they emerged onto a rocky ledge overlooking a village nestled in the valley below.

“Prepare your weapon,” the commander said. Pip unstrapped his pack and quickly mounted his Triton 250 on its tripod, while Gallagher pulled out a set of binoculars and surveyed the village.

“Look directly down to the school playground on the edge of town,” he said as he handed them to Pip. “Do you see a red-haired boy sitting away from the others and eating his lunch?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think he could be David Collins?”

“It’s possible, yes, sir.”

Pip tried to see the boy's eyes, to see those pools of blackness, pools of cold and absolute death, but the boy's head remained bowed as he ate his sandwich.

"Kill him," Gallagher said, softly and calmly.

Pip almost asked whether he was sure, whether he knew for certain the boy was David Collins, but his very first lesson from Sergeant Croft – a soldier never questions his orders – silenced him. Instead he took one final look through the binoculars before putting them aside and moving his weapon into place. Adjusting the telescopic sights, he centred his aim on the boy's head before squeezing ever so gently on the trigger. Easy now, easy now ...

Blam!!

Pip woke with a scream choked in his throat, his pulse racing and his head spinning, as almost immediately both legs cramped in excruciating pain. He sat bolt upright while trying to stretch his thighs, but became entangled in the sheet and tumbled ungracefully off his bunk, banging his head on the linoleum floor and nearly knocking himself out. His gorge now rising, he pulled himself up a little, whimpering and moaning, not only from his physical pain but the mental anguish of trying to simultaneously recall and forget that dreadful day.

Had he really killed an innocent child as part of his training? He was sure, absolutely sure, he could never have committed such an atrocity, brain-washing or no brain-washing, but at the same time the clarity of the memory made him just as certain it was true. Could there have been more than one? Had he left a trail of murdered red-haired boys in the wake of his training? He moaned, shaking his head in denial and confusion.

He remembered all too well the moment on Bluehaven when he'd almost shot the real David Collins; the moment when their minds had touched, freeing his soul from the effects of the mind-altering drugs.

'Pip, kill me if you must, but doing so won't destroy Drago, it'll only slow him down. Sooner or later he'll make another vessel, and you might not be there to stop him next time. There's another way, Pip, a better way, but we must work together. We must pass beyond redemption –'

“When the stars grow dim,” Pip said out loud, just as he’d done back on that headland, but this time his cramps dissolved away, leaving him feeling strangely calm and at peace. Heaving a deep sigh of relief as his stomach settled and his pulse rate dropped, he cautiously pulled himself onto his feet and poured a glass of water. He’d just taken a sip when the door to his room opened.

“Get yourself dressed, Ingle,” the military police officer said. “It’s time for your day in court.”

“And I’ll be representing you,” said the man standing behind him.

“Owen! Am I glad to see you!”

“We won’t have time to talk before the trial starts, so just make sure you plead *not guilty*. Once we get through the preliminary hearing we can sort out your defence.”

Pip smiled for the first time since his incarceration.

* * *

“Stand up, Ingle,” the chairman of the military tribunal said. “You are being represented by, is it Owen Lachlan?”

“Yes, sir,” Owen said, now standing also.

“You’re Brian Lachlan’s son, aren’t you? Your father was our former Director of Justice and a very shrewd man. What does he think of you defending this case?”

“My father has long since retired and no longer expresses an opinion.”

“A wise man indeed, more than I can say for his son.”

“No doubt, but I’m still representing Mr Ingle in this case.”

“Be it upon your head then.” The chairman shook his head, scowling. “Your client is charged with treason. Does he wish to enter a plea?”

Owen nodded to Pip.

“Not guilty,” Pip said.

“Is this in accordance with your advice, Mr Lachlan?”

“Yes.”

“Then your advice is as ill-considered as your choice of client. Let this circus begin. Lieutenant Barnes?”

The prosecutor stepped forward. "Sir, with your concurrence I will present evidence to this court that the defendant, as head of the Black Delphinidae, directed the defamation and killing of our late Supreme Councillor, Alistair Blunt."

"Please proceed," the chairman sighed.

"I call Horace Tansey to the stand."

A military police officer escorted the heavily-built man to the witness box.

"Mr Tansey, were you at the former warehouse of Macadam and Sons in Longville on the third of August?"

"Yes."

The prosecutor handed him a photograph. "Did this man attempt to gain access to the premises?"

"Yes."

"What name did he give?"

"He called himself Edwinson."

"Did he attempt to bribe you?"

"Yes, he gave me fifty bucks."

"Did you let him in?"

"No, but one of the other guests vouched for him so that was okay."

"Your witness, Mr Lachlan."

Owen stepped forward, clearing his throat. "Mr Tansey, what was the purpose of the gathering in Longville?"

"I don't know."

"Surely you must know it was a bunyip-baiting meet."

"I couldn't say. There were people there, important people, and my job was to make sure only invited guests were allowed in."

"Did you see any bunyips there?"

"No."

"Did you see Alistair Blunt there?"

"No."

"Did you see anything of what went on inside the building?"

"No. My job was to mind the door, and that's what I did."

Owen sighed. "I have no further questions."

The prosecutor stepped forward. "I call Clem, son of Edwin."

Two military policemen escorted Clem to the witness stand and handcuffed him to the railing.

“Clem, what is your position in the Black Delphinidae?”

“I’m principal aide to the Emissary.”

“You mean the defendant?”

“Yes.”

“Were you in Longville on the night of the third of August?”

“Yes.”

“Did you attempt to enter the former warehouse of Macadam and Sons, posing as a Mr Edwinson?”

“Yes.”

“What took place at those premises?”

“It was a bunyip-baiting meet.”

“So you say. Did you secretly take photographs of this alleged event?”

“Yes.”

“Were those photographs then published in the Cornipean Argus?”

“Yes.”

“Who told you to do this?”

Clem glanced at Pip, who nodded. “Pip, the defendant I mean.”

“Why did he do that?”

“He said he needed to stop the bunyip-baiting.”

“Did he say why he needed to do this?”

“He said something terrible would happen if we didn’t.”

“What specifically?”

“He didn’t know. His foresight is never very specific.”

“So he didn’t know why he was doing this.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“So acting on Ingle’s whim, you attended this alleged meet and caused photos claiming to incriminate Alistair Blunt to be published in the Argus.”

“It wasn’t a whim –”

“Just answer yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. We come now to the day of Mr Blunt’s death. Did you unlawfully enter his property on Sontar in the company of a Mr Michael Chandler?”

“Um, well, yes,” Clem said after a slight hesitation. *Good, he doesn't know about Russell.*

“You don't sound too sure. Do you require more time to consider your answer?”

“No, Michael and I were there. We were trying to find further evidence of Blunt's involvement in bunyip-baiting.”

“Were you there at the behest of Mr Ingle?”

“No, not exactly.”

“I'm sorry, I don't understand. Mr Ingle is the head of the Black Delphinidae, is he not, and didn't you just say you were an agent of his?”

“Well, yes, but Pip didn't approve of us going.”

“But you went anyway.”

“Yes.”

“It sounds like Mr Ingle was running a very poorly disciplined operation, if what you're telling us is true.”

“No, well, yeah, maybe.”

“I shall record that as a *yes*,” the chairman said.

“As I understand it from the civilian police records,” the prosecutor continued, “you were apprehended by Mr Blunt's security guards, and a short time later a scuffle involving a bunyip occurred and several shots were fired.”

“Well, yes, but –”

“You said in your initial statement that one of the guards shot and wounded the bunyip, but the bullet ricocheted and struck Blunt in the head, killing him.”

“That's what I thought, but the police later found it was a military bullet that killed him.”

“Indeed, fired from a Triton 250, specifically the Triton 250 first issued to Lieutenant Philip Chandler and kept by his son Michael following his death.”

Clem gulped.

“But you knew this, didn't you? You saw him use the weapon to threaten a veterinary surgeon.”

“Um, yes.”

“Was Michael Chandler acting under orders from the defendant?”

“No, of course not.”

“Yet the next time you saw him he was wearing the uniform of a Black Delphinidae acolyte, was he not?”

“Yes, but –”

“Thank you, Clem son of Edwin. Your witness, Mr Lachlan.”

“Um, Clem,” Owen said, looking uncomfortable questioning a witness whom he also counted as a good friend. “When did you first meet Michael Chandler?”

“It was shortly after the Longville photos were published. Someone suggested he might have further information about Blunt’s involvement with bunyip-baiting.”

“Alleged involvement,” the prosecutor chimed in.

“Whatever,” Clem said. “I called on him at his office on Bluehaven and he told me about the farm on Sontar.”

“Was he aware at the time of your involvement in the Black Delphinidae?”

“No, although I accidentally let it slip while we were on Sontar.”

“Are you aware of any prior connection between Chandler and the defendant?”

“No,” Clem said, before suddenly remembering something Michael had told him on Sontar. He stared into space, wondering if he should mention it.

“What is it, Clem?”

“Um, I think Michael may have said he once handled a real estate transaction for Pip’s parents.”

“Is this true?” the chairman asked. “Lieutenant Barnes, were the prosecution aware of this?”

“No, sir, but we’ll certainly follow it up.”

“I don’t see Michael Chandler anywhere on my list of witnesses. Will he be giving evidence here?”

“He’s currently before the civilian courts charged with Blunt’s murder. We’ve been trying to subpoena him but so far without success.”

“I see. Mr Lachlan, do you have any further questions for this witness?”

“Um, no, your honour.”

“I didn’t think you would. In that case I’ll adjourn this hearing for today.”

* * *

Michael emerged from the customs and immigration hall in Azarath, looking up and down the street for any sign of a taxi, but the long line of bedraggled people leading to the distant empty rank confirmed his worst fears. Azarath's reputation for the worst transport services on the planet was not about to be dented. With a sigh and a shake of the head, he dragged his baggage over to join the end of the queue.

"Michael, over here!" someone called from across the street, and he turned to see Russell waving to him. After waiting an interminable amount of time for a break in the traffic, he hoisted his bags and dashed across the road.

"What are you doing here?"

"Frank sent me to fetch you."

"I mean what are you doing on Meridian? I thought you'd have been caught up in the seminary lockdown on Huntress."

"No, I was visiting my parents on Cornipus when the military took over, and then Frank contacted me."

Russell opened the boot of what looked like a refugee from the wrecker's yard, and Michael tried to suppress his revulsion as he gingerly placed his luggage inside. The screech of protesting hinges as Russell forced it closed reinforced his fears about the car's road-worthiness.

"Don't worry, it's as good as new," Russell said as he opened the door for him. Reminding himself that he was, after all, in Azarath, Michael eased himself into the fraying bucket seat and secured his seat belt.

With a squeal of tyres and crescendo of horns behind him, Russell joined the throng of other motorists trying to leave the spaceport. Around them, wastelands of disused warehouses soon gave way to what Michael assumed were Azarath's slums; old tenement houses with flaking paint, rusting roofs and grubby children playing in microscopic front-yard dustbowls.

It brought back memories of the slums on Cornipus where he'd lived in the weeks and months following his departure from the Bluehaven Delphinidae Temple. He'd moved from each seedy

apartment into one even seedier, always seeking a lower rent as his resources dwindled and his prospects for employment faded from dim to none. He remembered again that day in the park when his life had hung in the balance, a life saved by Russell's selfless intervention. He chanced a glance across at him sitting in the driver's seat, now an older and wiser man who'd faced far greater demons in the Huntress prison colony as a result of that act, and who was now rescuing him once again.

The spaceport road soon joined a broader highway choked with even more traffic, and as they topped the next rise Michael saw before them a huge concrete bridge spanning a broad river. To the left were shipping terminals, vast expanses of fenced-off land littered with containers piled three or four layers high. Although no ships were in port, several large cranes were lifting the stacked containers onto trucks, while others were lined up with fresh ones to add to the collection.

Across the river the road branched and Russell took the left-hand fork towards the coastal cities of Pitkin and Rutherford. Pockets of new housing developments soon gave way to farmland, predominantly grain crops although Michael was unsure of the variety. Interspersed amongst them were vineyards, each with large signposts luring thirsty travellers to sample their produce. A winemaker himself, he recognised many of the brands, some more reputable than others, and was almost tempted to ask Russell if they could make a short detour. Moments later his wish was granted as they turned into the driveway of Tallowood Estate.

After passing the visitors' car park and cellars, Russell followed the track through an open gate and up a small hill to the three-storey mansion perched on its summit.

"This is Frank's place," he said as he pulled up in front of the portico entrance. "Pretty amazing, don't you think?"

"The Central Library must pay its archivists well," Michael said. From around the side of the building came a stockily-built man with a shaved head and tattoos on his arms and upper chest; the sort of man not to bump into in a dark alley, he thought.

"You found him, I see," the man said as Russell stepped from the car.

“Indeed. Michael, this is Anton, Frank’s assistant.”

“Dogsbody more like it, but it’s an interesting job,” Anton said.
“Come on in; the boss is waiting for you in his study.”

Michael grabbed his bags from the boot of the car before following Anton up the steps and through the huge wooden doors.

Faces in the Dark

The darkness enveloped Pip like a trusty old blanket, a comforter against the cruelties amassed against him. Yet even that solace was short-lived, for within it roamed vengeful ghosts, faceless red-haired boys circling the fringes of his consciousness.

“Do you think he could be David Collins?”

“It’s possible, yes, sir.”

– No it isn’t; the whole idea’s preposterous! David Collins is on Bluehaven, living in the Delphinidae temple with his parents. Does this look like Bluehaven to you? Does it?

– David Collins has dark skin. Do I have dark skin? Look at me, Pip, look at my face. Do I have dark skin?

– David Collins is four years old. Do I look four to you, Pip? I’d have been eight next birthday, eight years old, if you hadn’t shot me.

BLAM!

BLAM!

BLAM!

Pip jerked his head up, eyes wide open in shock.

“What’s wrong?” Owen asked, looking up from the military law book he was poring through.

Pip rubbed his face, trying to regain his composure. He glanced around the room, taking in once more his all-too-familiar surroundings. “Sorry, I must have dozed off. Do you, um, do you remember how I was abducted into the military twelve years ago?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well this is where I spent those five years, here in this compound, this barracks, this very room. I think they’re keeping me here deliberately, and, um, lots of repressed memories of that time are coming back.”

“Not pleasant ones, I gather.”

“No. They were training me for the assassination attempt on David Collins and I think, well I’m pretty sure, they took me to one of the civilian worlds and made me, forced me to –”

Pip covered his face again as the gunshot echoed through the catacombs of his mind, stirring up those ghosts once more. “Owen, I, I killed a child, a red-haired boy – perhaps more than one.”

“Gosh.”

“It was awful. Gallagher asked if I thought that boy sitting in the playground could be David, and I said yes but I wasn’t sure, because I couldn’t see his face or his eyes, just his hair, and then, and then he said, so softly and calmly, he said *kill him*, and I did.”

“Gallagher was there?”

“Yes, he took us there; he made me do it.”

“Are you sure it really happened, and it’s not just memories of this place messing with your head? You were taking those mind-altering drugs back then, weren’t you?”

“I don’t know, honestly, but the memory’s so real. It’s like I’m torn in two, certain I could never have done such a thing but just as certain I did. Do you, um, do you know if there were any reports of school children being shot by snipers back then?”

“When was it, do you know?”

“It would’ve been just before my assassination attempt on David, because the boy would’ve been about five years old.”

I’d have been eight next birthday.

“Or, um, maybe even six or seven. It was hard to tell.”

Owen scratched his chin. “There’s nothing that springs to mind, but I can check back through the news archives easily enough. But are you sure you really want to know?”

“Yes, I’m sure. If it’s true I’ll just have to come to terms with it, after all I was under the influence of those drugs at the time, as you say, but not knowing is far worse for me, I’m sure.”

“All right, I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks, Owen.”

* * *

The elderly man behind the large oak desk stood, beckoning Michael into the room. "I'm so pleased you could come," he said, offering his hand. "I'm Frank Halliday."

"I'm honoured, truly. I've heard so much about you."

"I'm sure it can't all be true. Please, take a seat; and you too, Russell. Anton, would you be so kind as to bring our friends some refreshments?"

Anton nodded before leaving the room.

"Scott Davies told me to see you about helping Pip," Michael said.

"I'm sure Pip needs all the help he can get. From what Owen's been telling me, his trial's not going well, and in any case, if I'm right about what Gallagher's up to, he'll want Pip out of the way whatever happens in court."

"What can I do?"

Frank stared at him for a moment, summing him up. "Have you ever been to Earth?"

"Where?"

"The planet Mark Collins came from."

Michael shook his head. "Never. Until now my travels have been limited to the inner worlds."

"It's time to broaden your horizons then, don't you think?"

"But why Earth? What can I do there?"

"For a start, the military are after you."

"Two of them were watching the terminal in Azarath but I think we gave them the slip," Russell said.

"Even so," Frank said, "they'll still figure out where you went, by a process of elimination if nothing else. It wouldn't be in our interests for any more of our people to fall into Gallagher's hands."

"What about Clem?"

"He's currently under house arrest in the seminary on Huntress and not in any immediate danger, as far as I can tell. We have contingency plans to get him out if need be, so don't go worrying about him."

Michael didn't look convinced. "But why Earth?"

"I need you to persuade some people to come back here, specifically Jason Collins and Chris Smith. They have, shall we say, certain talents I'm sure we're going to need."

“Jason’s Mark’s father, isn’t he?”

“That’s right.”

“What about Mark himself?”

“I suspect he and Lorina have their hands full with their school, but if they want to come too, all the merrier.”

“Okay, but how do I get there?”

“Anton will take you through Sheol.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“It’s fairly safe now that the ogres have gone home, as long as you don’t get lost in the dark.”

“What about you and Russell?”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be busy too. We need to rally public opinion back in Pip’s favour.”

“Will Gallagher allow that?”

“Of course not,” Russell said, grinning. “But we won’t let that stop us.”

* * *

Owen turned away from the screen, rubbing his eyes. He’d spent all day poring through the galaxy’s newspaper archives, searching for any mention of schoolyard shootings during Pip’s time in the military, but had drawn a complete blank. Indeed, he’d been surprised to see there’d been very little crime at all back then, although no-one seemed to have noticed at the time. Mark Collins, known then as *Mark the Bewildered*, had reigned over an unprecedented decade of prosperity and stability for the galaxy, and Owen closed his eyes, reminiscing with the warm afterglow of hindsight that time spent helping the displaced people of Huntress and learning so much of their amazing history.

Mark had had great charisma, for sure, with his disarming boyish grin and easy-going nature, but there’d been more, Owen now realised, something unnatural and disturbing about that decade of bliss. The spirit of Drago, waiting eagerly to be reborn into Mark’s son David, had no doubt been working behind the scenes, lulling everyone into a false sense of security prior to his tumultuous return

when ancient star-dimmers had plunged ten of the galaxy's worlds into darkness.

He shuddered as he realised just how much he and his friends had been pawns to both Drago and those opposing him. Even now, he was unsure of the allegiance of General Gallagher and the military, for their recent actions seemed at odds with what he'd been led to believe at the time. Or, as seemed more likely, he supposed, did Gallagher just have his own agenda, using that ancient struggle as a smokescreen to hide his true purpose? He shuddered again.

It had been General Gallagher leading the invasion of Earth, back before Mark came to power and forced his withdrawal, Gallagher who'd tried to have Mark killed to prevent the birth of his son, and now Gallagher who'd seized power following the death of Alistair Blunt. What other pies did he have his grubby fingers in?

"Gallagher asked if I thought that boy sitting in the playground could be David," he remembered Pip telling him yesterday.

"Gallagher was there?"

"Yes, he took us there; he made me do it."

Owen closed his eyes again, trying to be sure he'd remembered Pip's words correctly. *"He took us there,"* he was positive he'd said, *us* plural, meaning there was at least one other present; a witness. Looking at the time, he swore as he dashed off to try to see Pip before they closed the barracks to visitors.

"Owen, what's wrong?" Pip asked as he entered the interview room with the obligatory military guard.

"You," Owen said, still trying to catch his breath. "Yesterday when you told me about Gallagher taking you to shoot that boy, I'm sure you said *'he took us there.'* Was anyone else with you, a witness?"

Pip looked surprised. "Sure, the commander came with us, Paul Hoskins. Didn't I say?"

"No, I don't think so. He's still in prison, isn't he?"

"Yeah, the minimum security place near Bensville on Cornipus, if I recall correctly."

"Do you think – I know this is hard for you, but do you think he could be trusted to tell the truth about what happened?"

“If Gallagher doesn’t get to him first, he probably would, otherwise I’m not so sure. Gallagher can be very persuasive, and he was Hoskins’ commanding officer back then.”

Owen was about to dash off again when he remembered the other reason for his visit. “Oh, I searched through all the galaxy’s newspapers and couldn’t find any reports of children being shot, if that’s of any consolation.”

Pip grinned, but he could tell it was forced.

“It’s not enough, though, I know. We need Hoskins’ account, one way or the other. Leave it to me.”

“It’s not that I have much choice,” Pip said as Owen dashed from the room.

* * *

Russell drove slowly through the historic village, recently restored following its near total destruction in the final action of the War of the Barefooters. Thirty years on, it remained uninhabited as a memorial to the population systematically wiped out by Morgoth’s forces.

He pulled up outside a grey concrete building now identified by a large sign as the Barefooters’ former secret headquarters. Frank stepped from the car, glancing around for any unwanted onlookers before signalling Anton and Michael to join him. Pulling a key from his pocket, he unlocked the front door and escorted them inside while Russell moved the car out of sight.

In what was now a museum, heavy ropes supported on polished metal columns separated the visitors’ gallery from what had once been the Barefooters’ meeting room and command post. Plaques told of their gallant stand against Morgoth and ultimate betrayal, leading to their flight into exile through the basement portal.

Unlocking another door, Frank led Anton and Michael downstairs to that portal, now just a dull metal plate set in a black frame some two metres high.

“How do you open it?” Michael asked.

“It’s password-protected to stop any visitors from going through and getting lost in Sheol,” Frank said, activating the terminal to the

side of the frame and entering an eight-character code. A shimmering light appeared in the centre of the plate before spreading out and engulfing it.

“Make sure Jason and Chris understand the gravity of the situation here,” he said, shaking Michael’s hand.

“I will, don’t you worry.”

“Safe travelling,” Frank said to Anton.

Picking up his backpack and strapping it on, Anton ushered Michael into the portal before following him through into the darkness.

* * *

The hire car had seen better days, Owen thought, but he hadn’t had much choice. With Bensville’s accountancy convention in full swing, he’d been forced to take whatever he could get, and supposed he should be grateful he wasn’t making this trip on a bicycle.

The road through the mountains had also seen better days, he thought as he slowed for yet another potholed hairpin bend, and almost yelped in fright as a minibus, travelling way too fast, came within millimetres of sideswiping him. He narrowly avoided clipping the bent and rusty guard rail as the road straightened out again. Dodging another large pothole, he cautiously accelerated towards the crest of the next hill.

The prison stretched out before him across a narrow secluded valley on the opposite side of the river to the road. It had once been a farm, he’d been told, and farming was still carried out by the inmates but whether as punishment or reward he was uncertain. Access was by means of an ugly concrete bridge with guard towers blocking each end, and he fished around in his wallet for the legal practitioner’s card he hoped would gain him admittance.

“We don’t get many big-wig lawyers coming here,” the young guard with a bad case of acne said. Owen, who’d never for a moment considered himself a *big-wig lawyer*, couldn’t help grinning. “Clip this visitor’s tag on your shirt and check in at reception.”

Owen drove across the bridge, hoping its surface cracks didn't go all the way through, and eventually found the deserted visitors' parking area.

"I'm Owen Lachlan," he said to the bored middle-aged thug behind the reception counter. "I need to speak with one of your in-mates, a Paul Hoskins."

"What you needs and what you gets are two different things, but let me check for you." The man's stool breathed a sigh of relief as he stood and ambled over to an ancient computer terminal in the corner. "Honker, Horseman, Hoskins, ah yes, quite a record he's got. It says here he killed a dolphin and a history professor."

"That's right."

"No great loss if you ask me. Is that what you want to see him about?"

"No, it's another case I'm working on; he, um, he might have been a witness."

"Well it looks like you're out of luck, mister big-wig lawyer. Hoskins was taken by some military policemen earlier today. You probably passed them on the road."

Owen remembered the minibus and sighed before turning back to the door.

"Don't forget to hand in your pass on the way out."

As he approached his car, he noticed the rear left tyre was looking decidedly flat, and sighed again.

* * *

Pip glanced nervously around the courtroom from the dock. When his eyes fell on the panel of adjudicators they all scowled at him, causing him to turn away. He stared again at the closed door at the back of the room.

Where was Owen?

When Pip had last seen him, he'd been about to go to Cornipus in search of Paul Hoskins, but that had been three days ago and he'd heard nothing since. Now the hearing had resumed but he wasn't here. Had he met with foul play?

What Pip had started as a fairly innocuous plot to politically discredit Supreme Councillor Blunt and force an eradication of bunyip-baiting, had instead led to Blunt's killing and a military coup. Was Owen yet another victim? How much more blood would be spilt on Pip's account? He covered his face, moaning softly in despair.

The prosecutor approached the bench, pointing to the clock hanging on the wall behind them. The adjudicators whispered amongst themselves, shaking their heads and scowling again.

"He'll just have to represent himself then, won't he?" he heard one of them say, but at that moment Owen burst into the room, puffing like he'd just run a marathon.

"Did you manage to find Hoskins?" Pip whispered to him as he stepped past the dock.

"No, the military whisked him away just minutes before I got to the prison."

"Do you think –" Pip began to say, but a cough from the bench interrupted their conversation.

"Mr Lachlan," the chairman said, "it would help your client's cause if you could at least try to be punctual."

"So sorry," he gasped. "My flight was delayed."

The chairman shook his head before turning to the prosecutor. "Let's begin once more then, shall we? Have you found Michael Chandler yet?"

"No, sir. He flew to Meridian and was seen leaving the terminal in Azarath, but my men lost him there."

"Keep looking; I want him before this court." The chairman sighed, shaking his head. "You may call your next witness now."

"I call Paul Hoskins to the stand."

Pip glanced at Owen, who looked just as shocked as he was, as a haggard old man shuffled up into the witness box. Hoskins had been Pip's commander during his time in the military, and he'd last seen him following Drago's defeat two years ago. Back then he'd been an elderly but still quite sprightly man, but his time behind bars had withered him beyond belief.

"Mr Hoskins," the prosecutor began once he was finally settled, "did you formerly hold the rank of Lieutenant-Commander when you were stationed here on Nimer?"

“Yes, sir, but I resigned my commission two years ago.”

“Did you at one time have the defendant serving under you?”

“Yes.”

“What was his rank?”

“Private.”

“Who else was in your unit?”

“Sergeant Terrance Croft.”

“What was the purpose of your operation?”

“We were training Ingle as an assassin.”

“Indeed, and who was he supposed to assassinate? Was it anyone in particular?”

“David Collins.”

“The son of Mark Collins?”

“Yes, that’s him. He was Drago’s vessel.”

“Yes, as we later found out to our great cost. Now Mr Hoskins, do you recall General Gallagher suggesting a real-life training exercise for the defendant?”

“You mean with the school boys?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“There were three occasions, if I recall correctly.”

“Please tell the court what happened.”

“General Gallagher was eager to see how Ingle’s training was progressing, and took us to several villages on Hazler where he ordered Ingle to shoot a red-haired boy resembling Collins.”

“Go on.”

Hoskins turned to face Pip, nodding ever so slightly. Pip covered his face again.

“When Ingle had set up his weapon, a Triton 250 assault rifle with silencer, Gallagher asked him if the boy in the playground could be Collins.”

“I’m assuming of course that he wasn’t.”

“No, of course not, but Ingle is, how should I say it, naïve to the point of stupidity. He hesitated for a moment before saying it could be, and then Gallagher told him to kill the boy. Ingle took careful aim, steadied himself and fired.”

Blam!

The courtroom hushed. Pip felt like he'd just had all the stuffing knocked out of him; his head drooped, his face turned pale and he swayed a little before steadying himself against the railing of the dock. In his mind's eye he could now see the boys' faces, those faces in the dark, taunting him, accusing him.

Does this look like Bluehaven to you?

Do I have dark skin?

Do I look four to you?

"He fired," Hoskins continued, his voice reverberating around the silent courtroom, "but missed. The bullet ended up in a tree some two metres above the boy's head, and the stupid kid didn't even notice."

Now the prosecutor's expression turned to shock. He fumbled through his notes, trying hopelessly to hide his embarrassment. "Um, Hoskins, you said there were two other occasions."

"Yes, and with the same result each time. Gallagher was furious, and almost terminated Ingle on the spot, but the people we were working with said that was the right result and to continue with the training, so we did."

The prosecutor shook his head, bewildered. "So Ingle never killed anyone."

"No, of course not, but he was never supposed to, not really."

"Do you have any further questions for this witness?" the chairman asked.

"Um, no, I don't think so."

"Mr Lachlan?"

"Huh? I – no – no questions."

"Thank you Mr Hoskins, you may stand down."

Hoskins glanced again at Pip, mouthing *that's the truth* before shuffling out of the room.

"I suppose you'd like me to adjourn the hearing at this point," the chairman said to the prosecutor.

"Yes, that'd be good, thank you, sir."

He whispered to his fellow adjudicators, who nodded approvingly. "I'll go one better than that. This charade has gone on long enough, and is now terminated. Whether the defendant was behind Blunt's shooting or killed civilian children as part of his training is irrelevant to these proceedings, as on his own admission he destabilised the

government by exposing Blunt's extracurricular activities, motivated only by his own self-aggrandisement. Mr Ingle, you are to remain in detention for a further period of three weeks."

Pip breathed a sigh of relief.

"At the end of that time you'll be taken to a place of execution where your life will be terminated by firing squad."

"You're joking, surely!" Owen said, now standing.

"I never joke. As for you, you should've taken my advice and consulted with your father before pursuing this case."

Owen stared blankly at him.

"Your father helped draft the regulations under which this tribunal is convened, and under paragraph fifty-two, subsection four, in cases concerning matters of galactic security, in order to contain said security threat, the defence counsel must suffer the same fate as the accused."

"I, but —"

"It was a compromise your father agreed to in order for the defendant to have any representation at all, and it adds some extra spice to the proceedings, don't you think?"

The adjudicators stood and departed, leaving Pip and Owen to the guards.

* * *

"Is that a light up ahead?" Michael asked. Anton had been leading him through the blackness of Sheol for many hours at least, although he'd long since lost any real sense of time's passage. At first he thought the distant orange glow was his mind playing tricks on him, but it had finally grown too bright to be ignored.

"I was wondering how long before you'd notice it."

"What is it?"

"A spirit glow, but it's a skill few have mastered. Pip can do it, as can Clem's grandfather, Jacob. There was someone else, too, a nasty spirit called Pedro who used to inhabit Sheol, providing a mournful backdrop to the place with his bagpipes."

"Sounds horrible."

"It was, but I've heard he's passed on now."

As they drew closer, three figures appeared within the light. “An adult and two boys, by the look of it,” Anton said, “and about to pass out through the portal we’re making for.”

“Should we try catching up to them?”

“I think that would be unwise.”

As Anton spoke, the glow suddenly disappeared, and Michael was sure he heard the echo of a heavy door slamming shut.

* * *

The book Clem was reading slipped from his hands, sliding silently to the floor as he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

In the fading light, the track he was following became harder to see as the undergrowth thickened around him. Enveloped by the discordant smells of vegetative battles fought over the dim sunlight, he pushed his way further into the entanglement of branches, leaves and vines. From ahead came the sound of muffled voices, other people dredged from the depths of his subconscious, people he had no desire to meet, but Pip was in danger, perilous danger, and only Clem could save him.

On the gnarled old tree in front of him someone had nailed a rusty sign. ACCESS DENIED, it said, THE PATH TO THE TRUTH ENDS HERE. Either side of the tree the undergrowth was at its thickest, a barrier of thorny vines and serrated leaves blocking any way around, but Clem wasn't about to let some rotten old tree stand in his way. Stepping forward, he reached out and grabbed one of the smaller branches, intending to either bend it or snap it off, but the moment he touched it the tree began to shiver, its dry leaves rattling above him like ancient bones. As he took a step backwards, from behind him came the rumbling growl of some huge predator waking to the smell of frightened meat. He turned, backing into the tree, but as he touched the bark its branches wrapped around him like a sprung trap, locking him tightly against it.

From out of the foliage strode a great beast, its muzzle dripping saliva from long razor-sharp teeth. As it leapt at Clem's throat, he saw a studded black collar around its neck, a collar embossed with a single white number, the number five.

Clem woke in shock, his raised palms fending off his nightmare beast, but the darkened room was peaceful and still. Yet even as the dream's terror faded, an uneasiness remained, a tingling of ancestral warning from deep within his brain.

In the far corner a shimmer of reflected light drew his gaze – *eyes, bunyip eyes, staring at him, devouring him.*

As Clem drew in a sharp breath, Number Five closed his eyes again and went back to sleep.

Part Two

The Bunyip's Lair

The City of Towers

“There’s a better place,” Jim Hamilton said. “Come, Pedro, come with me into the light.”

As he spoke, a column of brilliant white light slowly spread out from the wall of the chamber.

“Your suffering is over now. Come with me, Pedro, come into the light.”

“No, you lie! The light will destroy me!”

“Wait, Pedro,” Billy said. “You and Peter were still one when Elko planted his seed of remembrance in us, so you should be able to remember the other time line, the one where Jim was your friend. He saved you once from yourself, and now he’s offering to help you again.”

“No, that can’t be! That Peter was an abomination, he was, he was, no he couldn’t have been me, could he?”

“Yes, he was,” Jim said, “and still is. The boy I knew and loved is just as much you as he is Peter. Come with me now, my friend, and let me save you again.”

Pedro stood staring at him for what seemed an age, before lowering his head and sighing.

“Come, Pedro,” Jim said, reaching out to him and taking him by the arm. Pedro raised his head again, looking him in the eye and nodding. Together they stepped forward into the light, but Jim hesitated for just a moment, turning his head back towards the Earthlings.

“Go now, my friends, and do not return to this realm. Sheol is no place for the living.”

Jim opened his eyes, trying to blink away that memory. He tapped the broken fence paling on the ground in front of his feet, steadying

himself as the patch of sky above darkened another notch. Almost hidden in the gloom of the alley, his friend turned to begin his short run-up.

The light swirled around them, brightening as he once more stepped forward, hand in hand with Pedro. From out of the glare two people glided towards them, a man and woman of indeterminate age.

“Mum? Dad?” Pedro said, standing still and staring at them.

Jim now recognised Michael and Rachel Thorpe, surprised they looked no older than they had sixty years ago when he’d first met them at Peter’s house. Rachel wrapped her arms around Pedro, and as she did, he began to soften, morphing from the fat cigarette-smoking man into the fourteen-year-old boy Jim had befriended during his time on Earth, a time that now had never been. But as Pedro turned back towards him, Jim saw something in his eyes, a hint of irascibility perhaps, that had never been present in the boy Peter.

“Do you remember Jim?” Pedro asked his parents.

“Yes, of course,” Michael said, now shaking Jim’s hand, “although I believe it was in a different time line when we met.”

Jim nodded as more memories of his six months on Earth came flashing back.

“We have a favour to ask you both,” Rachel said as she led them further into the glowing passageway surrounding them. “A friend of ours is in need of some help.”

“Well, that depends,” Pedro said, and again Jim saw a flash of defiance in his eyes.

“Our friend said he needs someone who’s not afraid to bust a few heads,” Michael said. Rachel looked aghast, but he winked at her.

“Oh, right,” Pedro said, “well I’m your man then.”

“I knew I could count on you. What about you, Jim?”

“Yeah, um, sure, but I don’t know about breaking heads.”

Michael laughed. “Good cop, bad cop. You two are perfect.”

Pedro grinned, patting Jim on the shoulder as the path they were following began to descend.

“Where are we going?” Jim asked, but before anyone could answer, the light dissolved into a swirling mist while soft grass replaced the nothingness beneath his feet. As the mist cleared, a

broad river stretched out before him, spanned by a silver bridge, while on the opposite bank a city of white towers gleamed in the bright sunshine.

He glanced about, trying to suppress a shiver of unease as Michael and Rachel led them down towards the bridge.

Pedro released the ball, although Jim could barely see it as it glided through the air, spinning viciously along its curved trajectory. He stepped forward and left, trying to hook it away before it could reach the ground and dart between his legs to strike the wicket, an old packing case with three stumps crudely painted on the side.

For once it worked, the ball striking the middle of his paling bat with a satisfying thwack before skimming off down the alley into the gloom. Pedro went running after it but, as he dashed by, the sky darkened further while an ominous deep rumbling began growing all around them.

Jim broke away from Pedro and his parents, dashing across the bridge and into the waiting arms of the Aboriginal man standing on the far bank.

“Elko, is it really you? But I thought you were...”

He was going to say dead, before remembering that he too was dead.

“I’m glad to see you again, Jim,” Elko said. “I never had the chance to thank you for your help on Earth, as that time line ended while you were still there. Perhaps, would it be too much for me to ask for your help once more?”

“I’d be honoured to do what I can.”

“And your friend Pedro? I could use his help too.”

By then Pedro and his parents had caught up with him.

“Is this your mysterious friend?” Pedro asked his mother, giving Elko a disparaging look.

“I didn’t know you’d met before,” Rachel said.

“He planted his seed of remembrance in me, although I was still Peter at the time.”

“And just as well he did,” Jim said, “or you wouldn’t have remembered me.”

Pedro stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his head, but couldn't suppress the grin that was spreading across his face. "Okay then, what would you have us do?"

Elko, the guiding light of their troupe of spirits in this strange city of towers, ran what might be described as a police force, although here there were no laws to enforce and no crime in the true sense of the word. In a city populated by the half-dreaming spirits of the dead, their role was to help the lost and confused while keeping the more troublesome residents under control.

But there'd been another agenda as well, as Jim had eventually discovered, for Elko had learned of an ancient threat lurking within the collective mind of the Dolphins and, through his contacts with the living, sought to aid those destined to challenge it. Pedro had been dispatched to escort them into the city, the first living spirits to cross the river Styx in anyone's memory, thus beginning the final battle which had brought triumph but at the cost of the city's very existence. Most of the residents had already fled, with only Elko's team and a few other diehards remaining.

Now Elko came running up the steps from his basement headquarters, emerging onto the street with Michael, Rachel, Hilda and Bobby close behind.

"I think this is it," he shouted to Jim. "Where's Pedro?"

"He went off after the ball. You go on ahead while I find him." He dropped the paling and ran off into the fading light, calling out to his friend.

The alley darkened, but even in the gloom he could tell that Pedro was nowhere in sight. The ground trembled beneath his feet as the rumbling grew louder.

"Pedro, where are you? This is no time for —"

A hand slapped across his mouth, silencing him.

"Come with me," a cold voice whispered in his ear, and he knew straight away who it was.

"What's happening, Charon?" he asked, relieved to find Pedro waiting with him in the shadows.

The ferryman grabbed them both by the arms, leading them quickly down towards the river. "Pip Ingle has fulfilled his quest, and

the Tivinel and their master have gone. Whatever they did to create this city is now failing, and we must cross the river before we're swallowed up by it."

"What about Elko and my parents?" Pedro asked.

"They can look after themselves. Now quickly, onto the boat."

Jim could barely see the ferry bobbing up and down in front of him, the fabled craft that carried spirits of the dead across the River Styx. He stepped cautiously onto it, trying to steady himself against its swaying as he made his way towards the seat at the stern. Pedro flopped down beside him as the boat pulled out into the choppy water.

The rumbling from the city behind them grew louder, and through the gloom Jim watched in horror as the last of the towers collapsed in a cloud of dust. The remaining light disappeared just as the boat beached itself on the far bank.

"This way!" Charon called through the darkness, and Jim and Pedro ran, following the sound of his voice. "A few more steps and we'll be safe."

The burnt stubble underfoot disappeared as Jim felt the walls of Sheol close in around him. From behind them came the soft sound of slithering things moving down towards the city. *Demons*, he thought, *going to devour any spirits lingering there*. He shuddered.

"Take hold of my hands," Charon said.

"Where are we going?" Jim asked as he followed him up through the narrow passageway.

"Elko left instructions to take you with me, for there's a task ahead for you both. You must hear the cry of the bunyips and discern its true meaning if you can."

"Huh? What are bunyips?"

Charon laughed. "That, my lad, is what it's all about, and a great many lives will depend on the answer."

"This is it," Charon said, Jim almost bumping into him as he suddenly stopped. "A little light please, Pedro."

Using a skill he'd developed during his many years as the piper haunting the dark recesses of Sheol, Pedro generated a dull orange glow, revealing a black doorway set into the grey wall before them.

Charon pulled a large brass key from within his cassock, pushing it into the lock and turning it clockwise.

“Welcome to Earth,” he said as he pulled down on the handle and opened the door.

A Discarded Reality

Jim didn't know what to expect as he passed out of Sheol through the portal to Earth. In the physical world he'd been dead for fifteen years, so he supposed he'd become a ghost of sorts, whatever ghosts really were. Back home on Eridani there'd been plenty of mythology about such things, and as he recalled from his studies of Earth's cultures, much the same existed on that planet. How much was truth, how much was speculation and how much was just fertile imagination, well he guessed he was about to find out.

Somebody once said truth is stranger than fiction. After the darkness of Sheol all he could see for a moment was painful light. He slammed his eyelids shut – *do ghosts have eyelids?* – waiting a few moments before opening them ever so slightly. Green, lots of green, and above that something blue that must be sky.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he realised he was standing in a forest on the edge of a dusty track. *A fire trail*, something in the back of his mind said, although he had no idea how that was supposed to work. *How do you make fire follow a track?*

Something felt odd. Feelings; sensory input – the dust and gravel against the soles of his feet, the forest smells of eucalypt and wattle, the sound of rustling leaves and the vibrant colours of the trees – he was no longer just a spirit, he was a physical being again, a *young* physical being.

A smile spread across his face, the smile of a child in absolute awe of the most wondrous and beautiful thing imaginable. The world was new; the world was fresh; the world was just overwhelmingly sensual. By some miracle he'd been reborn into life and he breathed deeply, letting his new-found youth invigorate his spirit.

Yet there was something strangely familiar about this place, something to do with the creek where he and Peter would often hang

out after school. *Where did that memory come from?* That was where the trail began, starting on the edge of town next to the creek and continuing for many kilometres into the forest; the place where he'd seen Peter running off in just a pair of jeans on this chilly winter's morning. *Peter?* With that thought he began walking further along the track.

Peter was standing just around the next bend, his right arm raised as if wrapped around the shoulders of an invisible friend.

"Got what?" he said, but then lowered his arm and turned as Jim approached, a look of deep confusion on his face. "Jim? What the, um, where the hell are we?"

Jim stared at him, the pieces slowly starting to fit together. "Pedro?"

He scratched his head. "Where's the ferryman?"

After all that had happened, Jim wouldn't have been surprised to see Charon sitting up a tree blowing smoke rings from a pipe, but he wasn't. "Um, do you think he could've been corporeal rather than a ghost like us?"

"Who says I'm a ghost?"

"Well you're an untethered spirit, so same difference I guess. Didn't Elko once say Charon might have been a Tivinel?"

"I think he was only guessing, but his guesses were usually right. What *is* this place? It looks familiar, but, but damn it, was I talking to someone when you walked up?"

"You looked like you had your arm around your invisible friend."

"Billy?"

"Who?"

"Shit!" Pedro said, picking up the empty waxed cardboard package lying next to his feet. "Of all the low-down dirty tricks for the universe to have played on us —"

Jim started laughing; he just couldn't help himself. Pedro glared at him, but that only made it worse.

"Do you know what friggin' date this is?"

"No, but I'm starting to get a pretty good idea."

"The 18th of July, 1989."

"The day that time cusp ended."

"Yeah, but you know what? We're still in it!"

Jim looked again at the bushland surrounding them, the gently rolling hills on the outskirts of Narrabri where he'd spent six months of his childhood in a time that never was. "This was the version of reality in which my parents were killed in a shuttle crash and Elko sent me to Earth to watch over Peter – well you really. It's when we first became friends, and it became the reality we created for ourselves in that City of Towers where the dead live out their fondest memories."

"Fondest memories, huh?"

"I suppose in a way they were. In real life I was a public servant on Eridani with a loving wife and beautiful son, and yes, I was happy and contented, but in my heart there always remained something about my time on Earth, a sense of being truly alive I suppose, that I could never quite recapture."

Pedro smiled. "Remember that play we did, *A Midsummer Nightmare* or something?"

"*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it was called. You played Bottom."

"Yeah, and that bully Matthew kept calling me *arse of the class* after that. How could I forget?"

"I was a tree, and had to stand on the stage all night with branches in my hands while the fairies hung lights on them."

"You played a great tree, you know, a stellar performance other tree-actors could only aspire to."

Jim laughed. "A large part of me insists all that was just a couple of weeks ago."

"In this reality it was."

"So what do you think will happen to us?"

"Assuming this time line persists, I guess we'll grow up here and live our lives all over again. Hopefully mine will turn out better than last time."

"And hopefully mine will be just as good, but I don't know how long I can go on pretending to be an Earthling."

"Maybe you won't have to, if someone in this reality discovers subspace."

"Like you perhaps?"

“Or like both of us.” Pedro glanced up at the sun. “It must be lunch time and I’m ravenous. Race you back to my place!”

Pedro and Jim together reached the front door of what had been the Thorpe residence in that reality, each willing to concede the race as a dead heat. Pedro dashed inside, heading for the kitchen.

“Mum, what’s for lunch? I’m starving!”

Jim followed him in, unease growing in the pit of his stomach.

“Jim’s here too, if that’s okay. Mum?”

Pedro dashed upstairs, but returned a few moments later looking puzzled. “The front door was open so she can’t have gone far. Maybe she’s next door.”

“I don’t think so. Here, watch this.” Jim flicked on the light switch, but nothing happened. “Look at the clock on the oven. Seven past twelve, the moment this time line originally ended, I’m guessing.”

“That’s close enough to it, I’m sure.”

“Did you see anyone else in town when we were coming up from the trail?”

“I wasn’t really looking.”

“There was no-one, not even any cars. Pedro, we’re the only ones left here.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

He ran upstairs again, returning feverishly twisting the dial on a transistor radio.

“There’s only static, isn’t there?” Jim said.

“It must be a blackout, that’s all.”

“The radio stations all have emergency generators; even I learnt that in my short time here.”

“Mum! Dad! This isn’t funny!” Pedro yelled. Jim grabbed hold of him, fearing he might run off in panic – *and get run over*, he almost thought. *No chance of that now.*

“Come back into the kitchen. We’ll find something to eat while we figure this out.”

Jim found half a loaf of sliced bread in the bread-bin, while the refrigerator yielded tomatoes, cheese, zucchini, lettuce, sliced pineapple and a full bottle of milk. *Still cold*, he thought, *but not for*

long. Added to that was an assortment of bananas, apples, oranges and pears.

He was surprised at how hungry he was, and judging by how rapidly Pedro was demolishing everything put in front of him, the feeling was mutual. Water still flowed from the tap – *gravity-fed from the reservoir* – but he wondered how long that too would last.

Without really thinking, he picked up the telephone handset hanging on the wall next to him, and almost yelped when he heard dial tone. Hope rising, he dialled his home number, listening with growing excitement to the assorted clicks preceding the ring tone.

It rang, rang and eventually rang out. He tried the emergency number, 000, but got only silence. Racking his brains, he tried several other friends' numbers, some ringing out and the remainder silent.

"Local numbers are still working, meaning the exchange has battery power I guess, but there's nothing outside Narrabri, not even a busy tone."

"So what do we do now?"

"Is your Mum's car in the garage?"

"Let's go see."

It was, and after a bit of searching, Pedro found the key. When Jim, the taller of the two, insisted on driving, Pedro merely nodded. *Any other time he'd have put up one hell of a fight over that*, Jim thought grimly.

Two blocks down they saw a car that had veered off the road and demolished a fence. They dashed over to it, hoping the driver wasn't injured, but it was empty, even though the key was in the ignition and still turned on. Jim turned it off.

The main street was a jam of crashed cars, all presumably having become driverless at seven minutes past twelve, and he quickly turned away, following empty side streets before rejoining the highway on the outskirts of town.

"Where are we going?" Pedro asked.

"Just down the road a bit." Jim didn't want to say what he was expecting to find, and really wasn't sure himself.

"Not too far I hope, because we're not going to be able to get petrol."

Jim glanced at the fuel gauge. “The tank’s full, but no, we’re not going far.”

Three kilometres out of town, where Haddon Lane joined the highway at the top of a ridge, Jim slowed. They’d passed several cars and a truck that had run off the road, and he didn’t want to top the rise at speed only to find a semi-trailer jack-knifed in front of them. It wasn’t a semi that caused him to suddenly slam on the brakes, though.

The car screeched to a halt, Jim holding the steering wheel in a death-grip while Pedro did the same to the top of the dashboard. No more than twenty metres in front of them, not just the road but the entire countryside disappeared, with nothing but blue sky beyond.

“Jeepers,” Pedro said.

* * *

“Jeepers,” Peter Thorpe said as he jerked awake, the book he’d been reading lying face-down on the floor. Thinking he must really choose less somnolent novels, he was about to pick it up again when someone pounded on the front door.

“Coming,” he called out, reaching for his walking stick as he eased himself out of his favourite armchair.

“Don’t rush,” a familiar voice said, “it’s only me.”

“Well if it’s only you, the door’s open so come on in.”

“You know you should really keep it locked, a man of your years living alone,” Jason Collins said as he entered the living room. “You never know who might wander in.”

“If I did, how would the undertakers get in to cart me off when I croak?”

“Leave a key under the mat for them, I suppose. How’s your ankle?”

“On the mend, I reckon, but taking its time.”

“Serves you right for thinking you can go hiking in the mountains at your age.”

“At my age? I’ve still got another nine years to wait before my centenarian’s e-mail from the king.”

“Honestly, you’re as bad as Mum and Dad. Why can’t you three grow old gracefully like everyone else?”

“You young’uns are all the same; no respect for your elders. Can I get you a coffee or anything?”

“Um, no thanks. Do you remember that warehouse in Brisbane where Frank Halliday had his portal into Sheol?”

“You gave the key to that damned ferryman on the River Styx, didn’t you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with your memory. Chris was worried there might be trouble if it fell into the wrong hands, so he alarmed the door.”

“That’s right, and he got me to design a spirit trap to go round it too.”

“The alarm went off about an hour ago. Chris is on his way there from the university and I’m about to go and meet him.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

Jason grinned. “I hoped you’d say that.”

“I’d dozed off just before you arrived,” Peter said as they headed down the Sunshine Motorway, “and was having the craziest of dreams. I was fourteen years old and back in Narrabri in that alternative reality where Billy and his father had been marooned on Eden and I was being bullied by Matthew at school.”

“You haven’t been reading your old books again, have you?”

“No, well not lately. That time line ended when I went dashing off down the fire trail to stand at the spot where we’d all disappeared from in the other reality, but in my dream it continued on, with Jim Hamilton following me out along the trail. When we got back to town, though, it was completely deserted, and everywhere there were empty cars that had just run off the road or crashed into each other.”

“It sounds like something from *The Twilight Zone*.”

“Just shush and let me finish, will you?”

“Sorry, Peter.”

“Jim drove us out of town, but just after we crossed the ridge at Haddon Lane, the world, well, ended.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was the edge of the world, literally, and beyond it, just nothing.”

“Jeepers.”

“That’s just what I said in the dream, except, you know, in the dream I think I was actually Pedro.”

Jason gave him a puzzled look before turning back to the road. “Pedro, huh. Did I tell you I met his and Jim’s spirits while I was in Sheol?”

“I’m sure you and Jenny both mentioned it.”

“They’d gone back to being fourteen years old in there.”

Peter remained silent, just staring out at the countryside whizzing past.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Chris was already waiting for them, pacing back and forth impatiently as they pulled up outside the warehouse.

“What kept you?”

“Oh, the usual things,” Jason said, “traffic, road works and a desire not to have to explain to a policeman why I was speeding to get to a possible haunting.”

Peter stared at the derelict building, once the business premises of Frank Halliday but unused since the 1960s save for its role in housing a portal into Sheol. Its brickwork remained sooty from the fossil fuel decades of the late twentieth century, while the high windows looked foggy and dull, like eyes blinded by cataracts. Shadows filled the narrow laneway outside, itself festooned with broken bottles, dismembered pallets and fast food wrappers, and he could easily imagine packs of starving dogs roaming at night, scavenging whatever they could find. If ever there was a need for a haunted warehouse, this was perfect.

“Do you think it’s safe to go in?” he asked.

Chris glanced at his phone. “The telemetry’s showing the portal door’s closed again, and the spirit trap’s still functional, so I guess we can risk it.”

“How about you, Jason?”

Jason just shrugged, but pulled the key from his pocket and inserted it into the lock.

With a squeal of protesting hinges, the door swung slowly open. The interior of the warehouse lived up to Peter's expectations – dark, with a musty smell of stale dust – but what he hadn't expected was the man in a black cassock peering out of the gloom, his face hidden in the shadows of his hood.

"Jason, so good of you to come," the intruder said, stepping forward. "I was beginning to wonder if I'd picked the right portal."

Jason's jaw dropped. "You, you're the ferryman, from, um –"

"From the River Styx, yes, very good, you remember me. So many don't, I'm afraid. Now I seem to have misplaced my travelling companions, two boys they were, Jim and Pedro. You probably met them last time on your way through the City of Towers."

Peter felt his legs begin to wobble as his mind turned inward.

"We met him in the City of Towers," Pedro whispered.

"What?"

"Huh? Sorry, Jim, for a moment I thought I was somewhere else." He stepped from the car, staring all the while at the edge of the world just in front of them. "Jeepers."

"Look at the power lines," Jim said, now standing beside him. From the last pole before the edge, the wires drooped limply towards the ground, their ends shiny as if they'd been sliced off with a knife.

"No wonder there's no electricity."

"An hour ago they'd have been connected to the grid."

Pedro picked up a rock and hurled it into the empty space in front of him. The moment it passed over the point where the road ended, it vanished.

"Where did it go? What, what's out there?"

Jim placed his hand on Pedro's shoulder, trying to calm him. "During my life on Eridani, I took an interest in the work Peter was doing, reading the papers and books he published."

Pedro shifted uneasily.

"You're not still jealous of him, are you?"

"No, not really, I guess."

Jim nodded. "A lot of what he wrote was beyond my understanding, but something stuck in my mind about time cusps being localised, as if the universe was trying to just change the bits it

had to in each version of reality while keeping everything else the same."

"So you think this region around Narrabri is the bit that was different, and everything beyond the edge here was unchanged."

"Yes, and for some reason this remnant has remained."

"They're in a remnant," Peter whispered.

"What?" Jason said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"The spirit trap's empty," Chris said from the other side of the room, "so I don't think Jim and Pedro came through the portal."

"No, they didn't," Peter said, "but I think I know where they are."

Before he could elaborate, a clunk came from the portal door, and as everyone watched, it slowly swung open. A tall, heavily-built man with a shaved head stepped through, looking around the room as his slender blonde-headed companion followed.

"Chris! Jason! Just the people we're looking for!" he said.

"Anton?"

"Frank's spoken to you, I presume, although if the surprised looks on your faces are anything to go by, perhaps he hasn't."

"Um, no," Jason said.

"This is Michael Chandler from Bluehaven, who needs your help."

Chris shook Michael's hand, still looking utterly bewildered. "Um, what can we do for you?"

"I don't know whether you've heard, but back home there's been a military coup, led by General Gallagher. Pip's been arrested and charged with treason, and, and it's all my fault."

"How? Why?"

"I killed Supreme Councillor Blunt; I thought he'd murdered my uncle, but afterwards I found out it'd been Gallagher who'd done it. Now everyone thinks Pip orchestrated it as part of his campaign against bunyip baiting."

"So what is it you want us to do?"

"Mr Halliday said you and Jason Collins had certain abilities he could use."

"That means he probably has creating and opening portals in mind," Jason said, shaking his head in despair.

Anton glanced around the warehouse. “Um, you said Frank didn’t contact you, so how’d you know to meet us here?”

“We didn’t. We came to investigate why the door to the portal had been opened and found – hey, where’s the ferryman?”

Everyone looked around, but Charon was nowhere in sight.

“Ferryman?” Anton asked. “Not the one from the River Styx?”

“The very same.”

“Please don’t tell me you’ve let him loose on Earth.”

Jason just stared at the open doorway leading to the alley.

“He’s a Tivinel, probably the last one alive, and extremely dangerous.”

At that moment Jason’s phone rang. He answered it while walking away from the others, but when he turned back he looked ashen.

“That was Mark,” he said, his voice wavering. “D-David’s gone missing.”

Ripples on the Water

“Does anyone know how this park got its name?” Billy Collins asked the group of children squatting on the ground in front of him.

“Is it those things that drop out of trees onto your tent?”

“That’s drop-bears, stupid. Bunyips can’t climb trees.”

“Don’t call me stupid!”

“That’s enough, you two. Anyone else?”

The small boy at the back timidly raised his hand. “I, I don’t know whether bunyips can climb trees, but they live in the swamps near the river, don’t they, and eat people who go near the water after dark.”

“That’s very good, Joel. A long time ago, long before even I was born, Aboriginal people like me lived around here, but the swamps on the Bunyip River were a bad, bad place, particularly, as Joel said, after dark. The Elders told everyone to stay away, but still many of our people were lost, way too many.”

“Are there still bunyips here now?” the girl at the front asked.

“Nobody’s seen one in many years, Penny, as the early farmers drained the swamps and drove them away, but I think they’re still out there, hiding and waiting, because that’s what they’re very good at, hiding and waiting.”

“That’s just make-believe,” the tall boy with a crew-cut said. “It’s like Bigfoot and, well, drop-bears.”

“You think so, Ellis?”

“Sure, I ain’t scared of no swamp monsters.”

“That’s ’cause you are one.”

Billy waited for the laughter to settle. “Bunyips or not, the swamps are dangerous places, and it’s all too easy to get snagged and drown if you go in the water. For those of you who want to swim, there are safe waterholes at the end of our walk.”

“Can we go swimming in the waterholes?” Loraine asked her mother.

Lorina looked at Mark, who shrugged. “Only if Billy says it’s okay and only if you stay with your brother.”

“I’m a better swimmer than David anyway.”

“Whether you are or not makes no difference; neither of you are to go swimming alone.”

Loraine scowled and poked her tongue out at David, who reciprocated.

“You’d better get your backpacks on,” Lorina said, now wondering if the hike was really such a good idea for the twins. “Your great-grandfather’s ready to start.”

She grimaced slightly as she waved goodbye, before joining Mark and his grandmother on the minibus for a tour of the historic Koo Wee Rup village.

* * *

“Phew, what’s that smell?”

“It must be Ellis.”

“It’s the swamp, moron.”

Everyone turned as Joel burst out laughing. “Swamp morons, monsters of the bog!”

“You’re a swamp moron.”

Ellis picked up a rock and threw it out amongst the bulrushes. “Take that, swamp morons!”

“Don’t do that,” David said.

“Why the hell not?”

“Disturbing the water upsets the spirits.”

“What are they gonna do, squirt? Grab me round the ankles and drag me into the bog?”

“They’ll take your soul and make you into a swamp moron,” Loraine said.

“Ellis ain’t got no soul.”

Something rustled the bulrushes near where Ellis had thrown the rock, silencing the children.

“W-what was that?” Joel asked.

“David’s right,” Billy said. “Don’t disturb the waters.”

“Are there really spirits in there?” Penny asked.

“There’s no such thing as spirits,” Ellis said.

“There are too!” David said. “I was possessed by one once.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, he’s right,” Joel said. “I heard about it on the news. What was it like?”

“It was really scary. Drago, an ancient king from the planet Huntress, tried to use me as his vessel to come back to life, and was making me do horrible things like setting fire to people and dimming the suns of all the worlds in that galaxy.”

“So what happened?”

“Pip Ingle saved me by taking him to a place where the spirits of his former subjects consumed him.”

“Isn’t Pip now the head of the Black Delphinidae?”

“Yes, but he nearly died too except my grandfather figured out how to rescue him.”

“Mum said you’re not supposed to talk about that stuff,” Loraine said.

David responded by poking his tongue out.

“Your sister’s right,” Billy said. “You don’t want to give yourself more of those nightmares.”

“Woo-o,” Ellis said, and David poked his tongue out again.

Billy shook his head. “Now the spirits here aren’t in the same league as Drago, but they can still be pretty nasty. I want you to all close your eyes and take a deep breath – don’t make such a face, Joel, it’s not that bad – and ponder whether those smells of decay might have been the source of the bunyip legend. Would a swamp monster that devoured wayward people have been responsible for such an odour?”

“Too right,” Ellis said.

They all turned as the rustling noise came again from the bulrushes, but could see nothing in the dark tangle of greenery.

“I can see the unease on all your faces,” Billy continued, “but imagine growing up here in a world without the ultranet where your only education came from the corroboree dances and the teachings of

the Elders, perhaps having even seen one of your family or friends disappear in the swamps. Pretty scary, isn't it?"

He could tell from the apprehensive eyes watching him that he'd hit the mark. "I want you to remember this moment, the feeling of dread rising up from deep within you, and know there are things lurking in the dark corners, things the universe's collective scientists still can't explain."

He let the fearful faces dwell on that thought for a few moments longer before breaking the spell by turning away from the swamp and picking up his backpack.

"Let's leave the bunyips to their smells and go find those nice refreshing waterholes now," he said, smiling as he heard their collective sighs of relief.

"Last one in's a rotten egg!" Ellis shouted as he leapt into the waterhole, closely followed by Penny, Loraine and David. Joel became the rotten egg and was dutifully splashed by the others.

"The water's so clear," Penny said. "Look, there's little fish on the bottom!"

"There's little fish on Joel's bottom!" David said.

Joel blushed. "I really wanted striped boardies like yours, but oh no, Mum had to buy me the ones with the fish on them."

"I think they're cute," Loraine said, causing Joel to blush even more.

"It's pure spring water here," Billy said, easing himself in to join them. "Further down river there's good trout fishing, I'm told."

"Do you do much fishing?" Joel asked.

"Only in the fish shop."

"My dad likes to go fishing but he never catches anything."

"That's why I stick to the fish shop."

"Race you all to the other side!" Ellis said.

"Hang on, I'm not ready!" Joel said.

"I've long since given up racing," Billy said, "so everyone get ready and I'll tell you when to go."

"Whatever," Ellis said, disappointed he had to give up his head start.

"On the count of three – one, two, three, GO!"

Ellis took an early lead, thrashing wildly through the water, with David and Loraine in equal second, followed by Penny and finally Joel. By the middle of the waterhole, though, Ellis was faltering, while Penny had moved ahead of David and Loraine and Joel slipped further behind.

Loraine crept ahead of David and was close to overtaking Penny when they ran out of waterhole. Ellis managed fourth place, turning and glaring at Joel who looked increasingly likely to drown before reaching the edge.

“Are you okay?” Loraine asked as he finally touched the overhanging rocks.

“I – I’m used – I guess I’m more used to salt water. More buoyancy, you know.”

“I can see now – why your mum bought you – the boardies with the fish on them,” Ellis said, also still huffing.

“Race you back!” Penny said, pushing herself effortlessly away from the rocks.

“You’re on!” Ellis said, splashing after her, but Joel just shook his head.

“You go, David,” Loraine said, “while I keep Joel company.”

David shrugged before stroking off in pursuit of the other two.

“I never was much good at swimming,” Joel said once the others were out of earshot.

“It’s all about rhythm. You have to make the water work with you instead of against you.”

“That’s what my sports teacher said, but it hasn’t worked. Neither of my parents can swim at all, so I’ve achieved something I guess.”

“Yes, you have.” Loraine looked into his eyes, smiling at what she saw. “Maybe, um, maybe when we get back I could give you some lessons, be your coach, like, if you want me to.”

“That’d be nice. Hey, what’s your brother doing?”

Loraine turned to see David veering away from the others, turning instead towards a clump of bulrushes on the left. A moment later he’d disappeared from view.

“You wait here while I find out,” she said, pushing away from the rocks.

Joel thought about following, but the prospect of drowning outweighed his curiosity. Instead he shivered, breaking out into goose bumps as a puff of cool breeze caressed his wet skin.

Joel jumped as a hand touched his shoulder, surprised to realise he'd been mesmerised by the rippling water. He looked around to see Billy standing beside him.

"There's an easy crossing just a little way upstream if you'd rather not swim back," he said.

"Yeah, um, thanks."

"Where are David and Loraine? I thought they were over here with you."

"David started swimming back, but turned away near those bulrushes, and Loraine went after him."

Billy jumped into the water. "You stay here!" he said, turning his head back momentarily and freezing Joel with his gaze before swimming off after them.

Joel shivered again as a cloud passed over the sun.

Billy turned into what looked like a maze of bulrushes deceptively hidden from the shore.

"David! Loraine!"

"Over here!" Loraine replied from off to his right.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"And your brother?"

Silence.

"Loraine?"

He turned to see her clinging to the bulrushes on the edge of a narrow channel leading further into the maze, and within moments had his arms around her as she started to cry.

"Where's David?"

She shook her head. "I – I can't find him."

Something rustled the bulrushes further down the channel.

"David! This is no time for games!"

For a moment something smelt of animal pheromones, musky perhaps though not as sweet, but then it was gone. Gone too was the

sunshine as heavy clouds raced in from the south-west. In a split-second decision he'd later regret, Billy wrapped his arm tightly around Loraine and began swimming back the way he'd come.

"What are you doing?" Loraine asked between sobs.

"Taking you back to shore, then I'll phone for help and come back after David."

"The ranger's coming out in his shuttle and will do an aerial search," Billy said as he concluded his call and turned back to the frightened children huddled around him. "You all stay here and keep together while I try to find David. Ellis, you're in charge."

"Um, where's Joel?" Loraine asked as she looked around.

"Oh shit, I left him on the other side of the waterhole." Billy looked across to the far bank, but there was no sign of the boy. "I told him to wait there. Damn!"

He jumped back into the water, swimming out to the bulrushes again.

"David! Where are you?"

Once more he smelt the cloying pheromones as he moved through the bulrushes. In places the water was less than a metre deep, but as soon as he'd start to wade the bottom would drop away again into a murky darkness. Many minutes had passed since David's disappearance, too many for there to be much chance of reviving him if, as Billy feared, he'd been snagged below water in one of those holes, but he continued to probe with his legs, fearing just as much the thought of David's bloated body rising to the surface in a few days time.

The channel twisted and turned, occasionally splitting into two or three diverging branches before joining up again. Around a bend the constricting bulrushes suddenly opened onto a broad pool, its surface rippling even though the air was still.

"David?"

For a moment he was sure he heard his great-grandson's voice answering him, but when he called again he realised it was an echo of his own voice. Just the same, though, he could've sworn the first time it had been different.

"David! Can you hear me?"

The water continued to ripple, while far away and so faint he might easily have imagined it, a tiny voice whispered what sounded like *jeepers*. A chill grew from deep within him, frosting his nerve fibres as it radiated outwards to erupt in goose bumps all over his skin. The water around him seemed to freeze as well, trapping him in its icy embrace.

From the west came the roar of an aircraft, and moments later the ranger's shuttle swooped low overhead. Billy called out David's name once more, glancing around forlornly before making his way back to the other children.

Billy grabbed his phone as it started to ring.

"I've spotted a boy about three hundred metres south-west of you," the ranger said, *"Caucasian with shoulder-length brown hair."*

"That'll be Joel," Billy said, breathing half a sigh of relief. "Can you get down to him or do you want me to come around?"

"There's a clearing close by where I can land. You stay put."

"Any sign of David?"

"No, but Police Rescue are on the way from Melbourne with their infra-red imaging."

He was sure there'd be police divers too, but wasn't going to ask.

"I'll keep looking as soon as I'm airborne again, but the way this weather's closing in, I won't be able to see much soon."

"Just do whatever you can."

"It's good that they've found Joel," Loraine said, her eyes still tearful.

"David'll be fine, I'm sure," he whispered, wrapping his arms tightly around her, but at that moment his phone rang again.

"I've picked up the boy, but he's pretty dazed and keeps saying something about the rippling water. Does that mean anything to you?"

Billy stared into space for a moment.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, um, somewhere in the middle of the bulrushes is an open pool. Can you see it?"

"No, wait, yes, I think I can see where you mean. I'm going down for a closer look."

“There was a strange rippling on the surface, but I don’t see how Joel –”

“I’ve spotted something in amongst the bulrushes. It looks like, yes, I’m pretty sure it’s a pair of striped board shorts.”

“That’s what David was wearing!”

“Still no sign of the boy I’m afraid, and I really don’t know how those shorts could have gotten where they are. They’re well back from the channel but there’s no sign of anyone having pushed their way in.”

“They’ve found David’s shorts,” Billy said to Loraine.

“Huh? But that means he couldn’t have drowned, doesn’t it?”

“Let’s hope so.”

* * *

“Tell me what happened,” Billy said to Joel.

They’d returned to the ranger station after failing light had forced an end to the search. The police infra-red scans had revealed nothing, and apart from confirming that the board shorts were David’s, there’d been no other trace of him.

Joel ran his hands through his hair. “I, um, I stayed on the rocks like you told me to until you were out of sight, but then I thought I heard David calling me, just down the bank a little, so I started walking towards him, but then, I don’t know, then all I can remember is being in the bulrushes looking out over a rippling pond, and knowing something was wrong, terribly wrong, but not knowing what it was.”

“What happened then?”

“I don’t know. It’s like I was dreaming, and the next thing I remember is the ranger taking me into his shuttle.”

“Are you sure it was David calling out to you?”

“Yeah, positive, like who else could it be?”

“Did you see him at all?”

Joel buried his face in his hands. “No, I didn’t see anything.”

“Let him be,” Loraine said, leading Billy over to where Mark was pacing up and down while talking on his phone. “There’s something

the boy's not saying, but I'm sure he's not deliberately holding back. He's still in shock, I think."

Billy nodded.

"Dad's flying down as soon as he can," Mark said, "and bringing Chris and Peter with him."

"Good," Billy said, but his mind was elsewhere, back in that rippling pond to be precise. "I guess there's nothing more we can do now until daybreak."

"We should've gone with you," Mark said. "If only we'd known it was dangerous."

"It wasn't; well it shouldn't have been, not from what the ranger told me."

"There's no point wishing we'd done this or that," Lorina said, putting her arms around Mark and stopping his pacing. "We've just got to do whatever we can to find him."

"Can he –" Mark began to say before deciding not to ask the question on everyone's minds.

"Of course he is." Lorina eased his head down onto her shoulder, running her hands through his long dishevelled hair. "Hush now, sweetheart."

Everyone turned as a man in an old-fashioned suit entered the room.

"I'm Inspector O'Reilly. Are the missing boy's parents here?"

"That's us," Lorina said.

"May I have a word please?"

"Of course."

He waved them into the adjoining room.

"In private, sir," he said as Billy started following.

"He's my grandfather," Mark said, "Dr Billy Collins, and I'd like to have him with us."

The inspector glanced at his notes. "You were leading the bushwalk, is that correct?"

Billy nodded.

"I need to speak to you anyway, so come along."

"It's not bad news, is it?" Mark asked.

"No, nothing like that; actually we're reasonably confident now that your son is still alive."

“I hope you’re right.”

“Your family is quite famous, am I right?”

“You’re thinking David could have been abducted,” Billy said.

“It’s one line of inquiry we’re currently pursuing.” He handed each of them his card. “If you receive a call from anyone, whether they’re demanding a ransom or not, call me immediately, and especially if they tell you not to involve the police.”

“Of course,” Lorina said.

The inspector glanced again at his notebook. “Do you by any chance own a dog?”

“No. Why?”

The inspector frowned. “Could David have been in recent contact with a large dog?”

Mark and Lorina looked at each other.

“It’s probably nothing, but there are teeth marks on his board shorts, not attacking marks I hasten to add, but consistent with him having been playing with such an animal.”

“Nothing comes to mind,” Lorina said.

“Our laboratory will be checking first thing tomorrow for any traces of saliva to help identify the type of animal, and once that’s done we’ll have a clearer picture of whether it’s likely to be relevant to his disappearance.”

“You don’t think he was taken by a dingo, do you?” Mark asked.

“I doubt a dingo would be big enough to take a twelve-year-old boy, but as I said, we’ll know more in the morning.”

“There wasn’t any blood, was there?”

“No, as I said, the marks appeared to be just playful tugs and didn’t even penetrate the fabric. There’s no indication your son was attacked by the animal.”

Mark gave Billy an uneasy look.

“Is there something I should know?” the inspector asked.

Mark glanced again at Billy. “It’s surely nothing more than coincidence, but at the time we were planning our holidays, my grandfather had been researching the origins of legendary creatures like the bunyip, and that’s how we ended up coming to this park, to see where it all began.”

“We have bunyips in my home galaxy,” Lorina said, “but they’re placid little animals, nothing like your swamp monsters.”

“Peter Thorpe and I have been looking into extraterrestrial foundations to ancient mythology,” Billy said. “Hades and the River Styx, for example, are real places created as a refuge by a race called the Tivinel following the devastation of their home world. We wondered if there might be something similar with the bunyip legend, so when Mark and his family decided to holiday in south-eastern Victoria, we couldn’t resist tagging along.”

“Is that how you came to be leading the bushwalk?” the inspector asked.

“Yes, I’ve been meeting with the local Aboriginal communities while exploring the park and it was actually the ranger who suggested I take the group out today. I was telling the children about the bunyips’ reputation for taking people who ventured too close to their habitats in the swamps, and then, well, the unthinkable happened.”

“You’re not trying to tell me the boy was taken by a bunyip?”

“No, of course not; it’s just that when you mentioned the teeth marks, well it’s one of those eerie coincidences I suppose.”

“You said a Peter Thorpe was with you, but I don’t see him listed on any of the records of interview. Did he play a part in staging this bunyip walk of yours?”

“Peter twisted his ankle on our first day here and returned home to recuperate.”

The inspector stared at him. “Look, you’ll probably think I’m an ogre for saying this, but if this whole business is a publicity stunt for some bunyip book you’re writing, you’d better tell me right now or you’ll be doing your proof-reading behind bars.”

“How dare you!” Lorina said. “My son is lost out there somewhere, being dragged around by wild animals from what you say, and you have the damned hide to accuse us of staging it all for publicity?”

Mark opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He ran his hands through his hair, sending it into even wilder disarray. “How – a man of my grandfather’s standing and reputation – I – I – I’m utterly lost for words.”

Billy lowered his eyes, staring at something of great interest on the floor.

“I’m sorry, but I had to ask; it wouldn’t be the first time someone’s pulled a stunt like that. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think that’s all for the moment.” The inspector turned and left the room, leaving Mark gaping in his wake.

“The nerve of that man!” Lorina said. “I have half a mind to speak with his superiors.”

“He was just doing his job,” Billy said, placing his arms around their shoulders.

“Do you think David could really have been taken by a bunyip?”

Billy shook his head. “In spite of what I told the inspector, I haven’t found anything linking the bunyip legend to any real species, native or extraterrestrial. I told the kids the legend probably grew from the smells of decay around the bogs and the dangers of being snagged, and that’s probably true.”

“So what could have happened to him?”

“He may have been abducted, hopefully by someone who just wants a bit of easy money, but I sensed something odd in that pool amongst the bulrushes where his shorts were found. Joel saw something too, something so extraordinary his mind won’t cough it up.”

“Are you thinking some kind of portal?” Mark asked.

“I don’t know, honestly, but I don’t think it’s quite that simple. I’m glad Chris is coming down tomorrow, though, as he’s much more sensitive to such things than I am.”

“You’re really scaring me,” Lorina said.

“Don’t worry,” Mark said, now grinning for the first time. “The more bizarre it is, the better David’s chances. Dad, Peter and Chris are experts in bizarreness.”

Swamp Monster

Joel screamed, a blood-curdling cry of despair waking everyone in the holiday unit. Mark was the first to his side, expecting to find him being attacked by some terrible beast.

“Sorry,” Joel said, his voice wavering in the aftershock of his nightmare.

“Were you dreaming about David?” Lorina asked, now joining them.

Joel nodded as he started gently sobbing. “Something happened out amongst the bulrushes, something terrible, but I, I just can’t remember.”

“Hush now, it’ll come back to you when it’s ready.” She reached over, placing her hand on his forehead, and gradually his sobbing eased. “Try to get back to sleep now, okay?”

“Do you want to go home to your parents tomorrow?” Mark asked.

“No, I want to stay and help you find David.”

Mark patted him on the shoulder. “You’re a fine boy, Joel. Your parents should be proud of you.”

“Dad’s right,” Loraine said, squeezing between Mark and Lorina as she reached out to hold Joel’s hand. “Tomorrow we’ll find David, both of us, and we’ll be heroes.”

“That’s right,” Lorina said, trying to sound as positive as she could. “Now think pleasant thoughts and go back to sleep.”

“I will.” Joel tried to smile but it only looked goofy, causing Loraine to giggle. That set Joel off, and Mark took Lorina by the hand, leading her away from the two giggling kids.

“I’m turning the light out,” he said. “Go back to your bed now, Loraine.”

“Did you sense anything when you touched his forehead?” Mark asked Lorina once they were back in bed.

“Yes and no. There were bulrushes, rippling water and a dog, I think, but nothing coherent. Whatever happened, his mind can’t comprehend it and so is blocking it out.”

“Do you think it’ll come back to him?”

“Perhaps, but he’ll need to find a reference point, something that makes sense of what he saw. Maybe one day he’ll be watching a movie and some special effect will make it all click.”

“I see. We should call his parents tomorrow and let them know what’s happened.”

“Yes, but I hope they don’t insist he come home. Sitting alone thousands of kilometres away and wondering what’s happening to his friends would be heart-wrenching for him.”

“Of course, but let’s be positive and hope we find David tomorrow.”

Lorina wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

* * *

Peter Thorpe stepped into the arrivals lounge at Latrobe Regional Airport in Morwell, still some fifty kilometres from the Bunyip State Park but the closest commercial air terminal they could arrange a flight into at such short notice. With him were Chris, Michael and Anton, as well as Jason and his wife Jenny.

“Over here!” Mark called out from the other side of the room.

Peter tightened his grip on his walking stick, wondering why the terminal gate was always at the furthest end of the building from the car park.

“Has there been any news?” he asked once he was close enough for conversation.

“No, but the search teams have only just gone back out. The weather closed in yesterday and it’s still pretty murky, I’m afraid.”

Jenny gave Mark a big hug, stifling any further conversation for the moment.

“Good to see you again, Mark,” Anton said, shaking his hand once Jenny had released him. “This is Michael Chandler from Bluehaven.”

“It’s an honour to meet you in person,” Michael said. “I must say you did a fantastic job as Supreme Councillor, simply fantastic, and there are many in our galaxy who want nothing more than for you to return, particularly now after what’s happened.”

Mark blushed.

“This is not a good time to be discussing politics, Michael,” Anton said.

“No, of course not; please forgive me.”

Mark forced a grin. “Lorina’s waiting for us back at the park with Loraine and Joel,” he said, leading them out to the rented minibus.

“Did anyone see what happened?” Chris asked.

“No, not really. Joel said he heard David calling out to him, but whatever happened left him in a state of shock and he can’t remember anything about it.”

“Perhaps if I can speak with him, I might be able to help.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m glad you’ve come. I’m beginning to think this whole business is right up your alley.”

“You mean ghosts and goblins?” Jenny asked.

“More like bunyips.”

Peter stopped walking. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“The police say some sort of dog had been tugging on David’s shorts. They’re doing tests today to determine the breed.”

“That’ll prove interesting, I’m sure. I take it no dogs have been found anywhere near the waterhole.”

“Not a trace of anything canine. There are some wombats about, but they have blunt teeth and in any case would be unlikely to be grabbing someone’s shorts.”

Mark opened the door of the minibus, while Jason and Anton loaded everyone’s luggage into the back.

The cloud base lowered and darkened, with intermittent showers becoming more persistent as they approached the Bunyip State Park. Conversation faltered as the gloom engulfed them, with no-one really wanting to discuss what was foremost on their minds.

Mark parked amongst the huddle of State Parks Service and police vehicles surrounding the ranger’s headquarters. Thunder rumbled around the mountains as they scurried inside, with Peter hobbling

along as best he could while muttering obscenities about Victorian weather.

Inside, search and rescue people in orange overalls nursed cups of coffee, looking uncomfortably idle and skittish as they waited to be let loose in the swamps. In another corner, half a dozen young police officers pored over maps, their pocket radios spitting out bursts of unintelligible speech. Squalls of rain drummed across the roof, masking their conversations.

Loraine ran forward to greet her grandparents, followed at a more sedate pace by Billy, Julia and Lorina.

“What’s happening?” Mark asked.

“Nothing at the moment,” Billy said. “No-one’s allowed out until the storm passes.”

“And with good reason,” Inspector O’Reilly said as he joined them. “A pity, though, as this rain will wash away any physical evidence there might have been. Now who do we have here?”

“These are my parents, Jason and Jenny Collins,” Mark said, “and my friends Chris Smith and Peter Thorpe.”

The inspector gave a cursory nod before frowning as he stared at Peter’s swollen ankle. “I gather you’ve all just flown down from Queensland.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“We haven’t gone public yet, although it won’t be long before the media get wind of it and then this place will turn into a bloody circus. Have any of you had any calls from anyone?”

The inspector frowned again as everyone shook their heads.

“Has that boy Joel remembered anything?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Lorina said, glancing over to where he sat alone staring out the window at the rain. “He hasn’t said a word all morning.”

“Excuse me, sir,” one of the young policemen said as he approached, handing the inspector a sheet of paper. “This just came in from forensics.”

The inspector glanced through it, reading it a second time before looking up at everyone. “I’ll give you ten seconds to start telling me the truth.”

“What do you mean?” Mark asked.

“The traces of saliva on the board shorts have been positively identified as having come from a Cornipean bunyip, the common or brown bunyip to be precise.”

Lorina held her hand over her mouth.

“Surely that’s not possible,” Mark said.

“You and your wife spent ten years in that galaxy. You didn’t by chance bring one back with you, as a clandestine pet perhaps?”

“Good heavens, no!” Lorina said. “Quarantine regulations would prohibit it.”

The inspector shook his head. “I’ll tell you what I think happened, shall I? Billy Collins here, along with his mate Peter Thorpe, concocted their absurd theory about your cuddly little Cornipean buniyps being the origin of our Aboriginal bunyip legend, so to gain a bit of publicity you all conspired to stage this little play in which you scare a bunch of kids about creatures from the swamps and then, lo and behold, young David is dragged off by one of them.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Peter said.

“No; *boy taken by bunyip* is ridiculous. I’m dismissing the search parties as of now, and if you could collect your boy from wherever you’ve hidden him and come down to the station to make a statement, we can perhaps avoid the unpleasantness of a court summons.”

Before anyone could speak, he turned and walked back over to his fellow police officers in the far corner. Within moments they and the search and rescue people began leaving the room, giving the Collins family a wide berth.

“No, you can’t –” Lorina started to say, but the inspector just shook his head as he followed them out.

“What do we do now?” Jenny asked.

“I think the rain’s stopped,” Joel said as he walked over to join them. “That policeman’s wrong – David *was* lured away by some sort of swamp monster, but, but I need to go back to the waterhole and have another look.”

“Joel’s right,” Loraine said, “and I want to go too.”

“Have you spoken to Joel’s parents?” Mark asked Lorina.

“Yes. They were very concerned, but eventually agreed to allow him to stay here as long as we didn’t let him out of our sight.”

“What do you think, Granddad?”

“Let’s see what this weather’s doing first, and then if it really is lifting I suppose there’s no harm in looking as long as we all stick together.”

Loraine and Joel exchanged conspiratorial glances.

* * *

“This is where Billy left me,” Joel said, standing on the rocks beside the waterhole, “although it all looks different after the rain.”

“You said you thought you heard David calling you,” Billy said.

“Yes; it came from down there amongst those bulrushes.”

He led them cautiously downstream, pausing occasionally to look around. Apart from the odd half-hearted croak from a frog, everything was quiet under the grey skies. Even the heavy rain earlier hadn’t coaxed the creek into any noticeable movement. *Still waters run deep*, Joel thought, and shivered.

“I heard him again here, sounding like he was just the other side of that clump of scrub so I pushed my way through, like this.”

“Careful now,” Lorina said. “The water may have risen.”

“I don’t think it has, well not by much anyway.”

Bulrushes now surrounded them on three sides, while directly in front was the rippling pool Billy had found. Joel looked around, his mouth half open as he tried to piece together what he’d seen.

“What the hell is that?” Chris asked as he pushed his way through the scrub to join them.

“What’s what?” Billy asked.

“There, on the water, it’s like there’s two surfaces, one a little higher than the other. No, it’s gone again now.”

“That’s what I saw yesterday!” Joel said, but then his mouth dropped all the way open as his shattered memories began slipping into place.

“Are you okay?” Lorina asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. David came running through the bulrushes, just there behind us, being chased by something. All I saw was a head, like a dog’s head I suppose, but a big one. It leapt at him, grabbing the leg of his shorts in its mouth, but, I think David must have left the cord untied, because the Velcro separated and he slipped out of them.

The dog thing flung its head back and forth, still with David's shorts in its mouth, then threw them over into the bulrushes there when it realised David was no longer inside them. Meanwhile David dived for the pool but, but that's when I noticed the funny thing happening on the surface, like I was going cross-eyed and couldn't focus, and when David touched it he just sort of disappeared through it without actually hitting the water."

"There, it's doing it again," Chris said. "Do you suppose it could be an opening across the subspace fold, and what we're seeing is the equivalent pool on Eden superimposed on the one here?"

"My thoughts exactly," Peter said.

"Do you think David might be on Eden then?" Mark asked.

"There's every chance he could be. Maybe Billy and I should flip across and see."

"We'd better find out when the next time slippage is," Jason said, pulling out his phone. "You don't want to flip across in the middle of one and create a time cusp."

"Heaven forbid!" Billy said. "Go on, make your call."

Jason dialled his offices in Queensland. "Aaron, could you find out from AusScience when the next time slippage is between Earth and Eden, and, um, if you can get hold of your friend in Earth Sciences, see if they've noticed any subspace irregularities around the Bunyip State Park."

"Do you think David might have flipped across to Eden?"

"It's our best lead so far."

"I hope you're right. I'll call you back in a few minutes."

"Is Eden Earth's twin planet on the other side of the fold?" Joel asked once Jason had ended his call.

"It sure is. We're privileged to be one of only a handful of planets known to have such twins."

"What's it like there?"

"The topology's practically the same as Earth, due to the tidal effects of the subspace linkage, but some parts are drier while I suppose elsewhere is wetter. I've only ever been there around the Narrabri district and once over on the coast."

"Are there many cities there?"

“No, the whole planet is a nature reserve and the only people are research workers.”

“Billy was largely responsible for that,” Peter said.

“With a lot of help from my supporters,” Billy said.

Jason’s phone rang, and he put it on speaker.

“Jase, it’s Aaron. The next slippage is at four-fourteen this afternoon.”

“Thanks; that gives us plenty of time to do a thorough search.”

“I hope you find him quickly.”

“So do I.”

“Oh, I asked Glen at Earth Sciences about any subspace disturbances and he said there’d been no more than usual. Apparently there are disturbances in your area just about all the time. It’s something to do with the rocks, he reckons.”

“How come we never heard about it?”

“I guess no-one thought to ask.”

“That sounds about right.”

“Tell Jenny the phone’s been running hot in her absence, but there’s been nothing us workers here can’t handle.”

“I will. Thanks Aaron and I’ll let you know what we find.”

“You’d better or you’ll have a mutiny on your hands up here.”

Jason terminated the call.

“I guess we should go and have a look around Eden,” Billy said, now turning to face Peter. “Do you remember how we used to do this?”

“Of course I do. Why has everyone started questioning my memory? Now give me your hands and show me your eyes.”

“Can we come too?” Loraine asked.

“No, it’s best if only Peter and I go,” Billy said. “We can each flip back here if things turn ugly.”

“Billy’s right,” Loraine said. “We can scout around some more here while they’re away.”

“But David’s not here, we know that!”

“Of course, sweetheart, but there might be clues the police either missed or thought didn’t matter.”

“Are we going to be detectives?” Joel asked.

“Sure, we’ll be the greatest detectives ever known.”

“Okay then, I suppose,” Loraine said.

“Are you ready?” Billy asked Peter.

“Just give me your hands and let’s do it.”

Everyone stepped back while Peter took hold of Billy’s hands and stared into his eyes. A shimmering appeared around them, followed by a loud crack like lightning striking in their midst. Loraine shrieked, causing everyone to turn towards her, and when they looked back Billy and Peter were gone.

“I’d forgotten how much I hate doing that,” Peter said, steadying himself from the sensation of slipping sideways that always accompanied his flipping across the subspace fold.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Billy asked, chuckling.

“I grew out of it back when we were fourteen.”

“A likely story. Stay put for a moment while I see how much I can remember of my tracking skills.”

Billy dropped to his hands and knees, crawling in widening circles as he meticulously examined the ground in front of him, while Peter glanced around at the landscape. Superficially it looked much the same as Earth, with the pool of water and the bulrushes, and even the water level was similar. The parts of Eden he’d previously visited had been a lot drier than on Earth, but as Jason had said earlier, that was most likely just a localised phenomenon.

The sky above was a clear deep blue, although the sun was well past its zenith. With Eden’s day only eighteen hours long, it would no doubt be setting soon, reminding him of the first time he’d set foot on this world. He and Billy had walked out along a fire trail on a chilly winter’s morning, eventually coming to a low cliff-face where Billy found the waxed cardboard envelope his father had hidden. Inside was the 3D picture that triggered a post-hypnotic suggestion Elko had implanted in him, causing him to flip across to Eden while dragging Peter with him. Acting on his father’s instructions, Billy had led them to a rocky overhang at the top of the ridge, and Peter closed his eyes as those memories came flooding back.

We’d been sitting under the overhang for about twenty minutes when I realised it was starting to get dark. It couldn’t have been any later than about one o’clock and yet night was falling. That was

finally it. I wanted to be brave and true like the heroes in the stories I loved to read, but I couldn't. I was scared – my home, my town, everything had disappeared and now it was getting dark at one o'clock in the afternoon. I started to cry. I just sat there, staring into space and bawling my eyes out like a baby. Billy came quickly to my side and put his arm around my shoulder, but I just kept on crying. Slowly I slid down until my head was buried in his lap. He held me there and started singing softly as my sobbing diminished and I fell asleep.

* * *

“Pedro?” Jim asked.

“Huh? Sorry, I was thinking back on how I'd flipped across to Eden with Billy that first time. I was scared stiff and starting bawling my eyes out, but Billy sang an Aboriginal lullaby and put me to sleep. That was when I started dreaming of this reality we're now stuck in.”

“Dreams within dreams.”

“Yeah, something like that. What do we do now?”

“Perhaps we should go back to my place. My guardian was one of Elko's people and had some stuff that might help us find a way out of here.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“I'm not sure; I never really paid that much attention to it, but it had something to do with subspace.”

Pedro turned back to look at the edge of their world. “Oh jeeppers, oh shit!”

“What's wrong?”

“This remnant thing we're in is shrinking. Look, the edge was a good ten metres from that power pole when we arrived and now it's nearly reached it!”

* * *

“Peter?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry Billy, I was miles away, dreaming about Pedro and Jim again. That remnant they're in is shrinking.”

“As if we don’t have enough problems already.”

“Any trace of David?”

“No, nothing, not even any animal tracks.”

“No bunyips?”

“Especially no bunyips. If it’s anything like what Joel described, I can’t imagine it charging around here without leaving its mark.”

“We have a few hours till the time slippage so I guess we should scout around and see if there’s anything to find over here.”

* * *

“Are you really from Bluehaven?” Loraine asked Michael as they searched through the bushland surrounding the waterhole.

“Yes, or at least I was until just recently.”

“We used to live on Bluehaven when Daddy was Supreme Councillor there.”

“I know; you were all quite famous then.”

“Did you live in the Temple?”

“No, my home was in Bringal Vale.”

“My great-grandparents on Mum’s side came from Bringal Vale.”

“Ah yes, Mary and Ron. They’re now living here on Earth, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they’re just a short walk from home. Grandpa Kevin and Grandma Lorett still live on Bluehaven though. Do you know them?”

“They were in charge of the Delphinidae Temple at the time I was studying there. Do you ever wish you were living back there?”

“Sometimes, but mostly I like it better here where nobody knows us. On Bluehaven we always had to be on our *best behaviour*.”

Michael laughed. “Thankfully that was something I never had to endure.”

“Did your parents let you be naughty?”

“No, um, I was an orphan and lived with my uncle on Sontar before becoming a Delphinidae student.”

“Were you one of those people in the white and green shorts?”

“Sure was.”

“So how come you didn’t stay there?”

“It’s a long story, but there was a war and some people I knew were killed, so I decided it was best to leave.”

“My dad was in a war just before I was born, but he said nobody got killed.”

Michael was silent for a moment. “That’s why I came here, to ask your dad and his friends to help stop another war.”

“Is General Gallagher being naughty again?”

“Yes, that’s right. How’d you know?”

“He’s a very naughty man who likes starting wars.”

“Hey, over here!” Anton shouted from in amongst the scrub.

“What is it?” Michael asked as everyone gathered round.

“Animal droppings.”

“Everyone stand back,” Jason said as he crouched down, examining the ground around them. “There are tracks too, there and over there.”

He placed a coin next to one of the tracks before pulling out his phone and using its inbuilt camera to photograph them.

“Jenny, do you have something I can wrap the spoor in?”

She fished around in her bag, pulling out a couple of tissues.

“We can get these analysed at the university.”

“What sort of animal do you think it is?” Jenny asked.

“I’m not sure. The spoor is a similar shape to that of a possum, only many times larger.”

“You mean that thing Joel saw was a giant possum?” Loraine asked.

“I, I don’t think so,” Joel said. “It looked more like a dog.”

“These definitely aren’t dog droppings,” Jason said. “I wonder if Dad and Peter have found anything.”

* * *

“Over here!” Billy shouted.

Peter hobbled towards him, his ankle now protesting at each painful step. “What have you found?”

“Animal droppings.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before. What do you think it is?”

“No idea. Do you have something I can wrap them in?”

Peter searched through his pockets before pulling out a handkerchief.

“We can get them analysed back at the university,” Billy said as he gently picked a couple up, but at that moment something growled in amongst the dense scrub to their left.

“I think we may be about to find out what it is.”

A large brown muzzle pushed its way out of the bushes, followed by the rest of the animal. Standing about a metre high, it stared first at Billy and then Peter, its teeth bared and a low guttural growling coming from deep within its throat.

“Holy shit,” Peter whispered.

The animal’s ears twitched as it took a few more tentative steps forward. Crouching, it prepared to leap as Peter grabbed hold of Billy’s hand and focused his mind on flipping back to Earth.

As it sprang towards them, it vanished in a blur of colour as Peter felt himself tumbling sideways. A moment later he was falling to the ground with Billy coming down on top of him, as remnants of their sonic boom reverberated around the gully.

* * *

“What was that?” Joel asked as a loud crack came from their right.

“It sounds like Billy and Peter are back,” Mark said.

Pushing their way through the scrub, they reached them just as they were pulling themselves upright.

“Did it follow us through?” Billy asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“What happened?” Mark asked.

“I think we had a close encounter with Joel’s swamp monster.”

“Any sign of David?”

“No, nothing I’m afraid.”

“So,” Joel asked, “so where could he have gone?”

Billy beckoned everyone over to him. “That’s what we need to figure out.”

“Could he have gone into Sheol?” Lorina asked.

“I don’t think so,” Peter said. “There are no known natural portals into Sheol, and while it’s relatively easy to project your spirit into there, a physical transition is a different matter entirely. I believe Chris is the only human known to have that ability, and he received special training from the Dolphins.”

“Apart from that first time they trained me for,” Chris said, “I’ve only been able to do it with Damon’s help.”

“As far as we know,” Mark said, “David has no physic abilities.”

“So if he’s not here or on Eden and couldn’t enter Sheol,” Lorina said, “where else can he be?”

“There’s one other possibility that comes to mind,” Peter said. “Billy, do you know what time he disappeared?”

“I’m not sure, but, um, it would’ve been about ten minutes before I called the ranger.” He pulled out his phone, checking the time of the call from its log. “That was at three-thirty, so I guess David vanished sometime around three-fifteen to three-twenty.”

“Jason, did Aaron say when the last time slippage was?”

“No, but I can find out.” He stepped away from the others while calling the office again. “Aaron’s going to ask AusScience and call me back.”

“You’re thinking he might be caught in a time cusp,” Billy said to Peter.

“That would be consistent with what we know. Chris, what time was the portal door in Brisbane first opened?”

Chris checked the log on his phone. “Eighteen minutes past three.”

“Jim and Pedro entered the portal at the time Charon opened it and are trapped in a cusp.”

“What’s a time cusp?” Joel asked.

“It’s when the flow of time turns back on itself, creating an alternative reality. They’re usually only short-lived, lasting maybe just a few weeks, but I was once caught in one spanning twenty years.”

“Gosh. What causes them?”

“The Eridanians make a device to trigger them, but the most common cause, at least for us, is flipping across the subspace fold to a twin planet during the time slippage.”

Joel scratched his head. “That’s because Eden has a shorter day, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Earth and Eden are normally locked together across the fold, but because of the shorter day on Eden, there’s an occasional slippage as they let go and resynchronise.”

Jason’s phone rang. *“The last slippage was yesterday afternoon at eighteen past three. Jase, are you there?”*

“Sorry, Aaron; yes, that’s the same time the portal door in Brisbane opened and also when David disappeared. Peter thinks he may be caught in a cusp.”

“Is there anything I can do up here?”

Billy took the phone from Jason. “Get onto the Eridanian embassy and tell them we need one of their time cusp orbs here. Use my name if you have to and don’t take no for an answer.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll have it delivered by the High Councillor herself if I have to.”

“What time did you say the next slippage is?”

“Four-fourteen this afternoon.”

“Make sure we have it by then.”

* * *

Mark stared again at his watch. “Where are those damned Eridanians?”

“Aaron said they were on their way,” Jason said, looking as if it was all his fault.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“We still have another ten minutes by my reckoning,” Billy said, “although the time slippage can vary a bit either side of the predictions.”

“I think it’s starting now,” Chris said, pointing out over the rippling pond.

“What? Where?”

“Can’t you see it?”

“I can see it,” Joel said. “It’s like a shimmering just above the water.”

“Exactly,” Chris said.

“I can *smell* it,” Jenny said. “It’s like something animal, but old and mouldy.”

Peter glanced nervously about, expecting to see the dog-thing leap out at them from the bulrushes at any moment.

“I can see it now,” Billy said. “It’s that double-exposure effect we saw earlier.”

The water suddenly became choppy, as if a school of fish just below the surface had gone on a feeding frenzy. As it churned, a mist began to form between the surface and its ghostly twin, flashing rainbow colours as the sun broke from between the clouds.

“I thought we had subspace physics pretty much down pat,” Peter said, “but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Can you hear voices?” Mark asked.

“*Oh jeepers!*”

“David, is that you?”

“*Dad, is that you?*”

“David, where are you?”

“*David, where are you?*”

“Can you hear me?”

“*Can you hear me?*”

“All I’m hearing is an echo,” Lorina said.

Loraine glanced at Joel, who nodded, and before anyone realised what was happening, they clasped hands and leapt side by side into the cauldron, disappearing into the swirling mist hovering above the water’s surface.

“Oh hell!” Mark said, leaping after them, but the moment his feet left the ground the shimmering disappeared. With a cry of despair, he belly-flopped into the pond, splashing water everywhere, while from above came the droning hum of a descending Eridanian shuttle.

The Nexus

“I remember this place,” Pedro said as Jim turned into the driveway of a stately house in Narrabri’s dress circle.

“Whatever else you might say about my guardian,” Jim said, “he was a man of exquisite taste.”

“What did he do for a living?”

“You know, apart from working for Elko, I really have no idea. He was Cornipean, though, a descendant of the Barefooters. You met him when they all passed through the City of Towers recently.”

“Not the old guy I pulled off the bridge?”

“Yeah, that’s him. Frank Halliday.”

“I thought he looked familiar, but surely – he was an old man back in 1989, wasn’t he?”

“His Barefooter heritage gave him an extended lifespan.”

“A man with fingers in many pies.”

“Huh?”

“Just an old Earth expression.”

Without pausing to wonder how it got there, Jim pulled the key to the front door from his pocket and led Pedro into the tiled entrance hall. Facing them was an antique table and chair accompanied by the obligatory hat stand, although Jim had never seen any hats hanging from it. His reflection in the mirror behind it startled him for a moment, for when he’d last seen himself he’d been a seventy-five-year-old man. He shook his head, grinning at his foolishness.

“Frank, are you there?”

There was no answer, not that Jim was expecting any.

“Come on in,” he said to Pedro who was waiting in the doorway.

Three carpeted steps led up to an expansive living room, furnished with leather sofas, armchairs and a low table made of a heavy dark-stained wood. A half-drained coffee cup alongside an open magazine

told of what Frank had been doing at the moment their time line had ended.

“Spooky, isn’t it?” Pedro said.

“It gives me the willies just thinking about it. Come on through to the study.”

Jim led him to a room at the back of the house. Bookshelves lined three of the walls, while along the fourth, leather armchairs sat either side of sliding glass doors leading out onto a wooden deck overlooking the river and the forested hills beyond.

“Nice,” Pedro said. He pulled a book at random from the shelves, only to find it written in an unintelligible script. “Can you read this, Jim?”

“I’m afraid not. Frank was going to teach me, but never got around to it.”

“This stuff’s not likely to be of much use to us then.”

“I guess not.”

Jim turned, opening the door and stepping out onto the decking. Pedro followed.

“It’s beautiful here, so peaceful and serene,” Jim said. “I used to stand out here looking at the stars with Frank of an evening. Of course I was homesick and wanted to see Eridani’s star, but it’s the wrong time of year and I was never able to. He taught me the names of other constellations, though, and pointed out a tiny speck of light which he said was the galaxy he came from. It all seemed so incredible to me then, and I guess even now it still does.”

“As a kid I was always looking to the stars,” Pedro said, “wanting to learn all about them and yearning to explore them. I studied astronomy at university and was part way into my doctorate when I became collateral damage in one of Peter Thorpe’s heroic deeds.”

Jim looked him in the eyes, wishing yet again that his friend could put his past behind him, but something else caught his attention. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“Voices. I thought I heard them back when we were over at the edge, but wasn’t really sure.”

Pedro cupped his hands around his ears.

“I don’t think they’re real sounds, more like a psychic connection to somewhere else.”

“I’ve been connecting to Peter’s mind on and off since we got here, but I haven’t heard any voices as such.”

“Wait.” Jim stared out into the distance, grimacing in concentration.

“I think it’s starting now.”

“What? Where?”

“Can’t you see it?”

“I can see it. It’s like a shimmering just above the water.”

“I think I heard something then,” Pedro said. “It sounded like a boy, a bit younger than us I think. Was it something about water?”

“I couldn’t really make it out, but English isn’t my first language.”

Pedro’s jaw dropped. “Oh jeppers!”

“What is it?”

“I just had another flash from Peter, and he’s with that boy talking about a shimmering on the water.”

“Can you sense anything else?”

“No, I’ve lost it. Are you still hearing their voices?”

“No, they’ve gone now too.”

* * *

“What is this place?” Joel asked.

Loraine shrugged. “What’s that smell?”

At first all Joel could see was a dim bluish glow, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he began to discern some of the structure surrounding them. The dark passageway from which they’d emerged opened onto an enormous cavern, twisting vertiginously away in a complexity of ledges and hollows. From the centre of the ceiling hung a long bony spine, barbed and ridged as it descended to a smooth rounded point hundreds of metres above the floor.

Between broad columns like gnarled tree trunks, the walls swirled and twisted, in places honeycombed while elsewhere blooming out like coral. A circular pattern of small hollows and ridges covered the floor in front of him, feeling gritty like sandstone against the soles of his feet.

“David!” Loraine called out, her voice echoing around them before tapering off into absolute silence.

“Over here!” came a faint reply from their right.

“Wait,” Joel said as Loraine started trotting off. “We should leave something here to mark the passageway back.”

“Good thinking. What’ve you got?”

Joel turned out his empty pocket. “You don’t have any, um, breadcrumbs or anything, do you?”

Loraine looked at him as if he’d just crawled out from under a rock.

“I didn’t think so.” He scratched his head before pulling off his tee shirt, tying it around one of the coral-like protuberances next to the dark opening.

Loraine shook her head. “I hope you’re not expecting me to contribute to your trail of discarded clothing.”

Joel just grinned.

“David, we’re coming! Which way are you?”

“Over this way. I think I’ve found something!”

“Keep talking so we can follow your voice.”

The path ahead looked something like an ancient watercourse through the swirls of coarse rock rising on either side. As they walked, the landscape constantly changed, going from rolling plains and narrow gullies to coral-like reefs and towers. In places dark striations stained the rock in layers, as if laid down by tides on an ancient seabed, while elsewhere overhanging cliffs honeycombed with crevices loomed high above. Joel kept glancing back, hoping they’d be able to retrace their steps after finding David.

“Phew!” Loraine said. “That smell’s coming from in here.”

They stood at the opening to a side cavern on the right of the path. Joel held his nose while peering in, but immediately recoiled.

“You don’t want to go in there.”

“Why? What is it?”

He took hold of her hand, leading her further in the direction of David’s voice. “It’s full of old rotting bones, human bones I think.”

“People taken by the bunyip?”

Joel nodded, though it was something he didn’t want to think about.

“Peter and Billy said the bunyip was on Eden, and I don’t think it came through with us so we’re probably safe until the next time slippage.”

“Unless there’s another one, its mate perhaps.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Sorry.”

As the passageway twisted around another bend, David’s voice suddenly became a lot louder, but a vertical wall of honeycombed rock blocked their way forward.

“David, where are you?” Loraine shouted.

“Up here!”

Joel could just make out the tiny figure peering down from what looked like hundreds of metres above them.

“You have to climb up,” David said, “but it’s not as high as it looks.”

Joel shook his head, wondering how that could be, but before he had time to argue, Loraine was scampering up the wall.

“Oh hell,” he muttered, looking for the best hand and foot holds to begin his ascent.

“It’s easier if you don’t look up or down,” David called from somewhere high above him.

Until then, Joel had been concentrating on finding the next place to put his hands and feet, and the thought of looking up or down had never crossed his mind. Now he just couldn’t help himself; he looked down and almost fell as a terrified squeak escaped his lips. Although he was sure he’d only climbed at most about five metres, the base of the wall was now far below him, a hundred metres at least. He closed his eyes, gripping the rock with his fingers and toes while trying to stop his knees from shaking. *Deep breaths*, he thought, trying to calm himself.

“Loraine’s made it up okay,” David called. “Keep coming when you’re ready.”

He was tempted to tell them to go on and leave him, but didn’t. Instead he took another deep breath, opened his eyes just enough to find the next hand hold, and pulled himself up a little. Steadying himself again, he put all his weight on his right leg and felt around with the toes of his left foot for the next suitable hold.

“That’s it; keep climbing,” David said. Joel wondered if he was starting to sound closer as he pushed up with his left leg.

He reached out for the next hand hold, but found only empty space above him. Before he could topple backwards in panic, something grabbed hold of his wrist.

“Got you!” David said, pulling him up.

Loraine grabbed his other wrist, steadying him as he scrambled to the top, his knees now wildly knocking. Somehow he managed to stand, his eyes fixed firmly on the Aboriginal boy before him, the boy he’d feared to never see again. He grinned from ear to ear as Loraine wrapped her arms around her brother, hugging him for all it was worth.

“So tell us what happened,” Loraine said as she disentangled herself. “Why’d you swim away into the bulrushes?”

“I heard voices from in there, two boys I think, and they sounded scared so I went to see what was happening. I came to that pool with the funny rippling on it and then, well, something jumped out of the bushes and grabbed my shorts.”

“It was a bunyip,” Joel said. “I saw it pull your shorts off before you jumped into the pool and disappeared.”

David nodded. “When I ended up in here I could still hear those voices, so I started following them to see if there might be a way out.”

“And is there?” Loraine asked.

“Come and I’ll show you.”

Joel studied his surroundings for the first time since completing the climb. Up here, everything looked different. They were standing on a broad ledge wrapped around swirling columns looking like chocolate fudge frozen into rock. Between each column, dark crevices led into narrow passageways, concealing secrets he really didn’t want to know about. Here the floor was perfectly smooth, with occasional steps leading up to higher balconies. The light, emanating from the rock itself, was brighter now although it had taken on a more greenish hue, making him think of tropical gardens by the sea.

The wall they’d climbed had emerged from something like a sink hole. He looked for any distinguishing features that could be used to find their way back, but although each twist and turn was different, the uniformity of difference made it impossible to pick one feature

from another. “Do you think we should leave something here to mark the way back?”

“Don’t look at me,” Loraine said.

David, who was wearing nothing at all, just shrugged.

Joel sighed before removing his board shorts and tying them to an outcrop of rock adjacent to the hole, while Loraine covered her mouth, trying not to giggle.

“Nice undies,” David said.

“Lead on,” Joel said, trying to stop himself blushing.

Their path wound around a grotesquely twisted column before climbing along a broad ledge. To the left, a deep pit filled with branching stalagmites waited to impale anyone taking a false step, while on the right the honeycombed wall rose vertically to the ceiling high above. They followed David along the ledge, Joel hoping he wouldn’t have to surrender his last remaining piece of clothing before reaching their goal.

* * *

“I’ve found something written in English,” Pedro said.

“What is it?” Jim asked.

“It looks like a diary, but that doesn’t make sense. I mean, surely Frank would’ve written that in his native language.”

“Let me see it.”

Is this the end of the road for my work here? With the deaths of Tom and Sarah Collins three years ago and the disappearance of their son Billy shortly thereafter, I can find no-one else amongst the local natives carrying the Barefooter traits. Even the boy Peter Thorpe, whom Jimmac is watching over, shows no outward sign of Barefooter heritage, in spite of Elko’s assurances otherwise.

Elko himself is deeply troubled by this turn of events, and believes renegade Eridanians may have been behind the deaths and disappearance, however I suspect there may be something more fundamental happening here.

The Eridanians have a device capable of disrupting the flow of time, creating a temporary backwater in which events may play out

differently. They are mostly a curiosity, though, as the changes don't persist, but I can't shake the feeling that I might be living in such a cusp. I feel strangely hollowed out, a husk of my former self, yet my dreams are more vivid and life-like than ever.

The last few days, while Jim has been off bushwalking with Peter, I've been visiting a place Elko once showed me; a sacred site for the Emu people, perhaps even the origin of their Dreaming. It's a waterhole and cave in the Pilliga, in itself unremarkable but for an almost tangible glow of wholesome vitality emanating from it. If this reality is indeed a time cusp, that location may be a nexus, a point of connectivity to the true reality.

"Do you know the place he's talking about?" Pedro asked.

"No, but, but hang on, somewhere I've seen something, I'm sure."

Jim opened a filing cabinet, rummaging through assorted documents before pulling out a crumpled pamphlet.

"It's from the local Aboriginal Land Council, explaining sites of significance to their people. I'm sure it said something about a cave in the Pilliga – ah yes, here it is. *Still actively used as a corroboree site, this cave and waterhole hold great significance in the Emu clan's Dreaming. Entry is restricted.*"

"Does it say where it is?"

"Um, no, except that it's somewhere in the Pilliga."

Pedro shook his head. "Do you have a map?"

Jim again attacked the filing cabinet, retrieving a handful of folded topographic maps and handing them to Pedro.

"Which one?"

"I don't know; I only lived on this planet for six months."

"Do you know what direction it is from here?"

"South-west, I think."

Pedro began unfolding maps and spreading them out on the floor. He suddenly grinned from ear to ear.

"What have you found?"

"Do you reckon that place could be called the Emu Cave?"

"I guess so."

"Good, because there's an *X* drawn on the map marking such a place."

“That’d be it, I’m sure.”

“Let’s go then.”

“I, um, I’d better visit the bathroom first.”

“Turn right here,” Pedro said as they drove down the Newell Highway towards Coonabarabran.

“Are you sure?”

“I think so. How far have we come?”

“About twenty-five kilometres.”

“This’ll be it, then.”

The fire trail they’d entered wound its way steadily downhill before crossing a dry creek bed on an old wooden bridge that rattled alarmingly as they passed over it. At the top of the next rise the road petered out alongside the base of a small escarpment. Jim parked the car.

“Which way do we go?”

Pedro studied the map again before looking around. “Up through that gap in the rocks, I guess.”

After a short climb they reached the beginnings of an overgrown track.

“How far do we have to go?”

“About two or three kilometres – oh jeepers!”

“What?”

“Out there behind us, look, the landscape’s disappearing!”

From their vantage point looking back over the plains towards Narrabri, they saw features on the horizon vanishing one by one as the edge of their world moved inexorably closer.

“We’d better hope Frank’s right about the cave then. What did he call it?”

“A nexus, whatever that is.”

“Let’s get moving.”

The track gradually descended through dense scrub before emerging onto a rocky ledge where a babbling stream splashed down into a pool. Beyond it, at the base of a small cliff, was the opening to a cavern.

“Is this it?”

Pedro studied the map again. "I guess so, although I'd imagined something a bit bigger."

"I think I can see some Aboriginal markings over there."

Pedro followed as Jim pushed his way through the tangle of low scrub surrounding the pool.

* * *

"In here," David said, leading Loraine and Joel into a narrow cleft in the wall.

"What is it?" Joel asked.

"You'll see."

The passageway twisted, becoming darker with every turn, while the lumps of broken rock littering the floor suggested it might not be entirely stable.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Loraine asked, but as she spoke they rounded another bend to see light coming from up ahead. From there the passageway opened into the mouth of a cave, with a rock pool at its entrance and a small waterfall opposite. Thick scrub cast shadows across the water in the late afternoon sunshine.

"This place looks familiar," Loraine said.

"I know," David said. "I think it's the Emu Cave near Narrabri."

"Yes, you're right. I remember Granddad bringing us here soon after we came to Earth."

"That would explain these then," Joel said, examining the Emu motifs adorning the walls of the cave.

"Those are –"

David suddenly stopped, staring across the pool at the rocks behind it.

"What is it?" Loraine asked.

"There used to be a memorial stone and plaque over there, dedicated to an Elder of our people, someone called Elko I think, but, but they're gone!"

"*Forever walk in the light*, it said. I remember seeing it, but look, there's no sign of anything having been there."

"That's so weird."

"Shush," Joel said. "I think someone's out there."

“Is this it?”

“Look,” David whispered. “There are two boys up above the waterfall.”

“I guess so, although I’d imagined something a bit bigger.”

“I think I can see some Aboriginal markings over there.”

“We’re saved!” Loraine yelled, starting to dash out of the cave, but Joel grabbed her hand.

“Don’t go out there; there’s something not right here. Remember, um, do you remember Peter saying something about a remnant of an alternative reality? I think this is it.”

“An alternative reality?” David asked.

“It was something to do with time cusps, but I don’t really understand. Peter thought there were two boys trapped in it.”

“I think he means us,” said a voice from just outside the cave entrance. A moment later two fourteen-year-olds appeared in front of them. “I’m Jim and this is Pedro.”

“I’m Loraine, and this is my brother David and our friend Joel.”

As Joel reached out to shake Jim’s hand, the falls at the far end of the pool erupted in spray, turning as he watched into a grey mist spreading out over the water. His jaw dropped as he drew in a frightened gasp.

“What’s wrong?” Jim asked, before turning and gasping too.

“Bloody hell,” Pedro said, as rocks around the cave entrance began to crumble and fall. “Everyone back into the cave!”

“What’s happening?” Loraine asked.

“This reality’s ending.”

More rocks fell as they hurried back the way they’d come, while the light outside the cave faded to black. As the last of them emerged into the chamber, the fissure in the wall sealed over, leaving no trace of an opening.

“Phew, that was close,” Pedro said. “What the hell is this place?”

“I think it’s Frank’s nexus,” Jim said.

Joel grimaced in confusion. “Frank’s necklace?”

“Nexus, as in a connecting place,” Pedro said. “Jim’s guardian reckoned that cave was a way out of the time cusp we were trapped in.” Pedro glanced around the chamber again. “I’m assuming you three know how to get back to the real world from here.”

“Joel’s been leaving a trail of clothing,” Loraine said.

“And David too by the look of him,” Jim said.

“No, I was wearing board shorts but a bunyip took them.”

“As they do,” Pedro said, rolling his eyes.

“What’s a bunyip?” Jim asked.

“Sheeze.”

“There’s my boardies!” Joel shouted, dashing forward to where he’d tied them beside the sinkhole and quickly pulling them on.

“More bunyip fodder,” Pedro said. “Which way do we go now?”

“We have to climb down into the hole, but don’t worry, it’s not as far down as it looks.”

“I don’t like heights,” Jim said.

“Close your eyes then,” Pedro said before swinging himself into the hole and scampering down. “It’s a piece of cake; lots of hand and foot holds!”

Loraine followed him in, again making it look easy.

“Come on, Joel,” she shouted from below. “I’ll help guide you.”

Joel lowered himself cautiously into the hole, feeling with his toes for possible foot holds.

“Take it slowly,” David said, “and don’t look down.”

“I wish you’d stop saying that.”

Joel took a deep breath before beginning his descent, forcing himself to look only at where he was placing his hands and relying on touch for his feet. *Think pleasant thoughts*, he thought, and turned his mind to Loraine waiting below for him, but had to catch himself as he almost looked down to see her. He stopped, taking deep breaths to steady himself.

“Are you okay?” Loraine called up to him.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, the words coming out on autopilot. He took another deep breath and began searching with his left foot for the next hold. *Left foot, right foot, hay foot, straw foot*, he chanted to himself as he slowly descended, trying to focus his mind entirely on just moving his hands and feet.

Suddenly there were arms around him, easing him down onto the floor. He blushed as Loraine kissed him on the cheek. Looking up, he saw the tiny figures of Jim and David starting their descent, and that

caused his legs to immediately turn to quivering rubber. Loraine wrapped her arms around him, keeping him from falling helplessly to the floor. He closed his eyes and let his mind go blank.

“Which way now?” Pedro asked.

Joel opened his eyes to see David staring at him. He let go of Loraine, blushing with embarrassment.

“That way,” he said, pointing down the passageway. “My tee shirt is marking the exit.”

Joel led them forward, trying to remember how far they had to go, but with everything that had happened, it seemed like ancient history now.

“What’s that smell?” Jim asked.

“Um, there’s a side cavern filled with old bones and stuff.”

“The bunyip’s lair,” Loraine said.

As she spoke, something ahead of them growled. Joel stopped and was almost knocked over by Pedro and Jim.

“I think it’s in here,” David said.

“What’s a bunyip?” Jim asked again.

“Nobody knows,” Pedro said, “but I guess we’re about to find out.”

Out of the Frying Pan

The Eridanian shuttle settled onto a flat expanse of rock about fifty metres from the pool. An elderly couple stepped from the hatch as soon as it opened.

“Todd! Elissi!” Billy said, sprinting over to them, while Peter hobbled along behind as fast as he could. “I know Aaron said he’d have the orb delivered by the High Councillor herself if he had to, but I didn’t really expect –”

Elissi raised her hand. “We had to come when we heard of your predicament here. I’m sorry we’re late, but your immigration people are very jittery after what happened in the other galaxy and it took forever to get landing clearance.”

A middle-aged Eridanian man followed Todd and Elissi from the shuttle, grinning from ear to ear when he saw who was gathered before him.

“Norrie!” Jason said, dashing forward to greet his long-time friend.

“You’re looking well,” Norrie said, “and Jenny too. I hope we can help find your grandson.”

Jenny gave him a hug.

“I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated now,” Jason said. “When the cusp opened a few minutes ago, Loraine and her friend Joel leapt through as well.”

“They wanted to rescue David,” Loraine said, “but –”

“Don’t worry,” Elissi said. “I’m sure we’ll find all the children safe and well. Norrie’s become our expert on temporal phenomenon.”

Norrie blushed. “I had to find something else to do after finishing the southern ocean restoration.”

“Dad did a lot of theoretical work on time cusps in his early days,” Jason said.

“That’s what originally got me interested.”

“I’ve forgotten most of it now,” Billy said.

“We might have an additional complication here,” Peter said as he joined them. “I think two people are trapped in a remnant from a time cusp that happened back in 1989 but has become connected to the one here.”

Norrie raised his eyebrows. “Is that possible?”

“Believe me,” Jason said, “if Peter says so, then it is. He wrote the laws of the universe.”

Peter glared at him.

“Um, the children,” Mark said, starting to squirm.

“Sorry, of course. Come follow me into my parlour.” Norrie led them into the back of the shuttle where racks of equipment had been hastily installed, handing Jason a tripod fitted with three fractal sensing loops set at right angles to each other. “Put this where the children disappeared.”

Jason dashed back to the pond, wondering whether to put the sensor next to the water or in it. The logical half of his brain told him in the water was best because that’s where the disappearances had occurred, yet something about the pond ignited a primal fear ingrained into his Aboriginal heritage, an inner voice saying in no uncertain terms, *don’t disturb the water*.

After what felt like a lifetime of indecision, he placed the tripod right at the water’s edge, hoping it would be close enough for Norrie’s instruments. Trying to suppress a growing feeling that he was trespassing, he glanced nervously about before scurrying back to the shuttle.

“What does this stuff do?” Lorina asked.

Norrie looked at Peter and Billy. “They can explain it better than me.”

Peter straightened himself up. “People once thought that time flowed in an orderly linear fashion from past to present to future, but all that changed with the advent of quantum physics and the uncertainly principle.”

“The uncertainly principle?”

“When it comes right down to the nitty-gritty, no outcome is ever certain, and the future can only be properly described in terms of probabilities. Some things are more likely, others less, and most are damn near impossible. Einstein once disparagingly called it *God playing dice with the universe*, but those dice are nearly always heavily loaded.”

“The most likely outcome usually happens,” Billy said when Lorina looked puzzled.

Peter nodded. “As the future becomes the present, each of those possible outcomes must be resolved. Current theory suggests that each potential outcome actually exists for a very short time, of the order of a Planck interval, before one, typically the most probable, becomes dominant and the rest dissolve away. Sometimes, very rarely though, that mechanism breaks down and multiple outcomes survive for a much longer time; days, weeks, or even years.”

“That breakdown requires a chaotic interaction with subspace,” Billy said, “such as can happen during the time slippage between twin planets or when induced by an Eridanian orb.”

“What do you mean by *chaotic*?” Lorina asked.

“The smallest of changes can produce totally different outcomes. Some liken it to a butterfly flapping its wings causing a typhoon on the other side of the planet, which is a good analogy as many weather systems are chaotic by nature. The same thing happens when multiple time lines are triggered by the tiniest of differences.”

“Each time line has a unique subspace signature,” Norrie said, “which is what this instrumentation detects.”

He adjusted the controls, frowning as he stared at the screen showing a single bright line on a field of mostly snow. “I’m receiving a strong signature from our own time line and traces of something else, but – are you sure you put the probe exactly where the children disappeared?”

“Um,” Jason said. “I placed it next to the pond; I, I couldn’t bring myself to enter the water.”

He stepped from the shuttle again, with Jenny and Billy following. Once more a primal fear gripped his heart as he approached the pond. The water rippled, daring him to touch it.

“What’s wrong?” Billy asked, now standing beside him.

“Can’t you feel it?”

“No.”

Jason picked up the tripod, hesitating for a few seconds before carefully lowering one foot into the water.

“No Jase, don’t!” Chris yelled, running from the shuttle. At the same moment, the water surface churned into foaming spray, while from behind came a roar as a great beast leapt out of the bulrushes.

Jenny and Billy both grabbed Jason, pulling him back towards them. The bunyip sailed past his ear, knocking the probe into the water before following it in a loud splash. Water sprayed everywhere, drenching them, while Chris covered his ears, grimacing in pain.

Suddenly everything was quiet, and when Jason looked back at the pond, its surface was still, with no sign of the animal that had leapt into it just moments before. The probe was mostly submerged, with just one corner poking out of the water.

“Norrie said it’s working now and showing something quite extraordinary,” Michael said as he came running from the shuttle, before taking in the chaotic scene in front of him. “What happened here?”

“The portal opened again and Jase almost had his head taken off by the bunyip,” Jenny said, helping Jason to his feet.

“Where did it go?”

“It leapt into the pond and disappeared.”

“What did you make of that noise?” Chris asked, now also pulling himself upright.

“What noise?”

“Didn’t you hear a loud piercing screech?”

“No,” Jason said. “All I heard was the bunyip growling and then the splash as it hit the water.”

Chris shook his head. “Something in this place really doesn’t agree with me.”

“I heard a screech,” Michael said, “but I thought it was just a bird.”

“So did I,” Lorina said, now joining them.

“It must be our Delphinidae telepathy,” Chris said.

Billy shook his head. “A telepathically screeching bunyip; that’s all we need.”

Norrie waved everyone back into the shuttle. On the display screen behind him was what looked like a fern leaf, with each branch dividing and subdividing *ad infinitum*. “This is extraordinary; I’ve never seen anything quite like it. It’s as if there’s a region of space where all possible outcomes coexist, time lines within time lines if you like.”

“What is it we’re looking at?” Peter asked.

“This is just a small cross-section of a three-dimensional surface. Each structure breaks down into finer structures, each of which breaks down into finer structures still.”

“Can you render the entire object?”

Norrie scratched his chin. “I think so.”

While he ferociously attacked the keyboard, Peter turned to Billy. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“You mean Mandelbrot sets?”

Peter nodded.

“What’s Mandel bread sex?” Lorina asked.

Chris fell to the floor, roaring with laughter. When it appeared he wasn’t about to stop, Mark led him outside.

“A Mandelbrot set is a mathematical surface showing chaotic behaviour,” Peter said. “It’s the classical representation of fractals.”

“I see,” Lorina said, but clearly she didn’t.

“As you zoom in on the boundary, you see more and more ever-changing detail,” Jenny said. “It’s like embroidery on steroids.”

“Ah.”

“This is the best I can do,” Norrie said, turning back to them. “The graphics engine I have here is rather limited.”

“Can you rotate it ninety degrees clockwise?” Peter asked.

“Like this?”

“Perfect. What do you reckon, Billy?”

“A Mandelbulb if ever I saw one.”

Mark and Chris had just returned inside, but the mention of *Mandelbulb* set Chris off again, forcing him back out.

“The Mandelbulb is a three-dimensional extension of the Mandelbrot set,” Peter said. “Its surface is an embodiment of chaos, while on the inside it’s like a magical cavern.”

“Is what we’re seeing a physical object?” Mark asked.

“In a sense it is,” Norrie said. “It’s a bubble of real-space inside subspace, accessible from both the pond here and its equivalent on Eden while embodying all possible time lines.”

“Could the children be in there?”

“Yes; either that or they passed through it.”

“Can we follow them?”

“I’ve uploaded the parameters into one of our orbs, so yes, if we go back to the pond, we should be able to enter the bulb.”

“Where are you going?” Chris asked as everyone filed past him.

“For some Mandel bread sex,” Billy said.

“Don’t Granddad, please,” Mark said. “You’ll set him off again.”

Chris chortled, but covered his mouth and followed them down to the pond.

“Do we have to go in the water?” Lorina asked, staring at the partially submerged probe.

“I think that will be necessary, yes,” Norrie said.

“What about the bunyip?”

Anton picked up a fallen tree branch. “Stay close together and I’ll fend it off with this.”

Jason cautiously eased one foot into the water, and when it didn’t erupt into a boiling cauldron, followed with the other foot.

“Form a circle around me,” Norrie said, holding the orb in front of him. “This has a radius of about two metres.”

As he activated the device, a shimmering appeared around them, followed a moment later by darkness.

“There’s gravity in here,” Peter said.

“And air,” Norrie said.

“Do you mean there was a chance there mightn’t have been?” Lorina asked.

“With all the other comings and goings, I thought we’d be fairly safe.”

“Norrie’s right,” Billy said.

“If this is how you lot conduct your research, I’m surprised any of you are still alive.”

Mark took hold of her hand, trying to calm her. “There’s light coming from through there,” he said.

The dark alcove in which they were standing opened out onto a huge cavern lit by a dim bluish glow. Honeycombed walls and twisted coral-like columns supported a white ceiling high above, featureless except for the long ridged spine hanging down from its centre.

“A textbook Mandelbulb,” Peter said, looking around.

“What’s this?” Jenny asked, pointing to the piece of cloth tied around one of the rocky protuberances.

“It’s Joel’s tee shirt,” Lorina said. “We’re on the right track!”

“Leave it there,” Jason said as she started untying it. “I think he left it to mark the way out.”

“I wonder which way they went,” Mark said, but at that moment voices and a deep growling came from his right. He took off in that direction, the others following in his wake.

Peter shook his head, wishing again that he’d brought his walking stick with him, before hobbling after them.

Mark froze as, just ahead of him and across a small gully, stood the bunyip, its gaze focused on the five children huddled together before it.

“Loraine! David!” Lorina shouted as she dashed past him, but he reached out, grabbing her by the hand and stopping her. The bunyip turned, glaring at them.

Anton moved to the front, still holding the tree branch and raising it as the bunyip took a few steps towards him. It paused mid-stride, baring its teeth as a low guttural growling came from deep within its throat, saliva dripping from its mouth as it sized up its opponent.

He stepped towards its left flank, thrusting out with the branch, causing the bunyip to retreat a few paces. Everyone else moved around behind him, inching their way closer to the children. With a series of manoeuvres, each forcing the bunyip further to the right, he managed to shepherd everyone around it.

Lorina dashed forward, wrapping an arm each around David and Loraine, while Mark did likewise to Joel.

“Your parents would’ve killed me if I’d lost you,” he said, now releasing him. “Why’d you and Loraine jump through the portal?”

Joel lowered his eyes, his bottom lip trembling. “We, we had to find David.” He covered his face as tears began to flow.

Mark immediately wrapped his arms around him again, trying to sooth him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound angry. I’m just so glad you’re all safe.”

The bunyip growled again, reminding him that they were anything but safe.

“I think we may have made an error of judgement,” Todd said. “The creature is now between us and the exit.”

“Who are your friends?” Lorina asked Loraine, noticing the other two boys for the first time.

“I’m Jim,” Jim said, stepping forward, “and this is Pedro.”

“I thought you looked familiar,” Jason said. “Weren’t you trapped in a time cusp remnant?”

“Yes, but your grandchildren rescued us.”

A chill passed through Peter as he stared at Pedro. He recalled a photograph, taken by his parents at the time of their move to Sydney, of a fourteen-year-old Peter trying his best to smile but with eyes betraying the emptiness gripping his heart, eyes crying unshed tears for the childhood friends he’d never see again. He’d found it after his parents had died, and for reasons he could never explain, had framed and hung it in his bedroom, a reminder in the wee small hours of his ancient loss. Now here before him stood the boy in the picture, with that same forced smile and those same sad eyes.

He’d always believed Pedro had been created, and perhaps irreparably damaged, by his later tampering with the course of history, when he and Billy had saved one life but destroyed another, but now he knew Pedro’s true birth had been in the horrors engulfing him back then, with his mind producing something unexpected; a virtual brother, an imaginary friend turned real.

Pedro stepped forward, offering his hand. “No hard feelings, Peter?”

It was Peter’s blood flowing in Pedro’s veins, Peter’s DNA inside Pedro’s cells. Pedro was his physical twin, just as Billy had been his spiritual one. Yet there was something Billy’s father had once said, something about the laws of the universe not allowing an eleven-year-old and fourteen-year-old Billy to be walking around together and

shaking hands with each other. *If Tom was right, how could this be happening?*

“Don’t touch me,” Peter said, drawing back his hand. “It could be dangerous.”

“You think we might, what, annihilate each other?”

“It’s possible, yes.”

A distant noise interrupted them. The bunyip turned its head, pricking its ears up before yelping and dashing off down a side passageway.

“What was that all about?” Mark asked, but before anyone could answer, five armed men rounded the bend behind them, raising their weapons.

“Who do we have here?” one of them asked in Eridanian.

“It must be tourist season,” another said.

“Well, well, if I’m not mistaken, we’re in the presence of the High Councillor, her husband and the esteemed Norrie Harrish.”

“And the whole Collins family too, by the look of it.”

One of them walked up to Peter, his weapon trained on the centre of his chest. “Is this one Peter Thorpe?”

“The General will be most pleased.”

“They’re Barradhim renegades,” Elissi whispered.

“Hasn’t Barrad been dead for more than ten years?” Mark asked.

“Twelve, but renegade groups are still operating in his name.”

“You’re quite astute, Highness,” the leader of the renegades said, “but we no longer operate in that turncoat’s name. Our new master will pay a handsome price for celebrities such as yourselves.”

“What about these other ones?” another renegade asked, waving his weapon towards Chris, Anton, Michael, Jim and Pedro.

The leader stared at each of them in turn, cocking his head slightly before shaking it. “They’re nobodies,” he said, now in English. “They have no value; feed them to the beast.”

“No, wait –” Elissi said.

“Silence! Take the prisoners to the ship.”

Three of the renegades escorted the celebrities back the way they’d come, while the remaining two took the nobodies further down the path. Joel waited where he was hiding behind a column, having slipped away while Elissi had been arguing with their leader. *One of*

the advantages of being a quiet little kid nobody notices, he mused. He stepped out, scratching his head and wondering what to do next, only to hear the two renegades returning. Ducking back behind the column, he waited for them to pass.

Acting on a hunch, he dashed out in the direction from which they'd come, running tip-toe to make as little noise as possible. Using his nose to guide him, he soon reached the bone cave and cautiously peeked in.

"Joel," Chris whispered from where he was tied to shackles on the wall along with the other four. "I wondered where you'd gone."

"Do you think you can untie us?" Pedro asked.

Joel squeezed in behind Chris, trying in the dim light to see how he was tied. "Relax your hands as much as you can."

He struggled and squirmed, pulling, twisting and working on the tightly knotted cord before finally feeling it loosen a little. After a few more twists and tugs, Chris was free.

Joel went to work on Pedro while Chris attacked Anton's bonds. Once freed, Anton stood at the cave's mouth, keeping watch for the bunyip or any returning renegades.

"What do we do now?" Michael asked once all were freed. "Do we go after the others?"

"And rescue them how?" Pedro asked. "We have no weapons."

"The leader said they were taking them to a ship," Joel said. "They may well be gone now anyway."

"I say we make for the exit and notify the authorities," Jim said.

Michael nodded. "I recognised one of those men."

"What?" Anton asked.

"When Pip and I were arrested on Huntress, I'm sure he was one of the military police."

"Didn't Elissi say they were renegade Eridanians?"

"Most of them were, certainly," Jim said, "but Michael's right, one of them wasn't. The leader referred to their master as the General; does that ring any bells?"

"General Gallagher," Michael said, shaking his head.

Joel dashed forward to where his tee shirt was tied marking the exit. He started untying it, but paused. “Do you think I should leave this here in case any of the others escape?”

“That’s good thinking, if you don’t mind,” Anton said.

Joel shrugged.

“Let’s go,” Michael said, “before the bunyip returns.”

The alcove leading back to Earth was dark, much darker than the dimly lit chamber of the nexus.

“How do we get out?” Anton asked.

“It’ll open naturally at the next time slippage,” Chris said.

“When’s that?”

“It’s roughly once a day, but, um, the last one was when Joel and Loraine went through, so we’ve got a long wait I’m afraid.”

“It’s a pity Norrie didn’t leave his orb here.”

“What’s this?” Joel asked, pointing to a plate on the wall just barely visible in the dim light. “There’s writing on it, but I can’t make it out.”

“It’s in Eridanian,” Jim said, trying to read the faint script. “Um, *Portal 12 Release*, as best I can translate it.”

“What’s it mean?” Joel asked.

“There must be a release switch to activate the portal somewhere nearby,” Chris said, feeling along the wall around the sign.

“Maybe you have to press on the sign itself,” Pedro said.

While Chris tried to no avail, an all-too-familiar growling came from just beyond the opening to the alcove.

“Oh shit,” Anton said, wishing now he’d stopped to find his dropped tree branch.

“Just thinking,” Joel said. “The sign’s in Eridanian, so maybe it only responds to an Eridanian touch.”

“Let me try,” Jim said, squeezing through between Chris and Pedro. He placed his hand on the plate, pressing with varying degrees of pressure. Something beeped, while behind them a dull shimmering appeared.

“That’s it!” Michael said.

“Everyone join hands,” Chris said.

As the bunyip’s silhouette appeared in the opening to the nexus, they leapt into the shimmering, immediately finding themselves

splashing into the pond under bright sunshine. As they clambered out of the water, the bunyip splashed through behind them.

“Quick, to the shuttle!” Anton shouted.

In what was surely a moment of fortuitous carelessness, no-one had locked the hatch before leaving. As Anton herded everyone on board, the bunyip charged towards them, water spraying from its coat. It came to a halt a couple of metres from the shuttle, staring and growling at it.

“We need to contact the Eridanian authorities,” Jim said, picking up the subspace radio handset.

“*Security services,*” the Eridanian voice said in reply to his call.

“The High Councillor and her husband have been taken hostage by Barradhim renegades.”

“*What? Where?*”

“They were on Earth, helping the Collins family locate their missing son, but were all captured inside a time nexus. We think the military from the other galaxy may be involved.”

“*Who is this?*”

“Jimmac Tulee.”

“*Say again?*”

“Jimmac Tulee from Angust.”

“*Well, Mr Tulee, if that’s who you are, I thought perhaps you’d know by now that you’ve been dead for fifteen years.*”

“No, you don’t understand –” Jim said, but the call had already been disconnected. He stared at the handset, mouth gaping, before placing it back on the console.

“That went well,” Chris said. “What do we do now?”

“Can anyone fly this?” Anton asked.

“I can,” Jim said. “Where do you want to go?”

“Brisbane.”

“Um, you’d better remind me where that is.”

“About thirteen hundred kilometres up the coast.”

“Oh, right.”

“You fly, I’ll point.”

Leaving the bunyip to ponder the meal that got away, they rose swiftly over the Southern Alps, making a beeline up the coast.

“Shuttle ES-471, this is Sydney Control. High Councillor, what is your flight plan?”

“Ignore it,” Anton said as Jim reached for the handset. “Michael and I aren’t officially here and I’d rather we not become involved with the local authorities.”

“Shouldn’t we let them know what’s happened, though?” Chris asked.

“If you can find something to write on, leave them a note.”

“Put us down there,” Anton said, pointing to a vacant lot in an industrial area south of Brisbane.

“Hold on tight,” Jim said. “I was never much good at landing these things.”

“Now you tell us,” Chris said.

Decelerating as he spiralled down, Jim hovered the shuttle about ten metres above ground.

“Just ease it down now,” Anton said.

Joel braced himself for impact, feeling his stomach jump into his mouth as the shuttle suddenly dropped. Jim overcompensated, though, and they lurched skywards again.

“Easy now,” Anton said as Jim tried once more to bring it down. “Three metres, two metres, keep it steady, one metre, almost there.”

Joel let out the breath he’d been holding as the shuttle bumped down and the hum of the real-space drive died away.

“Leave your note on the driver’s seat,” Anton said to Chris as he opened the hatch. “Follow me.”

Squeezing through a gap in the chain wire fence surrounding the lot, he led them a couple of hundred metres down a narrow laneway before stopping outside an old abandoned warehouse. Pulling a key from his pocket, he unlocked the door.

“Over this way,” he said, leading them into the gloomy interior.

Chris stopped Joel as he was about to follow the others in. “You really shouldn’t be coming with us. Do you want me to call your parents?”

“No, I have to come. Loraine and David are in danger.”

“That’s all the more reason for you to go home.”

“But, but what if those renegades figure out I was a witness? I’d be in even more danger at home than I would be with you.”

Approaching sirens echoed through the laneway while police shuttles swooped low overhead.

“Hurry up,” Anton called from deep inside the warehouse, “or we’ll all find ourselves trying to talk our way out of prison.”

Chris shook his head. “Very well, come along Joel, but don’t do anything to make me regret this.”

Joel grinned from ear to ear as he followed him into the gloomy interior, while overhead something scurried across the rafters. “What was that?”

“Just a possum, I think, or perhaps an owl. Now watch your step as there’s lots of glass and metal shavings on the floor.”

“I’ll be fine; I never wear shoes and my feet are pretty tough.”

Chris smiled, remembering a similar conversation when Jason had led him through there nearly twenty years earlier.

They joined the others standing around a heavy steel door in the far corner of the building. Pulling another key from his pocket, Anton opened it, revealing a portal filled with a dull shimmering light. “Go through and wait for me on the other side.”

“Where are you taking us?” Pedro asked.

“Meridian.”

Into the Fire

Police Superintendent Scott Davies was about to leave his office when an encrypted call from the Eridanian ambassador came through.

“Scott, we may have a major diplomatic incident on our hands.”

“What’s happened?”

“Earlier today, the security service on Eridani received what they at first thought was a hoax call, claiming our High Councillor and other prominent people had been abducted.”

“What made them think it was a hoax?”

“The caller, a teenaged boy by the sound of him, identified himself as Jimmac Tulee from Angust, a former Eridanian Councillor who passed away fifteen years ago.”

“And now?”

“The security service has confirmed that the call came from the High Councillor’s shuttle, which she’d flown to Earth on an urgent personal matter and which was later found abandoned on that planet. A voice-print of the caller has also confirmed his identity as Jimmac Tulee.”

“Your security people have an interesting mystery to solve. How does it concern us?”

“The caller said he believed the abductors were agents of the military here, and a note found in the shuttle has provided further evidence of that.”

“Can you send me a copy?”

“It’s on its way.”

Scott printed the e-mail attachment as soon as it arrived.

To whom it may concern,

While investigating a temporal anomaly in the Bunyip State Park, Elissi and Todd Myers and Norrie Harrish of Eridani, along with Peter Thorpe and the entire Collins family, were abducted by five armed men, four of whom appeared to be Eridanian (possibly Barradhim renegades) and one identified by Michael Chandler of Bluehaven as a military operative from his galaxy. They referred to their master as The General and we think they may have been taken to Nimber or Pulper.

Please notify police superintendent Scott Davies on Cornipus and Frank Halliday on Meridian, as they may be able to help.

Christopher Smith

*Research Fellow, Department of Parapsychology
Brisbane University*

Scott folded the note, pushing it into his pocket before locking his office and heading for the spaceport.

* * *

Joel glanced around the room into which they'd emerged from Sheol, taking in the maps and charts covering the walls and the row upon row of disused computer terminals arrayed on metal desks. In the far corner a flight of stairs led up to a closed door.

Anton lifted a wall-mounted telephone handset, speaking rapidly before replacing it again.

"Where are we?" Chris asked.

"A museum," Anton said. "This was the Barefooters' headquarters on Meridian during the war."

"Barefooters?" Joel asked, grimacing in confusion. "As in water skiing?" Pedro rolled his eyes.

"The Barefooters were descendants of genetically modified soldiers," Anton said, "gifted with extraordinarily long life and a superhuman resistance to injury and disease. Prior to the war they were renowned as keepers of the peace, but were driven into exile by Morgoth and his forces."

“Oh right, I think I remember something about that from school. Why were they called Barefooters?”

“They never wore shoes on account of their autothermia.”

“I never wear shoes, so could I be a Barefooter?”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, ravenous.”

“You’re not a Barefooter then. They were never hungry unless you starved them for months on end. Anyway, they’re just about all dead now.”

“So why are we here?”

Anton glanced around at the others. “Who *is* this kid?”

“A friend of David and Loraine,” Chris said, “and he seems determined to rescue them.”

“That’s all we need.”

The door at the top of the steps opened, revealing a tall dark-haired man standing behind it.

“Hi Russell,” Chris said, smiling. “Has Frank roped you into this too?”

“Of course. Come on up and I’ll take you to him now.”

The stairwell opened into a meeting room, most of it cordoned off by heavy ropes suspended on polished brass columns. Rows of leather seats, painstakingly restored, faced a podium behind which hung a portrait of a man bearing more than just a passing resemblance to Mark Collins.

“Who’s that?” Joel asked, pointing.

“He was Gallad,” Anton said, “the leader of the Barefooters opposing Morgoth.”

“But he looks like Loraine and David’s father.”

“Mark Collins is genetically his son.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story, but suffice to say Mark was a full-blooded Barefooter before his fractal genes were destroyed by the subspace energy pulse that killed Morgoth.”

“Why don’t I know any of this?”

Pedro again rolled his eyes. “Make sure he goes to remedial school once we’re back on Earth.”

Russell picked up a handful of pamphlets from the front desk, handing them to Joel as they filed past. "Perhaps these will help."

Joel glanced at them before grimacing again. "I can't read the language they're written in."

"You speak it well enough."

"Yes, but we don't do your writing at school until next year."

"Sheeze," Pedro said.

"If you're really good I'll tell you a bedtime story tonight," Chris said, grinning.

"No, but –" Joel started so say, before deciding it was best not to.

Russell glanced nervously up and down the street before ushering everyone into his car. "Sorry if it's a bit of a squeeze."

"Put Joel in the boot," Pedro said.

"He can sit on my lap," Chris said, cutting off any reaction from Joel.

"Everybody inhale," Michael said.

"Mind your elbows," Jim said, trying to squeeze in against Pedro.

* * *

"At ease, Sergeant," General Gallagher said. "Your commander said you had something to tell me."

"Sir, we found some unauthorised Eridanians and Earthlings snooping around inside the nexus."

"I thought we had protocols in place for dealing with that sort of thing."

"We do, yes, but amongst the intruders were the Eridanian High Councillor, our own former Supreme Councillor Mark the Bewildered, High Priestess Lorina and several other prominent civilians."

"Quite a gathering, it seems. Where are they now?"

"Under guard in the Special Operations unit."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"Um, there were five others with them, nobodies that we left for the beast, but they escaped and informed the authorities on Eridani and Earth. One of them apparently recognised me and figured out who we were."

“So has the Milky Way galaxy declared war on us?”

“Not as yet, sir.”

“Well we’d best make sure they don’t.” Gallagher paused for a moment, stroking his chin. “On the other hand, wars do make very good diversions. Tell your commander I want to see him when I return.”

“Yes, sir.”

Gallagher shook his head as the sergeant left his office, wondering what had become of recruitment standards and vowing to make amends.

* * *

The armed guard ushered the prisoners through the double white doors at the end of the corridor. Inside the brightly lit room were row upon row of tables and chairs, while at the far end stood a self-serve bistro framed by stacks of porcelain plates.

“Help yourselves to the food,” the guard said. “It’s compatible with all races of people.”

“Which means it’s bland and tasteless,” Billy whispered to Julia.

“I’m not hungry anyway,” Mark said.

Lorina squeezed his hand. “I’m sure Chris and the others will be okay.”

“Eat or starve, I don’t care which,” the guard said before leaving the room and locking the door behind him.

“Well I’m hungry,” David said.

“You’re always hungry,” Loraine said. “Mum, do you think, is it possible Joel might —”

Lorina wrapped her arms around her daughter, holding her tightly against her chest as she started sobbing. “We must never give up hope, never, you understand?”

“I, I guess so.”

“Come and we’ll get some food, okay?” Loraine said, leading Mark and the twins across the room. “The world always seems better on a full stomach.”

Lorina hadn’t noticed them earlier, but as she approached the bistro she saw two men sitting quietly in the corner, both blonde-

headed and thus most likely from Bluehaven. As they turned, the shock of sudden recognition caused her to stumble backwards into Mark.

“What’s wrong?” Mark asked, before turning to see the two men now standing and walking towards them, grins spread across their faces.

“Owen! Pip!” Lorina shouted, trying to disentangle herself from Mark. “What are you doing here?”

“Awaiting execution,” Owen said, glancing cautiously at Mark before wrapping his arms around Lorina and kissing her on the nose.

“What?” Mark asked, freezing as he was about to shake Pip’s hand. “Why?”

“Grab some food and sit down,” Pip said. “It’s a long story, and then you can tell us what brings you here.”

* * *

“Thank you for taking the time to see me,” the Eridanian ambassador said, ushering General Gallagher into his office.

“It’s always a pleasure, Ambassador. What can I do for you?”

“I’d have thought that was obvious.”

“You mean your missing High Councillor?”

“I have it on good authority that she was taken captive by your soldiers. Is that true?”

“Yes, she and her companions are currently in custody on Nimmer.”

“Why is that?”

“They were caught spying on one of our military facilities.”

“How? Where? From the reports I’ve received, they were on Earth at the time.”

“That’s correct, but they entered our facility through a subspace portal using this device we confiscated from one of them,” Gallagher said, holding up the orb. “There can be no doubt their presence in the facility was intentional.”

“That’s preposterous! Elissi would never do such a thing. What do you intend doing with them?”

“They’ll face a military tribunal charged with espionage and, when found guilty, will face execution by firing squad.”

“You do realise the Eridanian Council would consider that an act of war.”

“Indeed, and if the positions were reversed, I would certainly be doing the same. But surely, Ambassador, we both know that Eridani has no military force capable of waging such a war.”

“Don’t underestimate us, General, for although we don’t flout our capabilities like you do, you may rest assured we are quite capable of matching your forces on the battle field.”

Gallagher laughed. “You’re not referring to the Barradhim, are you? The Milky Way galaxy’s *Special Forces*?”

The ambassador looked taken aback.

“Your Council really should look beyond its luxurious chambers once in a while,” Gallagher continued. “The Barradhim have been under my control for some years now.”

“Impossible!”

“Perhaps, but nonetheless true. The agents who assisted in the apprehension of the spies weren’t renegades, as your report suggested, but regular members of your force acting under my orders.”

The ambassador stood, and for a moment Gallagher wondered if he was about to try settling the matter by way of a fist-fight.

“Declare war on us by all means, Ambassador, but I assure you our forces will take great delight in destroying your world and any others in your galaxy that might be stupid enough to come to your defence.”

“I must report back to the Council.”

“Of course, but please don’t take too long in your deliberations as I can’t postpone the execution of your High Councillor indefinitely. Now if you’ll excuse me, Ambassador, I have other more important matters to attend to.”

The ambassador stood glaring as Gallagher marched from his office, wishing now he had punched him in the nose when he’d had the chance. Stroking his chin, he returned to his desk and placed a secure call to the Eridanian Council chambers.

“It’s Andwin from the Meridian embassy here. Could I speak to the Council Secretary please?”

“I’m sorry, Ambassador, but the Council is currently engaged in a meeting with senior Barradhim officers.”

“That’s what I’m calling about. I have good reason to believe the Barradhim have been infiltrated by this galaxy’s military and may be plotting a coup against us.”

“One moment please, sir.”

The ambassador drummed his fingers on the desk, wishing the Eridanian government formalities weren’t so firmly entrenched.

“Are you still there, sir?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Sir, the Barradhim officer pointing a gun at my head wishes me to tell you that your intelligence is correct, and that your services to Eridani are no longer required.”

* * *

“It all started when a bunyip chased David through a portal into a time nexus,” Mark said to Owen and Pip.

“Just an ordinary everyday occurrence for our family,” Julia said, earning herself a poke in the ribs from her husband.

“Did you say a bunyip?” Owen asked.

“It was a great big bunyip with really sharp teeth,” David said. “It bit into my board shorts and pulled them off me.”

“But surely not; a bunyip couldn’t do that.”

“Don’t let the names confuse you,” Lorina said. “The bunyip David’s describing is an Aboriginal swamp monster, a mythical Earth creature, although perhaps not quite as mythical as we thought.”

“That’s what originally drew us there,” Billy said, “to see if there was any connection between our swamp monsters and the Cornipean buniyps.”

“At first we thought there wasn’t,” Peter said, “but then that policeman said the DNA they got from the saliva on David’s shorts matched that of a Cornipean bunyip.”

“A common or brown bunyip to be precise,” Mark said, trying unsuccessfully to imitate the policeman.

“Could there have been a common ancestor?” Owen asked.

“Perhaps,” Jason said, “but with such a difference in characteristics, the DNA signatures should have diverged considerably. Identifying the root species would be possible, but matching it to a subspecies?”

“I agree,” Billy said. “It’d be like taking a swab from David and matching it to an orang-utan from a forest in Borneo.”

“I always knew David was really a monkey,” Loraine said.

“Oh hell,” Pip said, and everyone turned to look at him. “Peter, Billy, do those bunyips of yours attack people?”

“According to the legends,” Billy said, “they’d eat anyone venturing too close to the swamps after dark.”

“Such superstitions are common in most early civilisations on Earth,” Peter said.

“But this one has real teeth,” Mark said.

“Agreed. So what are you thinking, Pip?”

“It’s, um, it’s only half an idea that’s been rolling around in the back of my mind ever since Clem came back with that bunyip of his, the one that had eaten Frizian honey.”

“Now you’ve lost me,” Mark said.

“Frizian honey makes our placid little bunyips into vicious creatures that fight each other to the death.”

“It’s used in bunyip-baiting,” Owen said, “which is how Pip got involved.”

“You were baiting bunyips?” Lorina asked, gasping and covering her mouth.

“No, we were trying to stop it, but then Michael Chandler shot Alistair Blunt and we were arrested after Gallagher’s coup.”

“Is that the same Michael Chandler who came to Earth with Anton?” Peter asked.

“It must be,” Owen said. “He’s tall with short blonde hair; a Bluehaven ex-patriot.”

Jason nodded. “He told us Frank Halliday needed Chris and me for something.”

“So what was your idea, Pip?” Jenny asked.

“Clem’s bunyip has been growing quite a lot since he brought it back, and I thought, well, I thought the honey might be causing that too.”

“So ultimately they turn into the thing that attacked David,” Mark said.

“Clem could be in danger then,” Lorina said. “Where is he?”

“Under house arrest on Huntress,” Owen said, “but we can’t very well help him from in here.”

The door at the back of the room banged open.

“What the hell’s going on here?” the guard bellowed. “You lot aren’t allowed to mingle with the other prisoners!”

Mark stood, staring at him. “Harrison? Lieutenant Harrison?”

“It’s Captain Harrison now, my liege. I’m sorry, I didn’t realise it was you.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was transferred when Blunt became Supreme Councillor.”

“Why?”

“My superiors felt my allegiance to you might compromise my position.”

“But, but I’ve resigned from politics here.”

“Our oath of allegiance isn’t dissolved by a change of government. I remain at your service, my liege, until such time as you discharge me.”

“I see. So, um, if I was to give you an order, you’d have to obey?”

“Of course.”

Mark grinned. “Could you take us all to Meridian?”

“Including Ingle and Lachlan?”

“Yes.”

Harrison stared into space, causing Mark to wonder if he’d just killed the goose before it could lay its proverbial golden egg. While Harrison’s orders regarding the new arrivals from Earth might have been sufficiently vague (just *escort them to the mess*, perhaps), freeing death-row prisoners was another matter entirely. Oaths of allegiance notwithstanding, in this galaxy disobedient soldiers generally found themselves standing in front of a firing squad, and he didn’t think Harrison would be too keen on that.

But before Mark could counter his request, Pip pulled him aside. “You, Lorina and the children go if you can, and leave the rest of us here.”

“No way!”

“You must, Mark. I can sense the future, remember, and you must go to Huntress and take Clem and his bunyip to Frank. Tell him – tell him the honey’s not a poison.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know what it means, only that it’s important. *The honey’s not a poison, it’s a cure.*”

“A cure,” Mark said, wondering if Pip’s incarceration had deranged him.

“If you succeed, the rest of us will be fine, I promise.”

Mark’s mouth opened in anticipation of more argument, but his mind couldn’t come up with anything. Instead he turned back to Harrison. “Would it be easier for you to facilitate just Lorina, the kids and me?”

The look of relief on Harrison’s face was palpable. “Indeed it would, my liege. There’s an old training shuttle you could take that I’m sure won’t be missed.”

“Can you make sure no-one is executed while we’re gone?”

Harrison stared into space again for a moment before grinning. “Yes, I believe I can.”

Moments after Harrison had led Mark, Lorina and the children out through the kitchen, the door at the back of the mess banged open as two guards escorted General Gallagher into the room. He stood frowning as he stared at each of his captives in turn.

“Ingle, what are you and Lachlan doing here?”

“You, um, imprisoned us here,” Pip said.

Gallagher just glared at him.

“Come on, Pip,” Owen said, grabbing him by the elbow when it looked like he and Gallagher were going to spend the rest of the afternoon trying to stare each other down.

Gallagher looked around again, as if he’d forgotten what he was doing there, before pulling the Eridanian orb from beneath his jacket.

“Would anyone care to explain what this is and what you were doing with it?”

Billy looked at Norrie, who looked at Todd, who looked at Peter, who looked back at Billy. “It’s a device for manipulating time cusps.”

“And?”

“And, um, it’s Eridanian.”

Gallagher shook his head. “What – were – you – doing – with – it?”

“Trying to manipulate a time cusp.”

Gallagher sighed, turning instead to Jason and staring at him.

“We believed our grandson might have been trapped in one,” Jason said.

“And was he?”

“Well, no, not exactly.”

“But you still found him, didn’t you?”

Jason nodded sheepishly while Gallagher glanced around the room again.

“So where are the terrible twins and their parents?”

“Um,” Billy said, cutting Jason off. “One of your guards took them aside.”

“To the toilets, I think,” Peter said, shrugging. “Young children, you know.”

Gallagher scowled at him before turning back to Billy. “What can you tell me about the place you found?”

Billy looked at Norrie, who looked at Peter, but before he could look back at Billy, Gallagher said, “I’m not going to bite you, well not yet at any rate, so please someone just answer the bloody question!”

“Norrie thought it was a nexus of all possible time lines,” Jason said.

“Which one of you is Norrie?”

Norrie glanced at Elissi before sheepishly raising his hand.

“Is that what you thought?”

He paused for a moment, staring at Gallagher’s boots, before nodding ever so slightly.

“Oh for Loria’s sake, can’t you speak, man? The sooner we straighten this out, the sooner you can all go home, okay?”

“Sorry, I, err, have trouble with your language,” Norrie said. “Yes, it was, how do you say, a nexus.”

Gallagher glared at him, but although Norrie’s mouth opened and closed a few times, no more words came out. He finally turned to Elissi.

“Madam High Councillor, I should inform you that your Council has relinquished power and handed the governance of Eridani over to me. That nexus, as you call it, is now mine, and I will find out what it does with or without your help.”

“What Jason said is true,” she said calmly, masking any reaction to Gallagher’s statement. “We discovered it by accident while looking for David and don’t know anything about it.”

Gallagher frowned. “Very well, then. All of you come with me and perhaps you might become a little more cooperative once we reach Eridani.”

* * *

“This shuttle was officially decommissioned about a decade ago,” Captain Harrison said as he pulled open a shed door at the back of the barracks, “but let’s just say a few of the middle-ranking officers have found it useful from time to time. Its transponder code has full security clearance so it can come and go from any of the military bases without being noticed, but stay clear of the civilian spaceports as they take a dim view of any unexpected military craft.”

“I can’t thank you enough for doing this,” Lorina said.

“It’s an honour and a privilege, my lady. Many of us don’t like what Gallagher and his cronies are up to, so if helping you can throw a spanner in his works then so much the better.”

“Just make sure none of the others get shot while we’re away,” Mark said.

“I’ll do my best. Now, um, do either of you know how to fly one of these?”

“I was given some basic training when I became Supreme Councillor, but that was a long time ago and I might be a bit rusty.”

“I did my share of flying while living on Sontar,” Lorina said, “but that was in old civilian shuttles.”

“I can fly it!” David said.

“I’m sure you can,” Mark said.

“I’ve seen them doing it on television.”

“It’s probably not quite the same in real life, sweetheart,” Lorina said.

“They’re pretty easy to handle so I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Harrison said, “but if you really get stuck anywhere just activate the emergency beacon and one of us will come and find you.”

“I’m scared, Mummy,” Loraine said.

“We’ll be fine, you’ll see,” Lorina said, hugging her.

“No, I’m scared about Grandma and Grandpa and everyone.”

“Don’t worry,” Mark said. “Captain Harrison’s a good man and will look after them, I promise.”

“I’m scared about Joel too.”

“Once we get to Frank’s place he should be able to find out where he is. I’m sure they’re all fine, really. Now jump in the back and fasten your seat belts.”

“Good luck and safe travelling, my liege,” Harrison said as he closed the hatch behind them. He stood back, waving, as the craft rolled out of the shed and took to the sky.

Part Three

The Nature of the Beast

The Brightest Star

Clem woke at dawn's first light. Across the valley a rooster crowed, while in the trees outside his window the crows were roosting. A pink glow in the east foretold of another hot and humid day, but for now the air was cool and fresh as he stepped out onto his balcony, breathing deeply.

This was always his favourite time of day, reminding him of a childhood lived in the twilight of a dawn that never came. He'd been raised by his parents in the village down the valley, both arborists tending the pummel forest vital to the survival of their people. Even though the planet's toxic atmosphere had been cleansed during the restoration, Clem still felt an ingrained need to eat the fruit and always kept a supply on hand.

The seminary had been built on the site of an ancient temple, a remnant of a time before the dimming of Huntress's sun. Little had remained above ground of the original structure, just a few broken walls and foundations, but its labyrinth of underground passageways and secret rooms still existed, although few knew the way in. Sealed and preserved in those catacombs were some of the creed's most sacred documents, documents which Clem had hoped might shed light on the mystery of bunyips and Frizian honey, but so far his weeks of searching had revealed nothing.

'Perhaps you're asking the wrong questions,' his grandfather had told him, and that may well have been the case, but it still hadn't brought him any closer to the truth. Just before his death, Blunt had implied that the bunyips' susceptibility to Frizian honey had been genetically engineered, and Clem thought that was most likely true, but he'd found absolutely nothing in any of the archives to substantiate it. In the ancient writings beneath the seminary he'd found no reference at all to bunyips or any creatures like them,

dashing his theory that the engineering had taken place on Huntress in the days of the Pasha. That being the case, he could only conclude that the bunyips were indeed native to Cornipus and had been corrupted by the settlers who came to that world from Meridian, but any records on the ultranet that might have shed light on this always came back with *access denied*.

He had at least made some progress in solving that mystery, for he'd discovered that someone had created a worm to encrypt and isolate those documents and was close to identifying its origin. But *close* wasn't the same as *caught*, and at times Clem had the unnerving feeling that the perpetrator was looking over his shoulder, observing all the traps he'd laid and neatly sidestepping them.

He took another bite of pummel fruit, hoping its nourishing juices might ease his pent-up frustrations. Across the valley, the first rays of sunlight touched the tree-tops, marking the end of twilight and the dawn of yet another day under house arrest.

The seminary had been closed following General Gallagher's coup and proclamation outlawing the Black Delphinidae, but Clem's grandfather Jacob had refused to leave, telling the military officials in no uncertain terms that he was too ill to be moved. Clem had insisted on staying to care for him, and so they'd remained with the seminary to themselves, apart from the bored soldiers guarding the gate.

Leaving his room, Clem made his way downstairs to the kitchen, pausing to open the French windows between the common room and the courtyard. Number Five came bounding in, giving Clem a half-starved look.

"Steady down, I'm getting your breakfast now," Clem said as he lifted a packet of bunyip mix from the shelf and began pouring the pellets into his bowl. They looked like nothing more than compacted sawdust and he was sure they'd taste like that too, not that he was game to try one, but for some inexplicable reason the bunyips really went for them.

With Number Five now happily crunching away, he set about cremating the sliced bread in the toaster while scrambling some eggs for his grandfather's breakfast. Until just recently, Jacob had joined him in the common room for meals, but these last few days he'd been

too weak to leave his room and Clem was becoming increasingly concerned for his health. Jacob had refused to allow him to summon medical help, though, saying nature would take its course, but Clem had decided that if his condition worsened any further he'd have to overrule him.

Jacob was at least sitting up in bed when Clem brought his breakfast into his room, his complexion looking a bit rosier than it had in recent days.

"That smells good enough to eat," Jacob said, smiling.

"I hope you like it; I'm not much of a cook."

"You're a damn sight better than the one you had working here before."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, I must say."

"I'm glad to hear it."

They both turned as Number Five dashed into the room and leapt onto the bed. Jacob scratched him behind the ears before giving him a bit of crust off the toast. The bunyip accepted the offering, licking Jacob's hand in appreciation before returning to stand guard at the door.

"Clem, your bunyip," Jacob said, "there's little time and you must find the answer soon."

"I still don't know what the question is."

"Go to Cornipus, Clem."

"Cornipus? I will if those goons ever set us free."

"You must go to Longville, for there it hides in plain sight. The honey's not a poison, Clem, it's – oh my, can you see that?"

"What? See what?"

"The Black Dolphin, Clem, he's nothing like we imagined, he's –"

Jacob drew in one last breath, holding it for a moment before exhaling in a long sad sigh.

"Granddad, no, no –"

Number Five crept alongside Clem, resting his muzzle across the top of his foot. Clem felt a dampness trickling down his toes as the bunyip's tears began to flow.

* * *

“Oi, what do you think you’re up to?” the soldier guarding the gate shouted as Clem approached in a daze.

“My grandfather’s just died and I need to –”

Clem covered his face as the soldier dashed forward.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, patting him on the shoulder. “I didn’t realise.”

“There’s a – there’s an undertaker down in the village –”

“Don’t worry, I’ll send someone down to make all the arrangements.”

“My parents, Edwin and Val, will need to come here too.”

“That’ll be okay, I’m sure. Now let me take you back up to the seminary.”

“No, I can manage.”

The soldier glanced at the bunyip that had followed Clem down the path. “Hello there.”

Number Five responded with a growl.

“It’s okay,” Clem said, “this man’s going to help us.”

The bunyip gave him a puzzled look.

“I must say that really is the biggest bunyip I’ve ever seen.”

Clem nodded half-heartedly.

“Sorry, not a good time to be discussing buniyps, I suppose. Look, just leave everything to me, okay?”

“Sure,” Clem said. “Thanks.”

He turned back towards the seminary, lost in the memories of the man who’d been his guiding light throughout his life. For as long as he could remember, his grandfather had been there, answering his questions about all manner of things, teaching him the sacraments of their creed, and helping to unravel the many mysteries the Black Delphinidae had confronted in recent years. It had been Jacob who’d recognised Pip as their long-awaited Emissary, the one chosen to restore not only their faith but their world.

He remembered again his twelfth birthday when Jacob had passed the Black Delphinidae’s sacred amulet to him in a ceremony as old as the creed itself.

‘I am a seeker of truth.’

'I seek the truth about my world.'

'I seek the truth about my people.'

'I seek the truth about my past.'

'I seek the truth about my future.'

He rubbed his chest, feeling once more the icy coldness of the amulet's first touch.

'In the dimming of the stars shall the truth be found.'

Now the brightest star he'd ever known had dimmed and passed away. He sat in the corner of his room, choking on the tears of grief that overwhelmed and crushed his soul.

* * *

The heavy coffin, made of the traditional dark-stained pummel-wood, struck the hard-packed soil with a final thud, sending chills up and down Clem's spine. Edwin and Val stood either side of him, passing him the pummel flowers to drop into the grave, a symbol of life following death.

"For Jacob, my father, finder of truth," Edwin said.

"For Jacob, my grandfather, finder of many truths," Clem said, picking up a handful of soil and sprinkling it over the coffin. Around them, a gathering of men and women from the village stood in silence under the watchful gaze of three armed soldiers.

"They should have let Pip come," Val said, sniffing. "It's not right, it's just not right."

"There are many things far from right," Clem said. "We must do what we can and let the Black Dolphin be our guide."

"If there's anything we can do," Edwin said, glancing up at the soldiers.

"Frank said to remain vigilant and follow his lead."

"Will you be staying here at the seminary?"

"For now, yes."

Edwin patted him on the shoulder. "Dad was so proud of you, so proud."

Clem choked back a sob as he embraced his father, while Val wrapped her arms around them both.

“There’s food and drink in the common room,” Clem said to everyone once they’d separated, and the three of them, all that remained of Jacob’s family, led the gathering up the hill.

“Is there anything you want to take?” Clem asked his parents as they stood in the doorway to Jacob’s room.

“We should go through his papers and personal effects,” Edwin said, “but anything relating to the Black Delphinidae should by rights go to you.”

Clem nodded, sitting himself down in front of Jacob’s ultranet terminal while his parents tended to the drawers and filing cabinet. Jacob had once told him his password, just for safe-keeping, and he used that to log in, half-hoping his grandfather had left him a message, something that might answer the many questions bouncing around inside his overloaded mind.

Why must he go to Cornipus?

What secret is hiding in plain sight in Longville?

If Frizian honey’s not a poison, what is it?

But no, there was plenty of correspondence on subjects like banking, taxation, insurance, building approvals for the seminary, even landscape gardening, but nothing at all about bunyips. Out of idle curiosity, he opened one of the gardening documents.

Access denied.

What? He tried another one.

Access denied.

“Dad, what do you make of this?”

Edwin turned away from the filing cabinet and stared at the screen. “Are you sure you’re using the right password?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t even let me view the folders if I wasn’t.”

Edwin tried opening one of the insurance documents.

Access denied.

“If the files were individually encrypted, it would prompt for a password, wouldn’t it?” Val asked, looking over their shoulders.

“I’d have thought so,” Edwin said. “Maybe you should get one of the whiz kids from the village to take a look at it.”

Clem scratched his head. “I thought I was supposed to be the top ultranet whiz kid around here.”

“You’re too old to be a whiz kid now.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Clem said, logging off and shutting down the terminal. “Will you be staying for dinner?”

“Sure, if you’d like our company.”

“Of course I would.” He wrapped his mother in a hug before dashing down to the pantry to find something edible.

“That was delicious, Clem,” Edwin said, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“I’m glad you liked it. I’m really not much of a cook.”

“If the truth be known,” Val said, “you’re one of the finest chefs in the village. Really, your talent’s wasted up here.”

“When this is all over,” Edwin said, “you should open a restaurant.”

“I might just do that. There’s a little town on Bluehaven where I wouldn’t mind living. Speaking of which, what do you think of this wine?”

“It’s quite pleasant, a nice fruity taste, but I thought the Chandler winery was on Sontar.”

“It is, but it’s owned by a small company in Bringal Vale. Michael Chandler was an acolyte here, which is how we came to have such a good stock of their produce in our cellar.”

“Isn’t he the one who shot Alistair Blunt?”

“Yes, but all things considered, I think it was justifiable homicide.”

“The less we know about it, the better,” Val said. “Speaking of which, I suppose we should be going before the soldiers on the gate get twitchy.”

“I’ll walk you down,” Clem said, “but first I’ll grab a little something to give them in appreciation of their help in arranging everything today.” He dashed down to the cellar, returning with another bottle of Michael Chandler’s finest vintage.

Outside, the air was pleasantly cool with just a slight remnant of the afternoon sea breeze, while overhead, the myriad of stars shone brightly. Clem couldn’t imagine a greater contrast to his childhood years living in the twilight zone of an almost dead planet, with its frying or freezing winds and occasional ferocious storms. The

refreshing dew underfoot and the salty tang in the air made it difficult to imagine a more idyllic place, yet a dark pall still hung over the village and its people.

“Are you done for the night?” the soldier guarding the gate asked as they approached.

“Almost,” Clem said, holding up the bottle of wine. “I have a little something for you, just to say thanks for all your help today.”

“Thank you indeed. I’m sure we’ll put it to good use.”

“Say, aren’t you Tim Caraway?” Edwin asked.

“Yes. You’re not *that* Edwin, are you?”

“Could there possibly be another?”

“And Val, of course; it’s been a long time.”

“Twenty-six years. Clem was just a babe in arms back then.”

“You all know each other?” Clem asked.

“We had dealings with elements of the military back then,” Edwin said, “and Tim was our go-between.”

“Come on into the gate-house and we’ll share this in memory of times gone by,” Tim said, holding up the bottle.

It was well past midnight when Clem finally climbed into bed, having returned five times to the cellar while his parents reminisced with Tim and the other two soldiers. He’d sat quietly on the side, sipping sufficient wine to keep his thoughts from turning morbid and occasionally contributing a few words to the conversation, but something was nagging him, something deep in the back of his mind that he couldn’t quite put a finger on. Now, too tired and intoxicated to dwell on it, he quickly drifted off to sleep, while outside on the lawn, Number Five sat looking up at his window.

* * *

Clem woke with a start to find sunlight shining down on his face. For a moment he felt totally disorientated until his throbbing head reminded him of what he’d been doing the night before. Moaning, he pulled himself out of bed and wandered down to the common room, opening the French windows to let his starving bunyip in. For one frightening moment he wondered if bunyip pellets could be a

hangover cure, but his churning stomach convinced him not to experiment with that line of thought and he settled instead for some water.

While Number Five munched his fill, Clem logged onto one of the ultranet terminals in the common room, his curiosity for the moment overcoming his hangover. He keyed '*Frizian honey poison*' into the search engine, although he was sure he'd just get *access denied* in response. But on this occasion it looked like he'd outsmarted the worm, for a paper from a prominent Cornipean zoologist appeared on the screen.

'Synopsis: Although there is universal agreement that the neurotoxin in Frizian honey is a poison only to bunyips, an explanation for this susceptibility remains out of reach. This paper summarises recent work on resolving the apparent paradox in interplanetary microbiology and suggests possible lines of future research in this field.'

Clem skimmed through the paper, noticing links to many of the other documents he'd tried unsuccessfully to open. He clicked on one of them, expecting to be told *access denied*, but instead was rewarded with the first page of the paper. He stared at the screen, his jaw slowly dropping.

What had changed?

Like a lead weight descending into the pit of his stomach, he knew, with growing certainty, exactly what had changed. Noting the resource locator of the paper, he walked slowly to Jacob's room, trying his hardest to come up with an explanation other than the obvious one.

Switching on Jacob's terminal, he logged in and entered the address of the paper.

Access denied.

Returning to the common room, the screen on the terminal there had gone blank, except for those same two words.

"How could he do this?" he said to Number Five as he made his way back to Jacob's room. "How? Why?"

With shaking hands and growing nausea, he sat in front of the terminal and launched his worm-tracing program. He didn't need to see the result, but it told him anyway. *The worm denying him access*

to information on bunyips and Frizian honey had been created by none other than his grandfather.

His head spinning, he toppled from the chair, almost landing on top of Number Five. Darkness claimed him, but not for long, as the bunyip's yapping aroused him once more.

Number Five had jumped onto the window ledge, disturbed by something that was happening outside. Pulling himself shakily to his feet, Clem stepped over to the corner and looked out to see a small military shuttle attempting an awkward landing on the lawn.

Subconsciously grateful for the distraction, he followed Number Five out through the common room and stood watching as the shuttle's hatch opened, wondering why the military would bother sending such a craft when they had three men posted at the gate.

Puzzlement turned to confusion as two children leapt from the shuttle and came running towards him, followed close behind by a man and woman of decidedly non-military appearance.

"Mark? Lorina? What are you doing here?"

"Uncle Clem!" David and Loraine shouted as they each grabbed hold of him, almost pulling him to the ground, but then David saw Number Five and yelped.

"It's okay, he won't bite you," Clem said.

"It – it's a bunyip," David said, trying to place Clem between himself and the animal.

"Of course it is."

"It's a Cornipean bunyip," Lorina said, laughing. "They're friendly and don't hurt people."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." She stepped over to the bunyip, bending down and scratching him behind the ears. Number Five obliged by licking the back of her hand. "See?"

"I, I guess so," David said, but he didn't look too convinced as the bunyip trotted over to sit at his feet.

"Scratch him behind the ears and you'll have a friend for life," Clem said.

Mark stepped over to them, glancing about at the peaceful surroundings. "From what I was told, I thought we'd be fighting our way in through platoons of soldiers."

“There are three of them down at the gate-house, but they’re probably still sleeping off their hangovers.”

“Huh?”

“My grandfather died yesterday and, um, I suppose my parents put on a bit of a wake last night. My head still hurts and I only drank a fraction of what they did.”

“I’m so sorry about Jacob,” Lorina said, giving Clem a hug.

“He was very old, but still it’s been an awful shock. So what are you doing here?”

“Pip sent us to take you and your bunyip to Frank.”

“You’ve seen Pip?”

“It’s a long story, but yes, so if you want to grab anything you think you might need, we’d better be off before your soldiers wake up and start shooting.”

“Give me a couple of minutes.”

“Oh, before I forget,” Mark said, “Pip gave us a message for you. He said to tell you the honey’s not a poison.”

Clem felt his head starting to spin again. “What?”

“He said the honey’s not a poison, it’s a cure.”

“A cure?”

“I take it, by the look on your face, that it means something to you.”

“My, my grandfather was trying to tell me the same thing when he died.”

Clem took a deep breath, now convinced more than ever that he was a puppet dangling on the end of someone else’s strings.

“I’ll, I’ll grab my things and be with you shortly.”

As the shuttle rose into the sky and disappeared, Tim Caraway and his two bleary-eyed companions looked up from the gate-house, wondering why General Gallagher had sent someone to take Clem without telling them.

Rendezvous

The space around the shuttle flashed with a blue light as it emerged from subspace into the Meridian transfer orbit.

“Military shuttle Excelsior, this is Meridian Control. What is your destination?”

Mark fumbled around for the microphone. “What do I tell them?”

“Give it to me,” Clem said. “Meridian Control, this is Captain Edwinson acting under orders from General Gallagher, on a covert mission to the Azarath region.”

“Are you mad?” Mark asked.

“Probably, but it was all I could think of.”

“Excelsior, hold your present position.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Lorina said.

“This is Captain Edwinson. Timing is critical to my mission and the general won’t be at all pleased if I’m not given immediate clearance.”

“I’m sorry, Captain, but you’ll need to lodge a flight plan before I can clear your descent. Azarath is a busy spaceport and those are my orders.”

“Bugger this,” Clem said. “Move over, Mark.”

Clem grabbed the controls and activated the retro-thrusters, beginning their descent.

“Excelsior, return to the transfer orbit immediately or face interception by armed customs vessels.”

“Clem,” Mark said, “don’t you think —”

“Nah, I grew up flying these things. They don’t stand a chance of catching us.”

Clem quickly scanned the planet looming up towards them before pointing the shuttle at the spiralling clouds of a tropical storm.

“Clem, you’re not —” Lorina said.

“They’d be crazy to follow us.”

“If we all get killed I’ll murder you,” Mark said.

“Dad,” David said, “how can you murder him if we’re all dead?”

“I’ll find a way, don’t you worry.”

“Shush,” Clem said. “I need to concentrate.”

“Let him concentrate,” Lorina whispered.

“Excelsior, three customs vessels are approaching your position. Return to the transfer orbit NOW or face the consequences.”

“Mark, can you turn that thing off?”

Mark pressed a button, hoping it was the radio’s power switch and not the ejector seat or something.

“Dad, those ships are right behind us!” Loraine said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll lose them,” Clem said. “Hold onto your seats.”

Mark gripped the console with white knuckles as the shuttle dived towards the storm, spiralling into it in the opposite direction to which the clouds were moving.

“This is a trick I learnt on Cornipus,” Clem said.

“What if those customs pilots know the same trick?”

“Then we’re done for, I guess.”

The shuttle shuddered as it entered the top of the clouds. Clem banked to the right before cutting the engines.

“What are you doing?” Mark yelled over the wind screaming across the fuselage.

“It’ll stop them tracking us, won’t it?” David said.

“Clever boy,” Clem said. “The uplift from the storm will keep us airborne indefinitely and they won’t have a clue where to look.”

“What about radar?” Loraine asked.

“This is a military stealth shuttle. We’re invisible to radar.”

Light flashed brightly to their left, followed moments later by the concussion of an explosion.

“Well that was the theory.”

Mark held his breath as another explosion flashed nearby.

“Hang on,” Clem said, putting the shuttle into a dive. Another explosion flashed above them and to the right, but it was several seconds before they heard the report.

Suddenly they broke through the base of the clouds, still plummeting down towards the churning sea. Clem pulled back on the joystick, levelling them out at just a few hundred metres above the water. He activated the navigation screen, checking their position relative to Frank's place.

"Can we glide all the way?" Mark asked.

"The wind will carry us to within a few hundred kilometres, and from there we should be able to risk restarting the engines."

"Assuming those customs ships aren't sitting there waiting for us," Mark said.

Clem shrugged.

"When they arrest us you can always plead insanity," Lorina said.

"Until General Gallagher figures out who *Captain Edwinston* is," Mark said. "You could have come up with a more obscure name, surely."

"It was all I could think of at the time, but don't worry, I've survived worse scrapes than this."

Clem focused on his instruments and the joystick, riding the updrafts through the heavy rain lashing the craft, while below them huge waves broke into foamy spray as the wind whipped the sea into a frenzy of white water.

A sudden downdraft gripped the shuttle, sending it plunging towards the sea. Clem pulled back hard while banking into the wind.

"Oh shit," Mark said as they passed through the spray of a breaking wave before rising again.

"This should do us," Clem said once he'd regained some altitude, restarting the engines while banking sharply left. At once the craft lurched as the wind cut in beneath it.

"I think I'm going to be sick," David said.

"Can you wait just a few more minutes?" Lorina asked. "I think we're nearly there."

Clem pulled the nose up, taking the craft back into the clouds, and gradually the buffeting subsided. As they neared the coast, occasional shafts of sunlight broke through, glistening on the raindrops still clinging to the windows.

"The worst of the storm's out to sea and the coast's fairly clear," Clem said. "Let's hope there's no-one looking up as we come in."

Dropping over a long sandy beach fringing coastal heath-land, Clem turned south-east, checking for any landmarks to make his approach easier.

“I see it!” Lorina said. “Over there, on that hill in the middle of the vineyard.”

Clem banked again, circling around as they dropped until finally touching down outside the front door of Frank’s mansion. Lorina wrapped her arms around him, giving him a big kiss on the nose.

As Mark released the hatch, the front door of the mansion opened and Anton came running down the steps.

“Oi, you can’t land here! This is private property!”

“Anton! You escaped from the nexus!”

“Mark, it’s you! What’s with the military shuttle? Did you steal it off Gallagher?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“Well I’ll be damned.”

Loraine climbed out of the shuttle and walked tentatively over to them, her eyes on the verge of unleashing a flood of tears. “Excuse me Mr Anton, please, but is, is Joel okay?”

Before Anton could answer, the tears began to flow. He smiled, patting her on the shoulder. “He’s fine, really, but if you don’t believe me you can go and ask him yourself. He’s just inside there with all the others.”

Loraine looked to her mother, who nodded, before dashing up the steps.

“What’s up with Loraine?” David asked as he came over to join them. “Did, did something happen to Joel?”

“No, not yet at any rate, but I think it’s about to.”

* * *

Joel grimaced again, wondering what had possessed him to follow Chris and the others into Sheol when he’d been given the perfect opportunity to go home to his parents.

Upon arrival at the mansion on the hill, Russell had taken Anton and Michael through inside while leaving the others in the entrance

hall. A short time later he'd called Jim and Pedro in as well, abandoning Chris and Joel for the time being.

"What's going to happen now?" Joel asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Chris said.

Before he could even begin to guess, though, Anton came running out, yelling something about a military shuttle landing on the lawn. Joel stared at the door, expecting troops firing laser blasters to come bursting in at any moment and wondering how a pleasant holiday in a Victorian park with his friends could have possibly ended like this.

When the front door opened, Joel closed his eyes, not wanting to see whatever horror awaited him. Footsteps came running towards him, sounding like bare feet slapping on the wooden floorboards, but that couldn't be right, surely. Before he could open his eyes, someone's arms wrapped around him, gripping him tightly and pulling him down.

"Joel, it's you, it's really you," his assailant whispered in his ear, making him think perhaps it wasn't a soldier after all. He cautiously opened his eyes but could see nothing but a mass of blonde hair.

"Loraine?" he asked, finally putting two and two together and hopefully coming up with the right answer.

"Young lady!" Loraine's mother yelled from somewhere over near the door. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

Loraine tried to stand but somehow managed to entangle her legs with Joel's and fell back onto him. Chris started laughing, causing Joel to blush while wondering if he might have fared better had it really been soldiers coming through the door.

On her second attempt, Loraine managed to stand without falling over again. Joel stood, brushing himself down and trying to look like nothing had happened.

"Chris, what were you thinking bringing Joel here with you?" Loraine said. "His parents will be ropeable!"

"Everything happened so quickly and I didn't have much choice."

"It's okay, Chris," Mark said, "you did the right thing. Loraine certainly thinks so anyway."

"That worries me too," Loraine said. "She's still just a baby."

"Mum!" Loraine said, looking ready to explode. "I'm nearly thirteen!"

Joel's jaw dropped as David and Clem came in, accompanied by what looked like a smaller version of the beast from the nexus. It wasn't quite the same, though, like comparing, say, a beagle to a wolf, but there was something else that struck him, something resonating with a memory from his early childhood. He grimaced, trying to pull that memory to the surface.

"It's a Cornipean bunyip," David said, grinning while watching Joel's reaction. "They're not like *our* bunyip."

"Huh – what – yeah, I know. It's like beagles and wolves."

David rolled his eyes. "Sometimes I wonder about you, Joel."

Before Joel could respond, an elderly man, presumably the one named Frank who owned the place, entered the room.

"Come on through to the lounge," he said. "Jim and Pedro have been helping Russell prepare some refreshments."

Joel followed the others through to a huge room adorned with book shelves and dark-stained furniture. Arrayed before them on low tables were piles of cakes, biscuits and sandwiches, while at one end a coffee percolator simmered away. With a rumbling stomach and watering mouth, he grabbed a plate and piled up as much as he could before squeezing onto one of the lounge chairs alongside Loraine.

Frank stood, tapping his glass. "Thank you all for coming here. I know you have been through considerable hardship and trauma along the way and I wish I could say that all will be resolved here and now, but sadly I can't. You each hold a key to the puzzle that has brought us here, and I hope that today we can at least pool our resources in order to clarify our objectives and agree to a way forward."

He beckoned the man sitting next to him to stand. "For those who don't know him, this is Superintendent Scott Davies currently with the Cornipean police force, and he'll be helping us with our enquiries."

"That's supposed to be my line," Scott said, smiling, but then his expression darkened. "There are two people who should be here but aren't. Pip Ingle and Owen Lachlan are currently under military arrest and awaiting execution by firing squad, and one of our priorities must be to secure their release by whatever means."

“What about my parents and grandparents?” Mark asked. “They’re being held by the military too.”

“Yes,” Frank said, “and I’m expecting someone to arrive shortly who should be able to shed more light on that situation. For the moment, though, let’s reflect on what’s behind all that’s been happening lately.”

“Bunyips,” Russell said.

“Yes, bunyips in all their forms, including *Bunya Miniatura Cornipius*, the brown bunyip native to Cornipus, and its cousin *Bunya Miniatura Rutilus*, the endangered red-bellied bunyip.”

“What about Earth’s bunyips?” David asked.

“There are no Earth bunyips,” Russell said. “They’re only found in our galaxy, having originally come from Cornipus.”

“I think David is referring to the mythical swamp monster that shares the same name,” Frank said.

“And the same DNA,” Mark said.

“What?”

“The bunyip that attacked David on Earth has the same DNA as your common or brown bunyip. Pip said he thought Cornipean bunyips that have eaten that honey you have turn into our bunyips.”

“Did Pip say that? But surely –”

Frank paused, staring at the ceiling.

“Butterflies!” Joel said. Everyone looked at him in stunned silence.

“I’m sorry,” Frank said, “but who are you?”

“I’m Joel Morison. I saw David being chased by the bunyip and went with Loraine to rescue him.”

“It’s my fault he’s here,” Chris said.

“No, not at all,” Frank said. “You’re most welcome here, Joel. Now what was it you were saying?”

“Bunyips are like butterflies. I thought of it before but couldn’t remember what the word was.”

“Metamorphosis,” Mark said.

“That’s it. They change from caterpillars into butterflies, the same as bunyips change from those like the one over there to the monster we saw in the nexus.”

Number Five stood and trotted over to Joel, giving him an inquisitive look.

“Scratch him behind the ears,” Clem said.

Joel reached down, hesitantly at first in case the bunyip might decide to bite off his hand, but when that didn’t happen he gave him a pat and a scratch. Number Five laid his muzzle across Joel’s left foot, closing his eyes and seeming to go to sleep.

“Our bunyips don’t normally turn into monsters,” Lorina said. “Is it the Frizian honey that causes it?”

“That was Pip’s theory,” Mark said.

“It explains why the vet on Sontar said there was a law requiring bunyips to be destroyed if they’ve eaten it,” Michael said. “But how’d the bunyips get to Earth and why are the military so interested in them?”

“Perhaps they want to use them as a weapon,” Joel said.

“But a weapon against whom?” Clem asked. “As far as I know, we’re not fighting any wars, and even if we were, I’d have thought all the high-tech stuff our military has would be far more potent than a few bunyips running around biting people.”

“That’s a very good question,” Frank said, “and hopefully Brigadier Piper might be able to provide a few answers.”

A bearded man in the well-worn uniform of a seasoned soldier entered the room. “I hope I’m not too late, as I’ve been trying to pacify an irate orbital traffic controller yelling at me about the behaviour of the shuttle I saw parked out on the lawn. Would anyone care to tell me what it’s doing here?”

Mark stood. “I, um, borrowed it from Captain Harrison on Nimber, but I hope I haven’t gotten anyone into trouble.”

“My liege, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were here. No that’s fine, but Harrison should have explained how we deal with the civilian authorities.”

“I guess he didn’t know we were coming here.”

“Brigadier,” Frank said, “we were discussing the military’s interest in bunyips and wondering if you could shed any light on it.”

Piper stroked his beard. “There’s a lot I’m not privy to, but General Gallagher’s had an interest in the clandestine bunyip-baiting for many years, and particularly during this past year with the

approach of Frizian's summer and the prospect of natural honey becoming available. There's something about bunyips and Frizian honey that he considers to be a grave threat to our civilisation, but as to the nature of that threat, he's been keeping it a closely guarded secret."

"The Eridanian ambassador told me Gallagher's taken their High Councillor captive," Scott said. "Is that true?"

"Yes, but the latest report I've received said he's personally taking all the prisoners back to Eridani."

"Including my parents and grandparents?" Mark asked.

"I believe so."

"Do you know what he's up to?"

"I have no idea, but I'm thinking his absence and your presence gives us an ideal opportunity to turn the tables on him."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Gallagher has generated considerable disquiet amongst the military, particularly with his coup following the death of Supreme Councillor Blunt, and I've been assembling a force to topple him should the opportunity arise. I'm proposing a counter-coup to reinstall you as this galaxy's Supreme Councillor."

"Oh no you don't!" Lorina said. "My husband's had enough of politics."

Mark shrugged.

"We can sort out the logistics later, my liege," Piper said, ignoring Lorina, "but you were discussing bunyips and I've hijacked your conversation. To answer your earlier question, I don't know what Gallagher's specific interest in bunyips is about, only that he dispatched a hand-picked group of men to the Milky Way galaxy a few months back and that it had something to do with a subspace nexus he'd found."

Scott's phone rang. "Excuse me one moment."

"Help yourselves to more refreshments," Frank said.

Joel was about to grab something for himself, before realising he still had a sleeping bunyip lying across his foot.

"Can I get you something?" Loraine asked, noticing his predicament.

"One of those sandwiches, thanks, and some water."

“I think he likes you.”

“I think he just likes my foot.”

“Perhaps there’s something you stepped on that smells nice.”

He lifted his other foot to see, but the movement woke Number Five who stretched before sauntering back over to Clem. Joel sniffed the soles of both feet before going to see what sandwiches were left.

Scott re-entered the room. “That was the Eridanian ambassador saying Gallagher infiltrated their Barradhim special force and has now ousted the Eridanian government.”

“We need to find out what he’s up to,” Frank said.

“I’m passably fluent in Eridanian and have some contacts in the Barradhim,” Anton said, “so I’ll go.”

“I was born on Eridani,” Jim said, “so I’ll go with you if you like.”

“I’d better come too then to keep you two out of trouble,” Pedro said.

“Excellent,” Frank said. “Are there any other lines of enquiry we should be pursuing?”

Clem raised his hand. “Before he died, my grandfather told me to go to Longville on Cornipus. He said the answer to the bunyip riddle is hidden there in plain sight.”

“Did he think there might have been something we missed in the warehouse they used for those bunyip baiting meets?” Scott asked.

“He didn’t say, but I suppose that’d be the logical place to start looking.”

“Pip said that Frizian honey’s not a poison,” Mark said, “but a cure.”

“A cure for what?” Frank asked.

Again Joel felt something tingling in the back of his mind, something more about butterflies and caterpillars, he thought. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t find any words to say.

“Are you okay, Joel?” Loraine asked, staring at him.

“Yeah, I, um, I almost thought of something then.”

“That’d be a novelty, I’m sure,” David said.

“I need to go with Clem to Cornipus.”

Lorina was about to say something, but Chris interrupted her. “I’d been about to volunteer to accompany Clem too, so I’ll keep a close watch on Joel.”

“Be it on your head when his parents find out,” Lorina said.

“I’ll go with Clem too,” Russell said. “I know my way around Longville.”

“Can I go with Joel?” Loraine asked.

“Definitely not,” Lorina said. “We’re going home, aren’t we Mark?”

Mark glanced at Brigadier Piper, who shook his head. “I don’t think that’s an option.”

“Go to Cornipus with Clem and Chris,” Piper said, “while I start mounting our counter-coup.”

Lorina glared at him but said nothing, while Loraine squeezed Joel’s hand. Joel looked into her eyes as a shiver of excitement ran through him.

“If we’re going to Cornipus I’ll need to find some clothes for David,” Lorina said, “and a shirt for Joel as well.”

“I’ll take you down to the village shops when we’ve finished here,” Anton said.

“Thanks. Is there anything you need, Loraine?”

“No, I have everything I want,” she said, still holding Joel’s hand.

Lorina shook her head but couldn’t help smiling.

“Is there anything I can do?” Michael asked.

“I have just the thing for you,” Scott said. “We need to ensure the public are in the right frame of mind for whatever Brigadier Piper is scheming.”

“I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“Good,” Frank said, “I think that covers just about everything. You’re all welcome to stay here tonight if you wish.”

“Thank you,” Mark said.

“I’m afraid I have to dash,” Piper said, “but before I do, which one of you is *Captain Edwinson*?”

Clem squirmed before raising his hand.

“You’re a damn good pilot, but don’t let me ever catch you doing that again in one of our shuttles.”

“I – no, of course not.”

Piper turned to Mark. “I’ll contact you through Frank in a few days, my liege.”

Mark hesitated a moment before nodding. “Oh, and congratulations on your promotion to Brigadier.”

“Thank you, but sometimes I think I’d have been better off staying a colonel.”

Hiding in Plain Sight

Joel woke with a gasp, relieved to find himself lying on a comfortable bed. In his nightmare, Loraine had spun a cocoon around herself, but when he'd torn it open, the beast from the nexus had leapt out at him. *It's really the other way around*, a tiny voice in the back of his mind kept saying, but he couldn't make any sense of it.

Breakfast was a time for hand-shaking, well-wishing and back-slapping amongst the adults, while Joel, Loraine and David devoted themselves to the task of consuming everything edible on the table. Each time he glanced at Loraine, though, he'd shudder as he remembered the cocoon, and a few times she gave him a puzzled look, but there was no way he was going to tell her about it. *Anyway*, he thought, *it's really the other way around*, whatever that was supposed to mean.

Frank drove them south in his minibus, crossing a huge bridge over a muddy river before entering the city of Azarath. Joel had occasionally visited Brisbane and once his parents had taken him to Sydney, leaving him with the impression of cities as crowded and ugly, but none of that prepared him for this place. Made entirely of crumbling concrete, pot-holed bitumen and dirt, it appeared to be an endless sprawl of factories, warehouses and run-down tenements interconnected by streets gridlocked with rusty cars, buses and trucks.

After eventually finding the one remaining parking space and hiking through a maze of passageways, ramps, stairs and tunnels, they reached the spaceport terminal building and joined the queue snaking its way towards the check-in counter.

The woman behind the desk granted each of the others their boarding pass before turning her attention to Joel.

“*Gimmel de goff?*” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Du gimmel de goff en hummer!”

“Mummy, Joel doesn’t have any identification,” Loraine said.

Lorina turned to Chris. “Don’t tell me you brought him here without any paperwork.”

Chris shrugged. “I didn’t think of it.”

Lorina hunted through her backpack, eventually pulling out a crumpled sheet of paper. “Do you believe in Dolphins?” she asked Joel.

“Huh?”

“Sign this.”

He couldn’t read any of the printing on the page but, not having any other option, scribbled his signature in the space at the bottom.

“Congratulations,” Lorina said, “you’re now a Delphinidae acolyte travelling under my care.”

Scowling, the clerk took the sheet and began attacking her keyboard. From somewhere behind her a bright light flashed, and after more key tapping she handed Joel a plastic card bearing his photograph and a piece of cardboard he presumed was the precious boarding pass.

“Don’t lose them,” Lorina said before pushing him over to join the others.

After all the drama of reaching the terminal gate, the flight to Cornipus took less than twenty minutes. Russell hired a minibus and soon they were driving through mountainous terrain on the planet renowned as the cultural hub of the galaxy.

“All the top schools and universities are here on Cornipus,” Russell said, “and the Great Library spans an entire city.”

“Gosh,” Joel said, trying to imagine how you’d find a book in such a place.

“It was settled over a million years ago,” Clem said, “when the people of Meridian began spreading out into space.”

“How many other worlds have people on them?”

“In all there are twelve major planets, as well as a few research and military outposts around the place. The inner worlds of Meridian, Bluehaven, Cornipus and Hazler are where most of the people live, but the farmlands of Amber and Sontar and the holiday world of

Shimmel also have sizeable populations. Huntress, where I came from, used to be a prison colony until the planet was restored a few years back.”

“What about the other four?”

“Ignus is a mining world and is mostly mechanised, while Nimber and Pulper are military bases. Frizian has an elliptical orbit and is only habitable during the summer which happens just once in every forty of our years.”

“Is that where the Frizian honey comes from that everyone’s been talking about?”

“Yes, it’s made by poisonous wasps that nest deep in the rainforests there.”

“How is it that it affects bunyips?”

“That’s the puzzle I’m trying to find an answer to.”

Joel glanced out the window to see they’d left the mountains behind and were now travelling through a broad valley filled with orchards. Ahead were the outskirts of what looked to be a small city.

“This is Longville,” Clem said, “sleaze capital of the galaxy.”

After passing through outer suburbs much like any other city, they entered what Joel presumed was the central business district. Although it had its fair share of modern shops with brightly lit displays, many of the buildings looked more like ancient ruins. He noticed a few had red lights hanging beside their doors, making him wonder if this was a popular place for doctors to have their surgeries. He was about to ask Clem when Russell turned abruptly into a side-street.

“Sorry, I almost missed the turn,” he said as they headed down a steep hill.

At the bottom, the road curved to the left, passing a row of old warehouses lining the river bank, the one at the far end cordoned off with blue and white plastic tape.

A policeman walked up to where Russell had parked. “I’m sorry but this is still a crime scene.”

“Superintendent Davies said we could take a look through,” Russell said.

“Oh right, you’re the group from Meridian, are you?”

“Yes, that’s us.”

“I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

“We had a quick trip with none of the usual hold-ups in Azarath.”

Joel shook his head, wondering what a slow trip would have been like.

“What is it you’re looking for?” the policeman asked.

“We’re not sure yet.”

“I see. Well just park around the side there and clip these badges on.”

“Thanks.”

Clem led them in through the front door, half expecting to see Horace the doorman blocking their way. It seemed an age since he’d come here in the guise of Mr Edwinson, and it suddenly hit him that if the guide hadn’t persuaded Horace to allow him entry, Blunt’s government would still be democratically running the galaxy, Pip and Owen would still be free and, worst of all, his grandfather might still be alive.

Yet Pip had said something calamitous would happen if the bunyip-baiting wasn’t stopped, and Clem still believed him even though he had no inkling of what that calamity might have been. Except for the freeing of Number Five, everything he’d done so far had led to suffering and death and he feared that trend would only continue.

“There’s not much in here,” Mark said, snapping him from his thoughts.

“Come on through to the back room. That’s where they held the meets.”

The back room, though, was also empty; the seating, the ring and the cages all gone. All that remained were a few scratches on the floor, and even those were just random marks giving no indication of what had taken place between those walls. For a moment Clem thought he could smell bunyip pheromones, but it was just his imagination playing tricks on him.

“What’s out here?” Lorina asked, standing at the back door.

“There’s a decking overlooking the river and some steps leading down to a wharf,” Clem said. “That’s the entrance Blunt used.”

He followed her out, remembering the tables and chairs where groups of patrons had gathered between bouts, but again everything had gone, leaving just bare weathered floorboards. A police launch bobbed against the wharf where Blunt's yacht had moored on that fateful night, but everything else looked deserted and unused. *Why were the police still here?*

"What did they do with the dead bunyips?" Russell asked.

"They, um, the handlers put them in black bags and took them away from the ring, but after that, I don't know."

As they watched, a diver surfaced next to the launch, handing something up to an officer on board.

"I guess they threw them in the river," Clem added, "but I don't see how that can help us."

He and Russell walked down to the wharf, but as David, Loraine and Joel went to follow, Loraine called them back. "What's going on down there isn't for young eyes."

Loraine looked about to protest but, deciding there was no chance of success, resigned herself to exploring the decking.

Clem waved to the officer on the launch.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you've found anything unusual in the remains you're recovering."

"Who are – oh, I remember you. You're the one the superintendent sent in with the camera."

"That's right."

"There are a lot of dumped bunyips down there, going back over hundreds of years they reckon, but nothing obviously out of the ordinary about them. We're sending them back to the lab for analysis, of course, on the chance we might find something we could use in a prosecution, but as far as I know there's been nothing so far."

"I see."

"A few of the bunyips were pretty big, bigger than your average domestic pet, but I suspect that was just part of the training and feeding."

"How big?"

The officer held his hands a little over half a metre apart. "That's about the biggest of them."

Clem nodded. "Is there anything else unusual you've found here?"

"No. There were some traces of bunyip blood on the warehouse floor, but apart from the bodies in the river, there's been nothing at all."

"That's fine. Thanks for your time."

"Are you sure your grandfather told you there'd be something here?" Russell asked as they walked back up to the others.

"Yes, he said to go to Longville because the answer hides there in plain sight."

"Well I can't see anything hiding here."

"Perhaps we're looking too hard."

"There's nothing here and I'm hungry," David said.

"David's right," Loraine said.

"Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?" Lorina asked, trying to recall when Loraine had last agreed with her brother about anything.

"That's not funny, Mum."

"There's a nice park up on the hill overlooking the bay," Russell said. "I'll grab some take-away and we can go up there for a picnic if you like."

"It's supposed to be in plain sight," Clem said to himself. "Why can't anybody see it?"

Chris patted him on the shoulder. "Come on; a change of scenery might help make it obvious."

Clem sighed but followed him up to the minibus, turning back for one last look at the building before climbing in.

"Any luck?" the policeman at the gate asked as he collected everyone's badge.

"No, I think whatever was supposed to be here is gone now."

"I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing."

"Not to worry," Mark said, "it's been new territory for the kids and a change of scenery for Lorina and me."

"If it's scenery you want, make sure you check out the hilltop park on your way out."

"We're heading there now."

Russell drove back through the shopping district, stopping to grab some delightfully unhealthy food before heading east along Clifftop Drive. On each side of the road more ancient buildings crumbled away behind high rusty iron fences.

“This must be a really old city,” Loraine said.

“They say it was one of the first places on Cornipus to be settled,” Russell said.

“Those buildings look old,” Lorina said, “but they can’t be *that* old, surely.”

“Some of the foundation stones may be original, but the rest are the result of many generations of renovation and restoration. In due course some historical preservation society will come through here again to continue the process.”

“So even in the oldest buildings, any ancient secrets would be long gone,” Clem said.

“I’m afraid so.”

They passed under a stone archway marking the entrance to the park. On either side were the remains of what looked like an ancient wall.

“Was the park once fortified?” Lorina asked.

“It sure looks like it,” Mark said. “I wonder what they were trying to keep out.”

“Restless natives, I expect.”

“There were no natives on Cornipus, though, were there?”

“Not if you can believe the history books.”

Russell pulled into the car park next to a lookout. The sparkling blue waters of Longville Bay stretched out before them, while in the distance, scrubby sand dunes separated the northern arm of the bay from the sea. A light breeze drifted in, taking the edge off the hot sunshine.

The children dashed across to claim ownership of the nearest picnic table, while Mark and Chris helped Russell with the food. Lorina joined Clem who was standing at the railing looking out over the water.

“I’m sorry I dragged you all out here on a wild goose chase,” he said.

“Honestly I don’t think you have. There’s something about this place, something I just can’t quite put a finger on. Maybe it has to do with everything being so old, I don’t know, but I’m sure there’s a secret here, something so obvious no-one can see it.”

“A fat lot of use it’ll be if we can’t see it either.”

“You’re still upset by your grandfather’s death, aren’t you?”

“No I’m not.”

Lorina shook her head. “You’re radiating grief like a goddamned beacon.”

“Sorry; it’s your telepathic empathy, right?”

“Yes, but I don’t need to be a telepath to see it. You’re thinking you were responsible because, um, because you went after Blunt.”

“If I’d just left him alone, none of this would’ve happened.”

“But you don’t really believe that, do you, because deep inside you know you did the right thing.”

Clem stared at her, his lower lip trembling. “If it was the right thing, why, why has it caused so much hurt?”

Lorina wrapped her arms around him as his tears began to flow. “All change is painful, Clem, no matter whether it’s for good or bad. Drago taught me that lesson big time.”

“But, but Jacob —”

The dam broke. Lorina held him tightly, patting his head, as Clem’s grief flooded out. Through her telepathy she felt an enormous pain, far more than she would have expected even from the loss of a much-loved grandparent, but there was something else, wasn’t there? *What’s a worm got to do it?*

“He created an ultranet worm that stopped me from reading anything about bunyips and Frizian honey,” Clem said, now straightening himself up and wiping his eyes. “Why did he do it, why?”

Lorina took a deep breath, steeling herself for an outburst of rage. “Because I told him to.”

“What? You? Why?”

“Months ago, back when Pip first began taking an interest in Blunt, Jacob called me. He told me he’d sensed something of your future and the task you must perform, but it could only be achieved if your thoughts were untainted by what others believed. He said

everything written on the subject of Frizian honey started with the premise that it was a poison, a neurotoxin, but it's not."

"The honey's not a poison, it's a cure."

"Exactly. He didn't know what it meant, only that if you read any of those papers you'd never discover the truth."

"But why didn't he just tell me?"

"He wanted to so much, but he knew that if he did, your curiosity would eventually get the better of you."

Clem smiled. "I'd peep, just to see what it was I wasn't supposed to read, and you know what? He was right."

"He told me that, back in his day, he'd been the village's ultranet whiz kid and was sure he could come up with something that would keep your curiosity at bay. I'm glad he succeeded."

"So am I, and thanks so much for telling me."

"Come and get some food before the kids eat it all!" Mark called out from the table.

Lorina took hold of Clem's hand, leading him over to the others. "Now let's see if we can't find this secret of yours."

"Let's play hide and seek!" Loraine said.

"Sure," David said, quickly scanning the table for any last morsel. "Joel can be *it*."

"Why do I always have to be *it*?"

"Because you're a git! Now close your eyes and count to a hundred. And no peeking!"

"Stay within the park and away from any edges," Lorina said as David and Loraine ran off.

"Sure, Mum," Loraine shouted back.

"You too, David!"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Are you sure that's wise," Chris asked, "letting them run off like that after what happened at the waterhole on Earth?"

"We can't keep them wrapped in cotton wool for the rest of their lives," Mark said, "and anyway I don't think there are any monster bunyips or portals around here."

"They'll be safe, I'm sure," Russell said.

“– ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred.” Joel opened his eyes, turning and dashing off into the maze of tracks criss-crossing the headland. In places were what looked to be the crumbling stone foundations of ancient buildings overgrown with prickly bushes and vines, while elsewhere, thickets of small trees, bent by the prevailing sea breeze, provided plenty of potential hiding places for his quarry. He stared at the dusty ground looking for fresh footprints, but it was too hard-packed for barefoot twelve-year-olds to leave any impression.

Deciding a process of elimination was his only option, he began pushing his way through the first thicket, listening intently for any giggling. Drawing a blank, he moved on into the maze as the breeze dropped and the air became hot and stifling.

Seeing something suspicious behind a clump of bushes, he pushed his way through, only to find himself face to face with the bunyip from the nexus! With his feet back-peddalling and his heart pounding, he fell into a spiky shrub and became ensnared in its branches. Expecting to be torn to shreds and eaten at any moment, he closed his eyes and prayed that if there was a God anywhere in the universe, He’d strike the beast dead before it could devour him.

When nothing happened after several excruciatingly long seconds, he thought perhaps his prayer had been answered and opened his eyes just a little. The bunyip was still there, raised on its hind legs ready to pounce, but it was a pounce that would never come. Almost laughing out loud with relief, he realised the thing before him was part of a statue made of a hard black stone. Pushing more of the bushes aside revealed figures of a woman and child cowering in fear before the attacking beast, while beside it and brandishing a spear stood a tall man wearing a ceremonial head-dress with what looked like a wolf-mask covering his face.

“Hey!” Joel called out at the top of his voice. “I’ve found something weird over here!”

When no response was forthcoming he tried again. “David! Loraine! This is serious! Come here!”

From further down the track he heard a rustling of bushes and a few moments later Loraine was at his side. “What’s wrong?”

“Look,” he said, pulling aside the bushes again.

“It’s the bunyip from the nexus!”

“I thought so too.”

“You didn’t – you didn’t think it was real, did you?”

Loraine started giggling uncontrollably as Joel blushed.

“What’s going on?” David asked, coming up behind them.

“Joel thought –” Loraine started to say before deciding diplomacy was a virtue not to be underestimated. “Joel found this.”

“Go and fetch the others,” Joel said to David. “I think this might be what Clem’s looking for.”

“You’re right, there’s no mistaking it,” Mark said. “It’s the bunyip from the nexus all right. What’s that inscription say?”

Russell stared at it, rubbing his hand across it to remove some of the dirt and grime. “It’s a pretty archaic form of Cornipean writing, but I think it says *Remember the Night Terrors.*”

“The what?” Loraine asked. “Do you think this was supposed to be someone’s nightmare?”

“No,” Clem said, “the bunyip’s too real for it to be just a dream. I have an idea starting to form; just let me think it through for a few moments.”

Joel turned back to the statue, shocked by the look of absolute terror on the faces of the woman and child. These were real people, he was sure, about to be devoured by the beast leaping at them. He turned his attention to the man with the spear, thinking at first he was about to save them by killing the bunyip mid-leap, but it was all wrong.

“No!” he said, not realising he’d spoken out loud, as it suddenly hit him. His gorge rising, for a moment he was sure he was about to bring up his lunch, but managed to control it by swallowing hard. *The man with the spear had no intention of saving anyone. He was the bunyip’s master, cheering it on as it went for the kill.*

“What’s wrong, Joel?” Loraine asked from somewhere far away, but all he could do was point with one hand while covering his mouth with the other.

“What are you pointing at?”

“That man, he’s *making* the bunyip kill them.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Just look at him, the way he’s standing.”

“Oh my gosh, Joel, you’re right.”

“Come over here away from that, kids,” Clem said. “I’ll tell you what I think it means and you can correct me if I’m wrong, okay?”

“Okay,” Joel said.

“Are you sure they should be hearing this?” Lorina asked, but Clem nodded.

“The history books all say that Cornipus was uninhabited when the first settlers arrived from Meridian, and that the wildlife here was benign, but I think, well I’m pretty sure, they’re wrong. The bunyips when fully grown were like the thing you saw in the nexus, and a race of indigenous people used them, perhaps for hunting. They turned on the new arrivals, raiding and terrorising them at night, I’m guessing, hence *Remember the Night Terrors*.

“To defend themselves, the settlers put those tall iron fences around their houses and built a walled encampment up here, as we saw from the remains at the gate and from all the old foundations either side of these tracks. I think where we’re standing was their village, with this statue erected in the town square to perhaps remind later generations of the horrors they endured. But the settlers were a technological people and developed a technological solution to their problem. Remember what Pip and my grandfather were trying to tell me?”

“The honey’s not a poison,” Mark said.

“It’s a cure,” Joel said.

“So if it’s a cure,” Loraine asked, “what’s it curing?”

“The real poison,” David said.

“The thing that stops the little bunyips metamorphosing into the monster ones,” Joel said.

“Precisely,” Clem said. “Russell, you’re a native here. What do bunyips eat?”

“You of all people should know that,” he chuckled. “Those pellets you buy from the supermarket, of course.”

“No, I mean in the wild. What’s their natural food?”

“Grasses and small lizards, I suppose, but honey-grass is their favourite.”

“What?”

“Honey-grass; it grows just about everywhere on Cornipus, and I’ve seen it on a few of the other worlds too. That’s some of it just there.”

Clem walked over to a clump growing on the side of the track. “This stuff?”

“Yes.”

He pulled off a blade, tentatively chewing on it before spitting it out. “I know that taste! Russell, when we were on Frizian, that woman leading the smugglers made me taste the honey. She said to remember it as it might someday save my life, and I’m glad I did.”

“You mean honey-grass and Frizian honey are the same thing?” Chris asked. “But how can one be a poison and the other the cure?”

“Only the taste is the same,” Clem said. “Russell, on the way here you mentioned something about a huge library spanning a whole city.”

Russell nodded.

“Do you think we could go there? I have a suspicion of what the answer might be, but I need to delve into some very old books.”

“Of course. It’s only about a three-hour drive from here.”

The City of Books

Clem finished the call he'd been making, putting his phone away before turning to the others. "Frank's given me the name of someone whom he thinks might be able to help us, but the address is rather strange."

"What is it?" Russell asked.

"Early Settlements Road, Cornipean District, History."

"That sounds about right. The whole city is arranged like a library. North of the river is non-fiction while the southern side is fiction, and then each district and suburb is a particular category. It's further divided down into streets, buildings, floors and rooms, so as long as you know what you want you can work out the address."

"University campuses do something similar," Chris said, "but I guess the people here just went to another level entirely."

"Cornipeans do have a reputation for that sort of thing," Lorina said. "Present company exempted of course."

"Don't worry," Russell said. "I can be just as Cornipean as the rest of them when I have a mind to be."

"He's right," Clem said. "You should have seen him on Frizian; I never would have thought –"

"Careful, Clem; remember who's driving the bus."

Clem glanced at the city skyline looming up on the horizon. "Can we stop at the next shopping district we come to? I want to get a few maps before we enter the city."

"Sure. If my memory serves me correctly, there's a retail centre close to the next exit."

Clem returned to the minibus with a handful of maps and a packet of bunyip mix.

“What did you buy that for?” Russell asked. “Your bunyip’s back at Frank’s place.”

“It’s just an idea I want to test,” he said, carefully opening the top of the packet to avoid spilling any. “Does anyone know what goes into these?”

“The name *bunyip mix* suggests it’s a mixture of things,” Lorina said, “but would I be right in guessing honey-grass is one of them?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.”

Clem pulled a pellet from the pack, looking at it and sniffing it before placing it in his mouth and chewing on it. Within moments he put his head out the window and spat the remains into the gutter.

“Well?”

“Mostly sawdust, I think, but with a definite tang of honey-grass.”

“Do you think the manufacturers put it in to make them attractive to bunyips?”

“I’m sure they do, but I suspect there’s a more sinister reason.”

“Is it to stop people’s pets from metamorphosing?” Joel asked.

“Exactly,” Clem said. “Have any of you seen the advertisements for this stuff? They have veterinarians in white coats going on and on about how it contains vitamins and minerals essential to a bunyip’s good health.”

“Are you saying it’s a form of mass medication?” Chris asked.

“I don’t normally go much for conspiracy theories, but this might just be the exception.”

“We need to find out why honey-grass tastes the same as Frizian honey,” Mark said.

“Yes, and that’s why we’re going to the library.”

“Is this city just buildings with books in them,” Joel asked, “or do people actually live here?”

“There are residential districts just like any other city,” Russell said. “The librarians and ancillary staff all live here.”

“So, um, there’d be supermarkets and restaurants too, I suppose.”

“Yes, because even librarians have to eat sometimes.”

“Then the people who work in the supermarkets and restaurants would also live here.”

“That’s right. There are also maintenance people who look after the roads and utilities, along with doctors and dentists and all the other services you’d find in a normal city.”

“And there’d be barbers too,” Loraine said, “unless the library people all have really long hair.”

Joel laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m trying to imagine the librarian at school with long hair.”

“Mr Eckles? Now that would be weird.”

“Why’s that?” Chris asked.

“He’s bald.”

“Loraine!” Lorina said.

“Well he is, Mum.”

Lorina sighed, leaning her head on Mark’s shoulder.

“What’s that say?” Joel asked, pointing to the large sign on the side of the motorway.

“The Great Library of Cornipus welcomes quiet visitors,” Russell said, chuckling.

“Well that rules Joel out,” David said.

“What? Me? But –” Joel started to say, before deciding that the more noise he made in protesting, the weaker his case would be.

Chris chuckled. “I’m sure they have soundproof noise-abatement cells where people like Joel can be locked away.”

Joel’s mouth opened and closed but no sound came out.

“Hey, you’ve finally found a way to shut him up,” Mark said, earning himself dirty looks from Lorina and Loraine.

“Honestly, Mark,” Lorina said, “you’re as bad as the kids.”

“Take the next exit,” Clem said, shuffling his maps, “and then turn right under the motorway.”

The Cornipean Ancient History building looked to be as old as its subject. Made of weathered sandstone and marble, its tiny recessed windows high above the street implied a gloomy interior filled with musty odours, while the heavy panelled doors at street level seemed designed to ward off casual visitors. Joel could easily imagine hordes of librarians like Mr Eckles inhabiting such a place.

Clem led them inside to a dark-stained counter, where an elderly woman with her hair tied high in a bun looked up at them with disdain. “We’re looking for Mr Montague.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“I’m not sure. An archivist from the Azarath library on Meridian told us to see him.”

“Just a moment and I’ll see if he’s available.” She picked up a telephone, speaking briefly before turning and walking slowly out to the back room.

“This place is creepy,” Loraine whispered.

“Not half as creepy as the people who work here,” David said.

A side door swung open as a young man with shoulder-length black hair walked through towards them, smiling warmly. “Are you the people Frank said were coming?”

“That’s us.”

“Come on through to my office. I’m Trevor Montague.”

As he led them out, the woman returned to the front desk, scowling at them. Joel immediately turned away, focusing instead on the patterned carpet in front of him as they entered a long dimly-lit corridor.

“Take a seat,” Trevor said, opening a door on his right, even though it was obvious the three chairs in his office would be insufficient for his eight guests. After some jostling, Lorina, Mark and Chris sat while the others spread out along the walls. “I’m afraid Frank didn’t tell me your names.”

“I’m Clem and this is my associate Russell, our friends Lorina, Mark and Chris, and the children Loraine, David and Joel.”

“I’m pleased to meet you all, and of course I remember Mark, Lorina and the twins from your time as Supreme Councillor. Frank said you’re interested in the early Cornipean colonies.”

Clem paused for a moment, glancing at Mark and Lorina before turning back to Trevor. “Does the phrase *Remember the Night Terrors* mean anything to you?”

“You’re referring to the statue in Longville, I presume.”

“That’s right. Do you know anything of its history?”

“I believe it dates from around a hundred years after the first settlement and its location on the headland was actually the town

square at the time. The foundations of some of the original buildings can still be seen there.”

Clem nodded. “I thought as much. Do you know what the statue represents?”

“It symbolises fear of the unknown, a fear that of course was unjustified in the case of the colonies here but just as daunting nonetheless.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand.”

“Put yourself in the place of those first settlers, coming to a new planet and not knowing what to expect. They would most certainly have had nightmares about savage natives and dangerous animals attacking their women and children.”

“You don’t think it was literally true?”

“Of course not; there were no sentient natives here and no carnivores bigger than a bunyip.”

Joel began squirming, looking like he was about to say something, but Lorina hushed him.

“Are there any records we could look at dating back to those first settlements?” she asked.

“Look at? No, anything like that has been lost in antiquity. The library wasn’t established here until thousands of years after those first settlements, and the earliest historical accounts we have are based only on archaeological evidence and conjecture.”

“What about honey-grass?” Mark asked.

“What about it?”

“Is there anything in your records about its origins?”

“It’s a native grass found just about everywhere on Cornipus. What else is there to know?”

“I thought, perhaps, there might have been some record of its having been genetically modified.”

“For anything like that you’d have to speak with someone in Botany.”

“Is there anyone you’d recommend?” Clem asked.

Trevor pulled out what looked to be an old-fashioned telephone directory and began thumbing through it. “Allan Thompson would be a good one to start with, I’m sure. Shall I call him to check if he can see you?”

“Yes, please do.”

Trevor made the call, speaking briefly before hanging up.

“Allan said you can come straight over.”

“How do we get there?”

He jotted down an address before handing it to Clem. “Go a couple of kilometres east from here then take the north-bound ramp onto the Science Motorway. Be careful you don’t go south, though, as that’ll take you over the river into Science Fiction and few who enter there ever return unscathed.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Russell said.

“And thank you for your time,” Lorina said, now standing and ushering the children towards the door.

“Always a pleasure and I hope I’ve been some help to you.”

“You have indeed,” Clem said.

“Why didn’t you tell him about the statue being the same as the bunyip in the nexus?” Joel asked Lorina once they were back in the minibus.

“Because I didn’t trust him, and neither did Clem, am I right?”

“You noticed his reaction too when I asked whether the statue could be literal,” Clem said.

“Oh yes, it was unmistakable.”

“I didn’t notice anything,” Joel said.

“We’re not the only ones with an interest in bunyips,” Lorina said, “and I’d rather General Gallagher and his cohorts not know what we’re up to.”

“Do you think Montague’s in league with Gallagher?” Chris asked.

“Probably not, but there’s a chance he could spill the beans to someone who is.”

“If there’s a risk, shouldn’t we cut our losses here and head back to Frank’s?”

“I think we’re safe enough as long as we don’t let on too much about our suspicions.”

“I’m sure there’s something more here we need to figure out,” Clem said. “Let’s at least hear what the botanist has to say.”

Not unexpectedly, the suburb of Botany was a leafy district of tree-lined streets with its low organic buildings set amongst fragrant gardens and ponds. Leaf litter and mulch covered the path leading from the car park to a reception foyer adorned with potted palms and ferns.

“We’re here to see Allan Thompson,” Clem said to the man in a floral shirt behind the counter. “He’s expecting us.”

“Go down that passageway there and turn left at the end. You’ll find him in the reflection garden.”

“Thank you.”

Behind glass walls on either side of the corridor were row upon row of tightly-packed bookshelves each identified only by a twelve-digit number. Aside from the shelves, the rooms were devoid of any furnishings or occupants, making them look more like vaults than a functioning library.

By contrast, the reflection garden was a maze of benches, desks and ultranet terminals set around shallow pools covered in water lilies. Another man in a floral shirt approached them as they entered.

“We’re looking for Allan Thompson,” Clem said.

An elderly man sitting not ten metres away raised his arm and waved. “You must be the people Trevor sent over from History.”

Clem ran through the introductions again. “We’re hoping to find something about the origins of honey-grass.”

“Well you’ve certainly come to the right place; grass has been my lifelong passion. Did you know there are over a hundred thousand varieties in our galaxy? I bet you didn’t! A hundred thousand, ranging from tiny grasses you need a microscope to see to huge tree-grasses tens of metres tall. Grass is also our most abundant dry-land plant, being found in one form or another in practically every climate and habitat. The grasslands of Frizian are testimony to that, by jingo, yes! Now that it’s summer there again, I’ll be going back in a few weeks to pick up the research I began forty years ago. Can you believe that? Forty years, yet it seems only yesterday when I was out there doing my post-doctoral field work. It’s a fascinating world, that’s for sure. Now what was it you wanted?”

“We’re interested in honey-grass.”

“Of course you are. Why else would you be here?”

“What can you tell us about it?”

“Everything you could possibly want to know. It’s closely related to Cornipean Spinifex, the most common and prolific grass on the planet, but it has some very surprising twists. It secretes dextrose, one of the sugars found in honey, hence the name honey-grass, but whereas the honey from bees is slightly acidic, honey-grass is alkaline, giving it a bitter metallic taste. What nobody realises, though, is that the same stuff is produced by the Frizian honey wasp. Remarkable, don’t you think?”

Clem’s jaw dropped. “Y-yes.”

“But that’s not the half of it. You say you want to know about honey-grass? Let me tell you it also contains small quantities of chlordiazepoxide. You heard of that? Maybe, maybe not, but think sleeping pills and you’d be pretty close. Now the chlordiazepoxide in sleeping pills is a synthetic drug, made in laboratories by men in white coats, so what’s it doing oozing out of honey-grass, that’s what I want to know!”

“Is this chloro-thingame also in Frizian honey?” Chris asked.

“That’s the fascinating thing, as if there wasn’t enough to be fascinated about already. I learnt something of Frizian honey while doing my research there. You know how it is, students aren’t paid very much and a bit of extra money comes in real handy, especially in a place like that. So let’s just say I got to know a bit about Frizian honey and the wasps that make it. And guess what?”

“What?”

“Do you know much about honey-wasp venom?”

“I –” Russell said, but Clem interrupted him before he could say any more.

“Only that it’s pretty lethal.”

“It is when injected directly into the bloodstream, but if taken orally it breaks down in your digestive juices, producing something called flumazenil, the pharmacological antidote to chlordiazepoxide. They told me that in the early days, Frizian honey was used to treat anyone who’d overdosed on sleeping pills.”

“It’s the cure,” Clem whispered.

“The cure? You’re not drug addicts, are you, thinking you can get high on honey-grass and then cure yourselves with some illicit

Frizian honey? Because it won't work, I tell you. Honey-grass will make you throw up long before you've absorbed enough chlordiazepoxide to do anything."

"No, no, it's nothing like that. Do you know what effect it has on bunyips?"

"What do you think I am, a veterinarian? Do I look like a veterinarian?"

"No, but –"

"Damn right I don't! You want to know about grasses, you talk to me, but if you want to know about bunyips, go talk to them."

"I just thought – no, never mind."

"If it's bunyips you're interested in, Jodie Ellicott could help you, I'm sure. She runs Bunyip House over in Veterinary Biology."

"How do we get there?"

"Just head north along the Science Motorway for another five kilometres. You can't miss it."

"Thank you so much for your time, but could I ask you one last favour?"

"Certainly."

"Could you write down the names of that chloro-thingamejig and its antidote, as I'm sure I'll have no chance of remembering them."

"I will if I can find anything to write on."

Lorina handed him a notepad and pen.

"One more thing," Clem said once Allan had finished writing. "Do you think honey-grass could have been genetically engineered?"

Allan smiled. "You know I never thought of that, but why would anyone bother?"

"Indeed."

"So what do you think?" Russell asked once they were back in the minibus.

"I think he's been smoking too many of his grasses."

"David!" Lorina said.

"What?"

Lorina just shook her head and sighed.

“I guess the early settlers could have engineered that sleeping pill stuff into the grass to pacify the bunyips,” Mark said. “But why the tie-in with Frizian honey?”

“Was Frizian settled before or after Cornipus?” Chris asked.

“I’m pretty sure it was a few hundred years before,” Clem said.

“So if the Cornipean settlers knew about Frizian honey being an antidote to the sedative, could they have used it as a control in their experiments?”

“That makes sense, and would explain why they made honey-grass taste the same as Frizian honey. They get their lab bunyips hooked on honey-grass then feed the control group Frizian honey to see if it reverses the effects.”

“It’ll be interesting to hear what the bunyip expert has to say about your theory,” Lorina said.

Compared to Botany, the suburb of Veterinary Biology looked sterile, the only landscaping being tasteless rockeries adorned with sculptures of animals pretending to be people. The grey rectangular structure before them, identifying itself as Bunyip House, had smiling concrete bunyips welcoming visitors up the steps and through the heavy glass doors at its entrance.

“We’re looking for Jodie Ellicott,” Clem said to the slender young woman behind the reception desk.

“I am she.”

“Oh, right. We have some questions about bunyips and Allan Thompson from Botany said you might be able to help.”

“Come on through to the consultation room,” she said, pushing open a sliding wooden door to the left of the counter and leading them into a room covered in posters showing various parts of bunyip anatomy. “What condition are you treating?”

“Huh?”

“I assume at least one of you is a veterinary surgeon. What treatment are you enquiring about?”

“No, um, we’re researching bunyips and the early settlers on Cornipus.”

Jodie frowned. “I’m not sure if I can really help you.”

“That’s okay, but I was wondering if you know what effect honey-grass has on bunyips.”

“What do you mean?”

“What does it do to them?”

“It doesn’t *do* anything to them. They eat it; it’s their staple diet. How could it do anything to them?”

Clem looked at the note Allan had written. “What about the chloro – chlordiazepoxide in it?”

Jodie gave him a blank look.

“The sedative?”

“Someone’s been telling you fairy stories, I’m afraid. Did you say Allan Thompson sent you?”

“Um, yes.”

“That explains it, then. Allan means well, but let’s just say he’s become a bit too close to his subject matter for his own good.”

David smirked.

“Well what about Frizian honey?” Clem asked.

Jodie took a step backwards, looking as if she’d been slapped across the face. “You’re not bunyip-baiters, are you?”

“No, of course not, it’s just that Allan suggested it might be an antidote to the thing in honey-grass.”

“That’s ridiculous. Frizian honey contains a neurotoxin that drives bunyips mad. Any bunyip consuming it must be destroyed.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’d have thought it obvious. The resulting brain damage is progressive and untreatable, causing the animal great pain and distress.”

Clem didn’t think his Number Five was at all pained or distressed, but wasn’t about to volunteer that information.

“Then what causes bunyips to metamorphose?” Joel asked before anyone could stop him.

“I’ve never heard such nonsense,” Jodie said. “I really don’t think I can help you.”

“Perhaps,” Mark said, “we could browse through your collection.”

“My what?”

“This is a library, isn’t it? Aren’t there any books we could look at?”

“Good heavens, no. Hasn’t anyone told you? The Great Library is a repository; the vaults here can only be accessed by staff members acting on behalf of accredited researchers, amongst whom I’m sure you’re not numbered.”

“Oh, right.”

“Thanks for your time, anyway,” Clem said.

Jodie snorted, ushering them back out into the foyer and towards the exit.

“Did I say the wrong thing?” Joel asked as they walked down the steps.

“No, it wasn’t your fault,” Lorina said. “That woman was terrified of something.”

“She was terrified we might suspect the truth,” Clem said.

Mark grinned. “Conspiracy theorists always say that.”

“Is there anywhere else we can look?” Russell asked.

“When I was studying my maps I noticed a place called Mythology. It’s over the other side of the river just past Science Fiction.”

“That first man we saw told us not to go anywhere near there,” Joel said.

“Exactly, which is why I think we should.”

Twin concrete bridges spanned the river separating Fiction from Non Fiction. On the far bank, brightly coloured buildings in all shapes and sizes filled the landscape amongst exotic trees and gardens.

“Mythology is a maze of twisty little streets,” Clem said to Russell as the motorway abruptly ended in an enormous roundabout. “Try not to get lost.”

“You’re the one with the maps.”

“Turn left into Catalogue Road; there should be a Visitors’ Information booth two blocks down.”

“I think this is it; yes, there it is.”

The booth was painted an iridescent yellow with a rotating blue beacon light above it, making it fairly conspicuous.

“We’re looking for any mythology surrounding the early settlements on Cornipus and that *Night Terrors* statue in Longville,” Clem said to the young man behind the window.

“Let me just check for you,” he said, tapping away on his keyboard. “You might want to try Bunyip Mythology at 74 Terror Lane. Go three blocks down Gryphon Avenue then turn right.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s not far, so it might be safer to leave your vehicle here and walk. Gryphon Avenue is directly opposite.” He gave Clem a detailed street map, circling both their present location and destination. “If you get lost, just call the number on the back.”

“Thanks.”

Clem studied the map before leading everyone across the road. “Stay close together; I have a feeling this place is designed to ensnare unwary visitors.”

“There must be a lot of stuff written about gryphons,” Loraine said, glancing back and forth at the buildings surrounding them.

“What are gryphons?” Joel asked.

“On Earth a gryphon has the head of an eagle on the body of a lion,” Loraine said, “but here it can be any combination of two or more animals.”

“There must be some really weird ones,” David said.

“Believe me, there are, but don’t go looking or you’ll give yourself nightmares.”

“Does this count as a cross-street?” Russell asked, staring at the laneway coming in on their right.

Clem looked again at the map, scratching his head. “I’m not sure. Are there any signs?”

“Not that I can see.”

“Oh no,” Mark said. “We’re lost already.”

“Let’s keep walking and maybe the next cross-street will have a name.”

Around the next bend they came upon a Cornipean woman, probably aged in her late teens or early twenties, leaning against a lamp post while rubbing the sole of one foot against its concrete base. She eyed them suspiciously, making Clem wonder if they should

perhaps cross to the other side of the road. He slowed his pace, allowing the others to bunch up around him and form as united a front as possible to fend off any impending attack.

“Are you lost?” she asked.

“We’re looking for Terror Lane,” Clem said, deciding there was probably no harm in seeking directions.

“You’re in it now.”

“I thought we were still in Gryphon Avenue.”

“No, but the way it twists around it’s easy to miss the corner. What number are you looking for?”

“Seventy-four.”

“You must be interested in bunyip mythology then, or is it the truth you seek?”

Clem stopped dead in his tracks, staring at her. *Was it possible she could be a truth-seeker?*

“Um, yes.”

“I’ll walk you down there if you like, and maybe I can tell you a thing or two along the way, stuff you won’t hear from any librarian.”

Clem looked at her, slowly nodding.

“I’m Mog,” she said, offering her hand.

“Mog,” Clem repeated, tasting the word as it passed from his lips. “I’m Clem, and these are my friends Russell, Chris, Lorina and Mark, along with the twins Loraine and David and their friend Joel.”

“Ah, you’re that Mark, of course. You’re not thinking of becoming Supreme Councillor again, are you? The general they’ve got running the place now really sucks.”

“I, um,” Mark said before Lorina poked him in the ribs.

“I understand,” Mog said, leading them further down the street. “So you want to know something about bunyips?”

“We’ve seen the *Night Terrors* statue in Longville and were wondering if it had any deeper meaning,” Lorina said.

“Beyond symbolising fear of the unknown, I presume.”

“Um, yes.”

“Good for you. At school we were taught that Cornipus was originally *terra nullius*, an uninhabited world with just lots of happy little bunyips running around and eating their honey-grass. For a while I even believed it.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Curiosity, mostly. In a city of books there are plenty of deep dark places full of interesting secrets nice people aren’t supposed to know about.”

“I thought only the librarians could look at the books,” Joel said.

Mog stared at him. “Do you think I’d let a stupid rule like that stop me?”

Joel blushed. “No, I guess not.”

“If you look deep enough it’s not too hard to find mention of the giant bunyips and their indigenous masters who terrorised the first settlers into committing one of the worst acts of genocide in the history of our galaxy.”

“Genocide?” Clem asked.

“So the honey-grass really is genetically-engineered spinifex,” Lorina said.

“You’ve got it in one. They thought the sedative they added would just pacify the creatures, make them less likely to kill people, but they got more than they bargained for, a lot more.”

“It stopped them from growing,” Joel said.

“Yes. The bunyips that ate honey-grass stayed the size of cubs, even though they matured sexually and could still reproduce. The honey-grass was addictive, too, so once the bunyips became hooked they couldn’t do without it.”

“So what happened to the indigenous people?” Loraine asked.

“That’s the weirdest thing. At first I thought there must have been a war or massacre or something but no, they just all disappeared without a trace at the same time as the large bunyips died out.”

Ahead a blue flashing light caught Clem’s attention. “Where are you taking us? We’re back where we started from at the information booth, aren’t we?”

Mog nodded. “There’s no such place as 74 Terror Lane.”

“What? No 74?”

“You were walking into a trap.”

“A trap?”

“Stay here close to the wall,” Mog said before dashing further up the road.

“What’s happening?” Joel asked Clem.

“Hush.”

“Who is she?” Loraine asked.

Clem said nothing, but watched as Mog came sprinting back towards them, her feet barely touching the ground.

“Is that your minibus up there?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Who have you been speaking to?”

“There was Trevor Montague in History,” Lorina said.

“Allan Thompson in Botany,” Clem said.

“And then Jodie Ellicott in Veterinary Biology,” Mark said.

“Did you say anything to Ellicott about honey-grass?”

“Yes. Clem asked her what it did to bunyips and she reacted rather strangely.”

“It must have been her then. I can’t imagine Allan calling the library police and Monty’s too stupid.”

“The library police?” Joel asked. “But we don’t have any overdue books, do we?”

Lorina shook her head in despair before turning back to Mog. “You know them all?”

“Of course. Look, I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but Allan’s my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather?” Clem asked.

“Do you always have to repeat everything I say?”

“Sorry.”

“Yes, he’s my grandfather. After he’d sent you to see Ellicott he wondered whether he’d perhaps made a terrible mistake, so he called me to keep an eye out in case you turned up on this side of the river.”

“No wonder this map didn’t make any sense,” Clem said.

“Show me that.” Mog took a quick glance before folding it and shoving it into her pocket. “It’s a fake.”

“What do we do?” Lorina asked.

“Follow me.”

Without waiting to see if the others were coming, Mog dashed back down the road, turning into an alleyway on the right and disappearing from sight.

“What kept you?” Mog asked, leaning on a lamp post outside a café in much the same stance as when they’d first met her.

“I’m getting old,” Mark said, huffing while the others caught up with him.

“This café’s a safe house; we can talk in there.”

“What’s with the library police?” Lorina asked as they commandeered a table in the far corner. “What do they do?”

“Maintain the *status quo*. They keep unauthorised people away from the books and make sure accredited researchers don’t stray beyond their field of interest.”

“But surely you need cross-fertilisation between fields to generate new ideas,” Chris said. “That’s how most research moves forward.”

Mog shook her head. “Your civilisation is young, Chris. This library is close on a million years old and for most of that time Morgoth was ruling the galaxy, making sure no new discoveries were made that might threaten his precious *status quo*. I know Mark tried to change that during his time in office, but it’s going to take at least several generations for it to filter down into a place like this.”

“So what happens to people the library police catch?” Joel asked.

“They disappear, most likely into slavery on the outer worlds.”

“Gosh.”

“We need to get back to Meridian,” Clem said.

“That won’t be easy, as the police will have notified the spaceports to keep an eye out for you.”

“Is there anywhere around here someone could land a shuttle without attracting too much attention?” Mark asked.

Mog scratched her head. “There’s a field on the outskirts of the city where the aerospace club do their flying.”

“How do we get there?”

“By train would be best. The police are watching your minibus so you can’t go back to fetch it.”

“The rental company won’t be too happy,” Russell said.

“We can sort them out later,” Mark said. “Give me your phone, Clem.”

Mark stepped away from the group as he made his call, while a waitress took their orders for coffee, hot chocolate and cakes.

“Frank said Brigadier Piper will send a shuttle for us,” Mark said as he returned to the table.

“You lot sure know how to travel in style,” Mog said. “I was about to suggest stowing away on a cargo ship.”

Joel gazed around the subway carriage as it zoomed through the city’s underground. Although he couldn’t read any of the writing on the advertisements, most of the pictures had a book theme, causing him to wonder what the people here did for relaxation.

The carriage was mostly empty, save for a young couple in a constant passionate embrace and an elderly woman devouring something smelling like toasted cabbage.

“We’re lucky,” Mog said. “An hour from now the evening rush will be on and these trains will be packed to the rafters.”

“I didn’t even know they had a railway here,” Russell said.

“We try to keep it hidden from visitors otherwise they’d take up all the seats. The travel companies provide their own buses and most tourists come here that way.”

“Let me guess,” Chris said. “Each librarian has his or her own allocated seat and woe betide anyone else who dares sit in it.”

“You’re spot on. The library police have a transit branch that enforces it.”

“We’re not likely to encounter them, are we?” Lorina asked.

“No, they only come on duty during the rush hours.” Mog glanced at the information display at the end of the carriage. “Our stop’s coming up next.”

The sun was setting as they emerged from the underground station onto the main street of a small village. A few people were pushing loaded shopping carts out of the supermarket at the far end of the block, but it was otherwise deserted.

“What’s the name of this town?” Mark asked, grabbing Clem’s phone again.

“Overton.”

While Mark made his call, Mog leaned against a shop-front, scratching the sole of her foot again.

“Do you have itchy feet?” Joel asked.

“Yes, it means I need to do some travelling.”

“The same thing happened to me back on Earth and I ended up here.”

“I’d better be careful then.”

Mark handed the phone back to Clem. “They know the place and will be here in about twenty minutes.”

“That’s good, because the field’s about twenty minutes walk from here.”

Once away from the shopping district, they passed stately wooden homes set on large leafy blocks of land. Occasionally a small bunyip would wander out to the front gate to watch the strangers pass, but apart from some young boys riding scooters down one of the side streets, there was no-one else about.

As they climbed the chain wire fence surrounding the field, a military shuttle circled above, glinting in the last rays of sunlight.

“Thanks for all your help,” Clem said to Mog as they stood waiting for it to land. “You’ve been a godsend, truly.”

Before she could reply, the sound of sirens broke the silence as two police cars sped towards the gate on the far side of the field.

“Oh shit,” Mark said.

The shuttle touched down just as the policemen forced open the gate and began driving through.

“You’ll have to come with us,” Clem said to Mog.

“I don’t think I have much choice.”

Captain Harrison stepped from the shuttle, waving them towards him. “You lot just can’t resist stirring the pot, can you?”

Counter Coup

The red light atop the television camera came on.

“Good evening and welcome to *Behind the News*,” the presenter said. “Tonight my special guests are Police Superintendent Scott Davies together with Michael Chandler, the self-confessed killer of our late Supreme Councillor. Superintendent, you headed the investigation of the bunyip-baiting allegations prior to Alistair Blunt’s killing, is that correct?”

“That’s right. As your viewers may recall, this case began with the publication of photographs implicating Blunt in a bunyip-baiting ring operating in Longville, and I was called upon to investigate the voracity of those claims.”

“What did you find?”

“Our investigations were only just beginning when Blunt was killed, after which the case was officially dropped, but unofficially we’ve continued sifting through the evidence found at both Blunt’s farm on Sontar and the warehouse on Cornipus. I can now say that the traces of bunyip blood found in the warehouse have been positively matched to that of a bunyip wounded on the farm just prior to Blunt’s shooting, corroborating eye-witness accounts of Blunt purchasing that bunyip following its victory in a bunyip-baiting contest.”

“What of Blunt’s shooting itself? Was that related to the bunyip-baiting?”

“Perhaps I should let Michael answer that.”

Michael took a deep breath as the camera zoomed in on him. “My late uncle, Eric Chandler, owned a farm and winery not far from a property where large numbers of bunyips were being bred. After much fruitless searching he finally found documentation linking this operation to Alistair Blunt and had been about to go public with his findings at the time of his death.

“I continued his investigations, becoming increasingly convinced Blunt had been responsible for my uncle’s death, and when approached by representatives of the Black Delphinidae interested in exposing Blunt’s bunyip-baiting activities, I happily escorted them to the farm, taking along my father’s old military rifle in case of trouble.

“As it happened, one of them was caught by Blunt’s henchmen and was about to be executed, so I took aim, intending to take out the man holding a gun at his head. Before I could fire, though, Blunt’s bunyip attacked the assassin, and when Blunt himself came out to see what was happening, I’m afraid my heart overruled my head and I shot him.

“Filled with remorse, I joined the Black Delphinidae as an acolyte, intending to serve my penance with them, but when General Gallagher closed down the seminary he told me that it had been him and not Blunt who’d killed my uncle. He said he’d done it to prevent my uncle from exposing Blunt’s bunyip-baiting activities.

“What I did is wrong, and I take full responsibility for it, but now a greater wrong has put two innocent lives in extreme peril. Pip Ingle and his attorney Owen Lachlan are under military arrest facing execution for the crime I committed, and if there’s anything I can do to save them, I’ll do it.”

“What Michael said is right,” Scott said. “I’m convinced Ingle’s only involvement was to expose Blunt’s bunyip-baiting, and I make this public appeal to the military high command to release him before an absurd travesty of justice occurs.”

The presenter nodded. “How quickly we forget that just two years ago Pip Ingle single-handedly saved us from Drago and his star-dimmers, and I for one am baffled by his incarceration.”

“On Meridian in Pip’s home town of Azarath,” Michael said, “there’s to be a public rally on Saturday with bands like *Manic Overload* and *The Green Bunyips* performing free of charge. I hope similar rallies can be organised right across the galaxy.”

“That sounds like a great initiative and I wish you well. For anyone requiring further information, just follow the ultranet link appearing on your screen.”

* * *

“Thank you,” the lead singer of *The Green Bunyips* said once the cheering and applause from their thousands of supporters began to ease. “It’s wonderful to see so many of you here today in support of Pip.” He glanced around the crowd. “Are Richard and Patricia here by any chance today?”

A man and woman, their blonde hair turning to grey, moved forward as the fans parted, joining him on stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let’s give a warm welcome to Pip’s parents, Richard and Patricia Ingle!”

The crowd once again cheered and clapped as Richard and Patricia tried to smile, blushing while holding each other’s hand for support.

“Richard and Patricia, like many others in this city, came here as refugees from Bluehaven during the war, and it was in that post-war period following the time freeze that Pip grew up, attending school here before becoming a Delphinidae acolyte. Patricia told me during rehearsals that, in his childhood, Pip loved to sing the Elfstar Song, a nursery rhyme many of you are no doubt familiar with and, as it turned out, prophetic of the task he was destined to perform. As a tribute to Pip, and with the support of his parents here, we’ve added another verse to this age-old classic and it now gives me the greatest of pleasure to perform it for you today.”

The band readied their instruments as the crowd hushed.

*“In Elfstar’s light we run with joy,
Across the field, each girl and boy.
O’er hill and dale we run and run,
until at last the night is done.
In dawn’s soft glow we rest our heads,
and wake up in our cosy beds.”*

He waved for the crowd to join in.

*“Oh Elfstar with your silver beams,
take us nightly in our dreams.
To Bluehaven, our long lost home,
where ancient Dolphins vainly roam.
In search of what they cannot find,
with many souls but just one mind.”*

Everyone hushed as he began the third verse.

*“Those souls an ancient king ensnared,
an evil mind whose thoughts they shared.
Until came Pip, so brave and true,
when darkness fell, that king he slew.
In Elfstar’s light they now are free,
to swim in peace throughout the sea.”*

“It was Pip who set the Dolphins free,” the lead singer said, “and now it falls to us to do the same for him. For Pip!”

“*For Pip!*” shouted the crowd.

“Set him free!”

“*Set him free!*”

Patricia whispered something to the singer, who handed her the microphone. “I can’t tell you how much your support means to us, but there’s another whom we mustn’t forget. Owen Lachlan put his life on the line defending Pip against that ridiculous charge of treason, only to find himself facing the firing squad as well.”

“*For Owen!*” the crowd shouted. “*Set him free!*”

“*What do we want?*”

“*Pip and Owen!*”

“*When do we want them?*”

“*NOW!*”

* * *

“The Generals will see you now, sir,” the young lieutenant said to Brigadier Piper. He nodded, running his fingers through his beard before stepping through the door to address the galaxy’s Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“At ease, Piper,” General Walker said, responding to Piper’s salute.

“You’ve read my report, sir?” Piper asked before immediately regretting it, as he wouldn’t have been summoned if they hadn’t.

“You’re asking us to relieve General Gallagher of his command, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. I have the greatest respect for the man and his past actions, however I believe with his coup here and now on Eridani, he’s no longer acting rationally. The growing public unrest over Ingle is symptomatic of that.”

“Supposing for a moment that we were to agree to your request, do you see yourself becoming his replacement?”

“No, of course not, sir. I have a long way to go before earning a general’s stripes, and in any case I’m not sure if I’d be suited to such a rank. If the truth be known, I’m still not entirely comfortable with the brigadier’s stripes you bestowed upon me.”

“So do you have anyone in mind to become our head of state?”

“As it happens, sir, Mark Collins is back in our galaxy, caught up in this same bunyip business that has Gallagher running all over the universe. I know there was a lot of unpleasantness over his handling of the Drago affair, but aside from that his government was competent and well-run by all accounts.”

“I see.” Walker glanced at the other two generals, exchanging nods and raised eyebrows. “Would you be so kind as to step outside for a moment?”

“Of course, sir,” Piper said.

“If you don’t mind my asking, sir,” the lieutenant said as Piper waited in the outer office, “are they going to execute you?”

“What? No, nothing like that.”

“I’m sorry, sir, it’s just that from the look on your face –”

The intercom buzzed, relieving him of his embarrassment.

“They want you back inside now, sir.”

“Piper, I’m afraid we can’t agree to your request.”

The brigadier bowed his head, focusing on the base of the desk in front of him. He was still determined to topple Gallagher and secure the release of Pip and Owen, but without the support of the Chiefs of Staff, his task would be a lot more difficult.

“If we’re going to have any chance of making this work,” Walker continued, “you’ll have to accept a promotion.”

“What? Sir?”

“General Piper, you are now acting head of Special Operations, replacing General Gallagher who is suspended from active duty pending the results of a psychiatric examination.”

“Thank you, sir, I think.”

“Release Ingle before some idiot junior officer decides to take matters into his own hands and triggers a civilian uprising we’d rather not have to deal with. You may also appoint Mark Collins as head of state on the proviso that, once this current crisis is over, a fresh election is held at the earliest opportunity.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Resolve this mess quickly and cleanly, Piper, for everyone’s sakes.”

* * *

“With public rallies in support of Pip Ingle now reaching a crescendo across the galaxy, rumours abound regarding General Gallagher’s prolonged absence and of rumblings of discontent amongst the upper echelons of the military. We cross live to the steps of Government House on Meridian where we believe a military spokesman is about to make an announcement.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, could I have a moment of your time please. I’m General Piper and have been appointed as acting head of Special Operations following General Gallagher’s suspension from active duty earlier today. As my first and foremost duty, I’ve given orders for the release of Pip Ingle and Owen Lachlan from military custody and am awaiting confirmation from my senior staff that this has occurred.

“Furthermore, it’s the intention of both my superiors and myself that this galaxy be returned immediately to civilian rule, and I’m pleased to announce that someone familiar to us all has agreed to serve as interim Supreme Councillor until such time as our present difficulties are overcome and fresh elections can be held. I welcome now our former head of state, Mark Collins, perhaps better known as Mark the Bewildered.”

Mark stepped out to join him, accompanied by Lorina and the children. Joel had been content to remain in the wings with Chris, but

at the last moment Loraine had grabbed hold of his hand, pulling him out with her onto centre stage.

“Praise the Bewildered One!” chanted the crowd as Mark raised his hands.

“I, um, I really don’t know what to say. Just last week I was holidaying with my family, blissfully unaware of the events unfolding here, only to be arrested by General Gallagher while rescuing our children from a wild animal he set loose on Earth. Even now, Gallagher is still holding my parents and grandparents, along with the High Councillor of Eridani and her husband, and has taken them with him on his campaign to conquer that world. As if that wasn’t enough, we narrowly escaped arrest in the Great Library of Cornipus for asking the wrong questions when trying to find an explanation for what’s been going on. I hope, then, that you’ll forgive me for not having prepared a proper acceptance speech.

“What I will say, though, is that my acceptance of this position is conditional upon it being a transitional arrangement only, after which free and open elections will be held for you to choose my replacement. Bunyip-baiting aside, I believe Alistair Blunt’s government was competent and well-regarded by most, and I’ll be making no changes to the departmental administrations here. My sole aim is to restore stability and good governance, allowing this galaxy a speedy return to self-determination, and I’ve been assured by General Piper that I’ll have the full backing of the military in this regard.

“The hour grows late and my family and I are tired after what has been an exhausting time for us. In the days ahead I’ll reconvene your governing council and work with them to consolidate a detailed plan for restoring this galaxy to full democracy. Good night and once again I thank you.”

Lorina moved up to the microphone as Mark stood aside. “Although the Delphinidae are no longer a major player in the politics of our galaxy, as High Priestess I announce tonight that we fully support Pip Ingle and his Black Delphinidae in their fight against bunyip-baiting and will assist in whatever way we can. The allegations made by General Gallagher against that creed were totally without foundation and I call upon their former supporters to rally behind the cause.”

Lorina raised her hands as the crowd cheered. “I also have a family now whose welfare I must consider, and I’d hoped to return to Earth with them as soon as possible, but in light of what’s happened we’ll remain here with Mark until his job is completed.”

David grinned but Loraine looked stricken, turning towards Joel and gripping his hand even tighter.

Lorina glanced at the children, suddenly realising that this moment was sufficiently newsworthy to be broadcast to Earth. “We’re grateful to our children’s friend, Joel Morison, who’s been a great help, and will of course make sure he’s returned safely to his parents as soon as possible.”

“But, Mum –”

Lorina gave Loraine her *best behaviour* look, silencing her. “He’ll be returned to his parents as soon as possible. Now as Mark said, the hour is late and the three children here should really be in bed, so thank you and good night.”

The crowd of onlookers cheered as General Piper led the new Supreme Councillor and his family back inside, but as soon as the door closed, Captain Harrison pulled him aside.

“Excuse me, sir, but I’ve been unable to confirm the release of Ingle and Lachlan.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no-one in Special Operations answering my calls.”

Piper grimaced. “Go there as quick as you can and pray you’re not too late. I fear we haven’t seen the last of Gallagher’s duplicity.”

“We’ll come with you,” Clem said, waving Mog and Russell to join him.

Harrison glanced at Piper, who nodded. “Come on then.”

* * *

Captain Harrison landed the *Excelsior* outside its hangar on Nimer, leaping from the craft and running towards the Special Operations headquarters as soon as he’d opened the hatch. Clem, Russell and Mog followed in his footsteps, hoping no armed soldiers would take exception to civilians invading their realm.

“This place is deserted,” Russell said as they ran through empty corridors.

“No wonder my calls went unanswered,” Harrison said. “That can mean only one thing. Follow me!”

Emerging from the end of the building, they crossed a broad courtyard before heading down a narrow passageway at its far end. On the other side a running track surrounded a training oval, in the centre of which a dozen soldiers raised their weapons towards two blindfolded figures standing on a raised platform.

“Take aim,” the lieutenant commanding them shouted.

“Croft!” Harrison yelled. “What the hell are you doing? General Piper explicitly ordered that Ingle and Lachlan were to be released.”

Lieutenant Croft spat on the ground. “When General Gallagher left, he told me that if anyone here should try to overthrow him, I was to execute Ingle and Lachlan immediately. Those were *my* orders, Captain, and a true soldier *never* questions his orders.”

Four of the soldiers turned their weapons on Harrison and his companions while the rest maintained their aim on Pip and Owen.

“Don’t do this, Croft. Gallagher’s lost his marbles, honestly. Ingle and Lachlan were on our side in the Drago business, don’t forget that, and they had nothing to do with Blunt’s killing.”

Croft turned back to his soldiers. “Fire,” he said softly, but at the same moment the air in front of Pip and Owen began to shimmer, swirling and thickening like a condensing cloud as a huge black dolphin took form, its body obscuring them from view.

“It’s just a conjurer’s trick,” Croft shouted. “Fire, damn it, fire!”

As the soldiers raised their weapons again, the dolphin turned towards them, its features now morphing into something else entirely. With flippers becoming arms and its tail dividing into legs, the creature stood, towering over them as the mouth of what had become a wolf’s head opened. With glistening saliva dripping from razor-sharp teeth, it howled in rage as the soldiers opened fire, their bullets deflecting harmlessly away. Having no other option, the men turned, running for safety behind the walls of the compound.

“Come back, you cowards!” Croft shouted, but to no avail. He pulled out his service pistol, firing repeatedly at the figure until his bullets ran out.

“It’s over, Croft,” Harrison said, stepping towards him while placing a call to the military police.

“No, it’s only just beginning,” Croft said, raising his hands in surrender. “You mark my words.”

The creature turned to face Clem and Mog, now unmistakably the indigenous warrior from the *Night Terrors* statue. As Clem’s hand found Mog’s, the figure’s expression softened, its rage now spent. Diminishing to human size, it looked at them with pleading eyes, eyes Clem was sure he’d seen elsewhere.

“Give back my people,” a voice said in Clem’s mind as the warrior’s mouth moved. “Give them back.”

Mog glanced at Clem, indicating she’d heard it too. As they watched in wonder, the warrior faded and disappeared, revealing Pip and Owen standing behind it, still blindfolded. Russell dashed towards them while Clem and Mog stared into each other’s eyes.

“Did you recognise it?” Mog asked.

“The warrior from the *Night Terrors* statue,” Clem said.

“I think you’re right, but what did it mean about giving back its people?”

“I don’t know, but there was something about its eyes, don’t you think?”

“Come and help!” Russell shouted, struggling to remove Pip’s bindings. “You two can smooch all you want later.”

“Are you okay?” Clem asked Pip while Mog tended to Owen.

“I think so.”

“That was amazing,” Russell said. “How’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“The creature.”

“I didn’t do anything, only when Croft told those soldiers to fire, I felt the Black Dolphin’s essence inside me saying to be calm and that it wasn’t the end. The next thing I knew, you guys were untying me.”

Clem stared into space as his grandfather’s last words came back to him.

“*Oh my, can you see that?*”

“*What? See what?*”

“The Black Dolphin, Clem, He’s nothing like we imagined.”

“In truth,” Clem said to himself, “all things are the same.”

“What did you say?” Mog asked.

“I’m not really sure.”

* * *

“Pip! Owen!” Lorina cried, dashing to embrace them as they entered Government House through a scrum of reporters. “I didn’t know what to think.”

“Captain Harrison arrived just in time,” Owen said, “although I think Pip had everything under control.”

Pip only looked more confused than normal.

“You’re safe and that’s what matters,” Mark said, coming forward to shake their hands.

“You look terrible,” Chris said to Pip.

“I’m just tired, that’s all, and glad to be out of that prison.”

Chris caught him as he began to topple. “Do you want me to fetch a doctor?”

“No, just a bed will be fine.”

“I really think –” Lorina began to say, but Mark hushed her.

“Come this way,” he said, leading them towards the lifts. “We’ve reserved the ambassadorial suite for you.”

“You three as well,” Lorina said to Mog, Clem and Russell. “There’s no shortage of accommodation here.”

* * *

Clem stared at the bed before him, wondering how he could possibly sleep after all that had happened, when someone knocked on his door. He opened it to find Mog standing on the threshold.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Come on in. I don’t think I’m ready for sleep yet.”

She sat on the bed, pulling him down beside her. “Me neither.”

“What an incredible day this has been.”

“I’ll say. My grandfather will be wishing he’d joined us when I tell him about it.”

“The botanist?”

“Yes.”

“How much does he know of the truth behind honey-grass?”

“All of it, of course, which is why he’s like he is.”

“It affected his mind?”

“No, silly, it’s his insurance. If everyone thinks he’s lost his marbles, they won’t take anything he says seriously and nobody will get hurt.”

“It’s that bad, is it?”

“Worse.” She took hold of his hand, squeezing it gently. “I’m so glad I’ve met you at last, Clem son of Edwin. Your grandfather’s been telling me all about you.”

“My grandfather?”

“There you go, repeating everything I say again.”

“Jacob died last week.”

“I’m so sorry, Clem; I didn’t know. He was a wonderful man.” She stared into his eyes, her brow furrowed as if weighing up a difficult decision, although in truth it wasn’t difficult at all. “Arms up.”

“Huh?”

“Put your arms up.”

He complied, wondering if he was about to be robbed, but smiled as she began pulling off his shirt.

“Enough talk; it’s time we found out how comfortable this bed is.”

Butterflies

An attendant entered carrying a telephone just as Lorina sat down for breakfast. “There’s a call for you from Earth, my lady.”

“Thank you,” she said, grimacing as she took it from him. “Lorina speaking.”

“It’s Jill Morison here; I saw you on television last night.”

“Yes.”

“Is Joel still with you?”

“He’s just having his breakfast, if you want to speak to him.”

“I will, but it’s you I really need to talk to.”

Lorina gritted her teeth. “I’m so sorry; I should’ve called you but in trying to find David we became caught up in a political crisis here and honestly our feet have barely touched the ground.”

“I saw David on the television so I’m pleased you found him, particularly as he and Joel are such good friends.”

“All the kids are fine, but it looks like we’re going to be kept busy here while Mark sorts everything out. I’ll make sure we have Joel on the first available flight back to Earth.”

“It probably sounds a terrible thing for a mother to say, but I was wondering if you’d mind keeping him with you, at least until the end of the school holidays.”

Lorina’s mouth opened, but it took several seconds for her to force some words to come out. “No, not at all; it’s a pleasure having him with us.”

“Joel’s always been an awkward child, as I’m sure you’ve discovered.”

“Honestly, he’s an angel compared to my two.”

“We’re always a bit hesitant forcing him onto others, but, well, Jack and I were planning a second honeymoon while he was away

with your family. If you need to send him back to us, though, we can always leave it to another time.”

“No, you go ahead with your plans and we’ll keep him safe and sound till you get back.”

“You can’t imagine what a relief that is for us. Your two are Joel’s only close friends and I’m sure he’d be miserable back here spending the rest of the holidays by himself.”

Lorina wondered if she realised just how close one half of that friendship was becoming. “They’re as thick as thieves, the three of them, and we’ll make sure he has a great time here. Now you and Jack go off and enjoy yourselves.”

“Thanks, Lorina; you’re a marvel. I might just have a quick word to Joel now if that’s okay.”

“Sure, I’ll put him on.”

Lorina passed the phone down the table to Joel, who’d taken it upon himself to rid Government House of all its toast and marmalade. “It’s your mother.”

He chewed and swallowed hard before taking it. “Hi, Mum – yes, I’m fine – you wouldn’t believe the amazing libraries they have here! – yes, of course I will – no, I don’t need shoes here, really – that’s great, thanks! – okay, sure, you and Dad have a great time – no, I won’t – I’ll tell her, yes – bye, Mum.”

“That was quick,” Lorina said.

Joel shrugged as he handed the phone back to the attendant. “Mum told me to say thanks for having me.”

“You’re welcome any time, you know that.”

At that moment David and Loraine emerged from the lift, pushing and shoving each other as they headed for the table.

“Guess what?” Joel said, jumping up and down like a jack-in-the-box. “Mum just rang to say I can stay here with you!”

Loraine wrapped him in a bear hug while David chuckled to himself, trying to hide a smirk. Lorina sighed before going in search of her breakfast.

* * *

Clem woke from a deep and restful sleep to see Mog sitting on the bed watching him.

“You look so beautiful when you’re asleep,” she said, running her hand through his hair.

“You mean waking up makes me ugly?”

“Well, yes.” She kissed him on the forehead as he pretended to go back to sleep, forcing him to open his eyes again.

“How is it you knew my grandfather?”

Mog placed her hand under his head, looking deep into his eyes. “You said something really profound yesterday, something that resonated with what Jacob and I had been discussing.”

Clem gave her a puzzled look.

“In truth, all things are the same.”

“Oh, that. I really don’t know what it means; it came to me in one of those moments of clarity when everything seemed to suddenly make sense, but by the time I tried to put words to it I’d lost it again.”

“My grandfather and I are truth-seekers, the same as your Black Delphinidae yet not the same at all.”

Clem stared at her. “We seek the truth through our Black Dolphin, whereas you seek the truth through those indigenous people of Cornipus, am I right?”

Mog nodded. “They’re different yet the same – that’s the message Pip was sending us.”

“Speaking of Pip, we should check in on him before we go down to breakfast. He didn’t look at all well last night.”

“That apparition he created drained him to the point of collapse, I’m sure.”

Clem climbed out of bed, hunting around for the clothes he’d so hastily discarded the night before. Mog watched on, smiling as he dressed.

Clem knocked softly on the door to the ambassadorial suite, hoping not to wake Pip if he was still asleep. When no response came, he quietly pushed it open, a feeling of unease growing in the pit of his stomach.

He’d never been in an ambassadorial suite before and was almost blown away by the extravagant opulence. A golden suit of armour

stood next to the door, although for what purpose he had no idea, while throughout the room hung lavish paintings mounted in silver frames. A thick hand-woven carpet covered the floor, tickling his soles as he crept towards the open bedroom door.

Inside, the canopy bed was empty, the covers pushed aside in disarray, while Pip's Black Delphinidae shorts, the only clothing he'd been wearing, lay on the floor in the corner where he must have thrown them before going to sleep. Clem quickly looked around the room, almost checking the closets and under the bed in case Pip was playing hide and seek, before deciding that was pretty unlikely. *Where could he be?*

Mog put her hand on his shoulder, causing him to jump.

"He can't have just vanished, can he?"

Clem was about to suggest looking inside the suit of armour when a flushing sounded from behind the wall. A moment later a panel opened, revealing a concealed en-suite with Pip standing naked in the threshold and staring at his two intruders. "Can't a man do *anything* in private around here?"

"Sorry," Mog said, "but Clem was worried you might have died during the night."

"I wasn't! Well perhaps just a little."

"Good grief," Pip said, grabbing a towel from the bathroom and wrapping it around his waist. "I suppose I should be grateful for your concern, but really."

"You're, um, looking a lot better this morning," Clem said, blushing.

"A good night's sleep will do wonders. Now if you'll give me a moment to make myself presentable, we can perhaps see if Lorina's hospitality extends to breakfast."

"Of course," Mog said, pulling Clem with her as she backed out of the room.

"Pip!" Lorina said, dashing over to embrace him as he stepped from the lift ahead of Clem and Mog.

"Don't tell me you were expecting me to die in my sleep too."

"What? No, but you really did look awful last night."

"I must have, I suppose."

“Come and grab some breakfast. I’m sure you must be famished after all you’ve been through.”

Pip looked thoughtfully at the table. “I am, now that you mention it.”

Joel stood, offering him his seat.

“No, don’t let me interrupt your breakfast.”

“It’s okay; I reckon I’ve eaten enough now anyway.”

“Any more and he’d start oinking,” David said.

“David!” Lorina said.

“What?”

“Joel’s our guest and you’ll treat him accordingly.”

Joel shrugged, blushing, while David scowled.

“What’s going on here?” Mark asked as he strode in, a phone in one hand and a stack of papers in the other.

“Nothing,” David said.

“It sounded like a very noisy nothing to me.”

“I see they’ve got you working already,” Chris said.

“He’s been up since dawn,” Lorina said, “making phone calls and organising meetings.”

“Have I missed something?” Pip asked.

“Mark’s Supreme Councillor again,” Chris said.

“Interim Supreme Councillor,” Lorina said.

“Gosh. How’d that happen?”

Mark shrugged. “I’m not really sure. Look, I’m going to be tied up all day with committees and subcommittees, but Frank just called to suggest you might all like to go out to his place.”

“That’s a good idea,” Lorina said. “At least there’s room out there for the kids to run around.”

“I was going there anyway to check up on my bunyip,” Clem said.

“You have a bunyip?” Mog asked.

“I’ll tell you the story on the way out there.”

“How about you, Pip?” Mark asked.

“Yes, I need to see Frank to thank him for his help and support during my imprisonment.”

“I guess it’s settled then. I’ll organise some transport for you.”

Joel supposed that, if he'd thought about it at all, he'd have imagined they'd be travelling to Frank's place by bus, and so was surprised to see three chauffeur-driven black limousines waiting for them outside. Pip, Russell, Clem and Mog boarded the first car while Lorina, Chris and Owen chose the second and the three kids took the third. With government flags flying, they headed off in convoy to join the motorway heading west towards Azarath.

Joel's car was like a miniature meeting room, with a central table between forward and backward-facing seats and thick glass separating the driver from the passengers. It even had a cabinet filled with bottles of liquor, but when David tried to open it he discovered it was securely locked. Joel found some magazines tucked away in a pocket, passing them to Loraine to translate as he couldn't read any of the writing.

"It's all just boring financial and business stuff," she said after giving them a quick flick through. "Aren't there any comics or anything?"

"Afraid not."

"What else is there to do?" David asked.

After three hours of *I spy with my little eye* interspersed with cries of '*Are we there yet?*' they left the motorway at the Rutherford exit, passing through farmland and vineyards before filing up the narrow road to Frank's mansion. Joel bounded out of the car, glad to be able to stretch his legs after so much sitting.

From around the side of the building came Number Five, yipping with delight as he made a bee-line towards Clem. Joel thought the bunyip looked bigger than he remembered it, but it couldn't possibly have grown that much in the short time since they'd left for Cornipus.

"So this is the bunyip-baiting champion," Mog said, scratching him behind the ears. "Was he always this big?"

"No," Clem said, "he's been growing quite a lot since his exposure to Frizian honey, but apart from fighting the other bunyips in the ring, he's not shown any signs of aggression."

Mog scratched her chin. "Maybe the big bunyips aren't all necessarily aggressive."

"The one we saw in the nexus sure was," Joel said.

“What nexus?” Mog asked, but at that moment Frank appeared, following at a more sedate pace in the wake of the bunyip.

“Pip, Owen, it’s so wonderful to see you both free at last,” he said, shaking their hands. “I wish there was more I could have done to help you.”

“You did more than enough,” Pip said. “I owe you all a huge debt of gratitude, really.”

Frank nodded. “Everyone come around the back. I thought as it’s such a nice day we could have a picnic to celebrate Pip and Owen’s freedom.”

Behind the mansion, three picnic rugs were spread out on the lawn, along with a collection of folding tables and chairs. Smoke rose from a barbecue where an Elvish woman stood preparing the food.

“Everyone,” Frank said, “this is Cloe Enderling, Damon’s sister.”

Cloe dashed over to Pip, wrapping him in a hug while repeatedly kissing him on the nose. Pip looked bamboozled for a moment before hugging and kissing her back.

“Have you heard from your brother recently?” he asked her.

“No, the last message I received would have been six months ago, at least.”

Pip scratched his head. “Yes, that was about when I last heard from him too.”

“I hope he’s okay.”

“I’ve been out of communication with everyone for a while, but maybe there’ll be something waiting for me when I get the chance to go through my e-mails.”

Cloe smiled. “*The Green Bunyips* put on a fantastic show for you on Saturday. You should’ve been there!”

“I wish I had.”

“If he’d been there,” Lorina said, “there wouldn’t have been a show.”

Cloe blushed. “You’re right of course. Silly me!”

“So tell us what happened on Nimber, Pip. We’re all dying to hear it.”

Pip looked at Owen, who looked at Clem, who looked at Mog, who looked at Russell. Not having anyone else to pass the buck to, Russell cleared his throat.

“When we arrived with Captain Harrison, the barracks were deserted so he led us outside to a training field where a whole lot of soldiers were about to shoot Pip and Owen. Pip did something, though, making the Black Dolphin appear, but then it changed into one of those indigenous Cornipeans like we saw in the *Night Terrors* statue, complete with its animal face.”

Joel gasped. “I thought that was just a mask he was wearing. You mean his actual face was like a wolf’s?”

“Whatever a wolf is, but yes, I guess so.”

“There was something about its eyes,” Clem began, but suddenly stopped, staring at Number Five and seeing those same eyes looking back at him. “No, it couldn’t be, surely.”

“What couldn’t be?”

“Um, Joel, back when we first came here, you said something odd.”

“He’s always saying odd stuff,” David said, glancing at his mother in anticipation of another reprimand.

“Something about flying butter, wasn’t it?”

“I remember. He said bunyips are like butterflies.”

“That’s right!” Joel said, but his jaw dropped as a memory from his early childhood, the one that had previously eluded him, came flooding back. It was a summer morning, he remembered now, and he’d been playing in the back yard of their home while his father pulled weeds from the garden.

“Daddy, what’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“There.” He pointed to a silky husk hanging by a thread on the side of the house.

“It’s a cocoon.”

“A what?”

“Caterpillars make them. They eat and eat until they’re big and fat, then they spin a cocoon around themselves.”

“Why?”

“It protects them while they’re changing into butterflies.”

“Butterflies?”

“It’s called metamorphosis.”

“Metter more fuss us?”

“Yes, lots of things do it. Grubs turn into moths and butterflies, tadpoles turn into frogs, and even cicadas start off as tiny beetles living underground for years before coming out and changing.”

Joel stared at the cocoon, extrapolating the concept to its logical conclusion. “Daddy, what do people turn into?”

His father leapt up, hands raised above his head and a snarl coming from his mouth. “MONSTERS!”

Although now old enough to differentiate between imagination and reality, Joel’s memory insisted his father had actually changed into a monster just like the beast from the nexus, set to tear him limb from limb with razor-sharp teeth and claws.

“I think Joel’s trying to have another thought,” David said, staring at him.

“I –” Joel almost said, before recalling the dream he’d had about Loraine metamorphosing into a bunyip. Like a juggler throwing all his skittles in the air and catching them one by one, in a blinding flash he saw what it all meant. “Dad said people turn into monsters, but it’s really the other way around!”

David twirled his finger beside his head. “He’s gone totally loopy this time.”

“Are you saying –” Clem began, but Joel couldn’t contain himself any longer.

“The monster bunyips turn into those wolf people like the man in the statue!”

“That’s impossible, surely,” Frank said.

“No, I don’t think so.” Clem reached down, gently lifting Number Five around the shoulders and holding him upright. “Look, his front paws are almost like tiny hands and if his thigh bones were to lengthen and his feet flatten out –”

“And the face too,” Chris said. “His neck would have to grow a little and tilt his head forward, but I can see how it might work.”

Mog looked at the bunyip, nodding as she collected her thoughts. “That explains why the indigenous people vanished when the last of the large bunyips died out.”

“Pip’s apparition told us to give his people back,” Clem said. “That’s what it all means and it’s what the Black Dolphin wants us to do.”

“What we think of as the Black Dolphin is really the embodiment of all sentient beings,” Pip said, “including those bunyip people.”

“*In truth, all things are the same,*” Mog said.

“Exactly. Whether we see it as a dolphin or a bunyip makes no difference.”

“It’s the truth behind all those secrets and lies. Those first settlers on Cornipus inadvertently committed genocide when they engineered honey-grass to stop the buniyps from growing up, as only mature ones could metamorphose into indigenous people. Why didn’t I see it sooner?”

“Because it was hiding in plain sight,” Clem said.

Clem released Number Five as he started squirming, but as soon as his feet touched the ground he dashed over to where Cloe was preparing the food, leaping up and grabbing a steak that was hanging over the edge of a plate. In four enormous bites, it was gone.

“He sure wolfed that down,” Joel said.

“Bad choice of words,” David said.

Lorina scratched her head. “I thought buniyps were supposed to be herbivores.”

“They do eat small lizards and frogs occasionally,” Mog said, “but I guess they go for bigger game once they start metamorphosing.”

“Including people?” Joel asked.

Number Five looked at him, licking the remaining juices from his lips.

Part Four
Reclamation

Angust

Anton led Jim and Pedro up the stairs from the basement of Angust's Boatman Tavern, having just emerged onto Eridani from a portal out of Sheol. The throng of afternoon patrons in the lounge gave them odd looks as they passed through to the street.

"My contact lives in Benton Road," Anton said. "Do you know the area, Jim?"

"Yes, I grew up here and had some friends in that street, but I guess they'd all be dead or extremely old by now."

"I'm sorry; this must be difficult for you."

"It's something I'll have to come to terms with, I suppose."

Jim looked up and down the street, a tree-lined boulevard surfaced with the tough interwoven grass commonly used on minor Eridanian roads, trying to reconcile his memories with what he was now seeing. It looked the same and yet in a way it didn't, until finally he realised with a chuckle what that difference was.

"What's so funny?" Pedro asked.

"Nothing really, it's just that I'm smaller now than I was when living here as an adult and I'm seeing everything from a different perspective."

Pedro compared Jim's current height to his own. "You must have been a pretty tall man then."

"I guess I was."

On their left was a park where groups of children ran about kicking balls to each other. Jim stopped walking, staring at it.

"I remember Elko sometimes bringing me here at night. He'd set up a telescope and we'd look at the other inhabited star systems in our galaxy." He turned to Pedro. "He often pointed out Earth's sun, telling me fantastic stories about the people he knew there."

Pedro placed a hand on his shoulder. “I never met him until we arrived in the City of Towers. What was he like in life?”

“Oh, much the same I guess. He was always worried about the Barradhim, trying to anticipate what they were up to and keep one step ahead of them.”

“It sounds like nothing much has changed then,” Anton said, “if the reports I’ve heard are anything to go by. Given their history, I don’t understand why the Eridanian government gave them such a free rein.”

“That was mostly Elko’s doing,” Jim said. “He and Barrad had been childhood friends and after their reconciliation he convinced the government here to enlist the Barradhim as a galactic trouble-shooting force.”

“That was probably a good idea while Barrad was alive, but after his death it became something of a free-for-all, making them easy prey for Gallagher to infiltrate.”

“Can this contact you’re taking us to be trusted?” Pedro asked.

“I believe so. He hasn’t been actively involved for many years but likes to keep his finger on the pulse. The information he’s given me in the past has always proved accurate.”

“All the more reason to be wary of him.”

“I know, and don’t worry, I am.”

The house Anton approached in Benton Road, a modest brick and tile dwelling, looked much like all the others in this quiet street. An aging Eridanian man opened the door in response to his knocking.

“Hello Anton. I can’t say I’m not expecting you after all that’s been happening here.”

“You’re looking well for a man of your years.”

“So are you. Who are your young friends?”

“Jim and Pedro, meet Jameed.”

Pedro nodded while Jim offered his hand.

“Jim, did you say? Don’t I know you?”

“I, um, I don’t think so.”

“Strange, you look familiar, but never mind. Come on in and I’ll make some tea.”

“I take it,” Anton said while following him through to the kitchen, “that General Gallagher has arrived on the planet.”

“By all accounts he stormed into the capital and formally dissolved the Council while saying something strange about acting for the greater good. After that he commandeered an aircraft to take him and his hostages down south.”

“South? Do you know where?”

“Now Anton, really, you know me better than that.”

Anton pulled out his wallet, making a show of how empty it was.

“How do you like your tea, boys?”

“Um,” Jim said.

“Hot and black,” Pedro said.

“Five hundred tops,” Anton said, pulling out a handful of crumpled Eridanian bills.

“It was somewhere near the new ocean, I think, but my memory isn’t too good these days.”

“All right, seven hundred.”

Jameed handed Jim and Pedro their tea. “It might have been Ashmore, or perhaps Newberry.”

Anton shook his head. “Eight hundred.”

“All right, they landed in Port Jimmac and took a boat from there to the islands.”

Pedro slapped Jim on the back as he coughed up a mouthful of tea.

“Is something the matter?”

“No,” Jim spluttered, “it tried to go down the wrong way, that’s all.”

“A thousand if you tell me which island.”

“You drive a hard bargain, old friend. Have you ever considered entering the diplomatic corps? They could use someone like you.”

“Which island?”

Jameed sighed. “I don’t know its proper name but it’s the large one just south of Hamlin Island. It’s supposed to be a wilderness reserve and off-limits to visitors, but I doubt General Gallagher would let anything like that stop him.”

Anton opened his jacket, taking out a wad of crisp new Eridanian bills. As Jameed made to grab it, though, he pulled it back again. “We’re going to need transport to the southern hemisphere.”

“There are buses –”

“We need to get there quickly.”

Jameed scowled, staring firstly at Anton and then at the wad of money in his hand. “Go talk to Ben. He might be able to help you.”

“Where do I find this Ben?”

Jameed hunted around for a pen and some paper. “He’s about five blocks up the hill, in Timbal Road.”

“Can he be trusted?”

“Can anyone be trusted?”

“I guess not.” Anton handed him the money. “Put it to good use and buy some decent tea.”

“Port Jimmac!” Jim said as they walked back out onto the road. “Those bastards have named a goddamned town after me!”

“So that’s what caused you to almost choke in there,” Pedro said, chuckling.

“I think you’re going to be in for a lot more surprises like that,” Anton said, unfolding the note Jameed had given him. “Does this look familiar?”

Jim stared at it, his jaw drooping.

Ben Tulee
57 Timbal Road

“What’s wrong?” Pedro asked.

Jim rubbed his eyes, trying to make sense of the emotions churning through him. “That’s where I used to live and I think, well I’m pretty sure, Ben’s my son.”

“Oh brother.”

“Look,” Anton said, “we can make other arrangements; find someone else to take us south, if –”

“No, it’s all right, but there’s somewhere I’d like to go before we see him, if you don’t mind. It’s not far.”

Anton nodded, guessing where Jim had in mind.

Long shadows darkened the cemetery as the sun dipped towards the horizon, adding to the trepidation Jim felt as they passed beneath

the stone archway at its entrance. The gatekeeper looked up as they approached.

“We’re looking for the grave of Jimmac Tulee,” Jim said.

“Family, are you?”

“Yes, you could say that.”

The gatekeeper nodded, pulling out a printed map and circling an area in the top left hand corner. “Take the main path up as far as the fountain, then go left through to the memorial ponds. You’ll find it’s well marked.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Pedro asked as they followed the directions.

“Yes, I, um, I need to see it with my own eyes, I think.”

A family gathered away to their right, tending to the grave of a loved one no doubt, but otherwise they had the cemetery to themselves. Jim felt goose bumps erupting on his arms as they entered the shadows of a grove of trees, even though until now the day had been warm. A bird called from amongst the foliage, a soft cooing in keeping with such a place, while from ahead came the splashing of the fountain Jim recalled playing in as a child, to the great consternation of his aptly-named Aunt Misery. She’d considered happiness a sin at the best of times, he recalled, but especially when visiting the last resting place of her long-suffering husband. *Last resting place* – the very thought sent shivers through him. *Had anyone else ever done what he was about to do?*

“The cemetery’s not as big as I would have thought,” Pedro said, breaking the silence.

“This one’s only been in use for a few hundred years,” Jim said. “There’s a much older one on the other side of the river.”

“Haunted by much older ghosts no doubt,” Anton said, immediately regretting it when he saw the look on Jim’s face. “Sorry.”

“No, that’s all right; it’s just that I’m starting to wonder whether what’s happened to me is a blessing or a curse.”

“A bit of both, I expect,” Pedro said. “I guess I experienced something of what you’re feeling when I came face to face with Peter in that nexus.”

Jim nodded.

A sign informed them that the weed-infested water on either side of the path was the *Memorial Ponds*. Consulting his map again, Jim turned to the right, checking the headstones before suddenly coming face to face with a sign bearing the image he'd grown accustomed to seeing in the bathroom mirror of his former home.

"Gosh," Pedro said from behind him.

Jimmac Tulee

(known on Earth as Jim Hamilton)

*In commemoration of distinguished service as Police Minister and
Deputy High Councillor.*

Loving husband of Dornie and father of Ben.

Rest in peace.

Jim looked down at the stone slab set into the ground before him. Two metres below, *resting in peace*, were his mortal remains, the same flesh and blood as his new fourteen-year-old self. *But was it?* He recalled the time cusp surrounding Todd and Elissi's wedding in which Peter Thorpe had died in one time line but survived in the other. When the time lines had merged, his remains had reconstituted themselves into a living body, leaving behind a hole in the ground. *Had the same happened here? Was the coffin buried below his feet now empty?*

There were ways to find out, to be sure; as a former Police Minister he knew that. What he didn't know was whether he really wanted to.

Pedro came to stand beside him, putting an arm around his shoulder. "You're thinking about what might be buried here, aren't you?"

"How can I be both alive and dead?"

"The same way I can come face to face with Peter, I suppose, although I'd have thought the law of conservation of mass would've had something to say about it."

"Huh?"

"Is the universe now heavier by two fourteen-year-olds than it was a week ago?"

"I was a public servant, Pedro, not a scientist. I have no idea."

“Peter would know the answer, I’m sure.”

“We can ask him when we find him, I suppose.”

“Jim,” Anton said, walking back over to him. “There’s something here I think you should see.”

“What is it?”

“You’re not going to like it, but I thought if we’re going to see Ben it’d be best if you knew beforehand, like —”

Jim stopped, staring at the headstone glowing eerily before him in the twilight. He knelt to read the inscription but didn’t need to; he knew already what it would say.

Dornie Tulee
Loving wife of Jimmac and mother of Ben
Rest in peace together.

The headstone felt icy cold as he reached out to touch it, eyes closed in a vain attempt to hold back the tears. How he wished now that he’d remained beneath the ground in the adjoining grave, or remained in Sheol to accompany her to whatever might lie beyond. *Why hadn’t she come to the City of Towers? Why hadn’t Charon carried her across the River Styx to join him there? Why hadn’t he felt something? Why hadn’t he known?*

The tears flowed freely now, coming in fitful sobs as he tried to deny his existence, wishing only that whatever force had given him this body would take it back, sending his soul into oblivion where it belonged. Had his hand held a dagger he’d have known what to do with it, but no, the only blades within reach were blades of grass. He tore at them anyway, taking out his anger as he shredded and pulverised them, doing to the blades what they couldn’t do to him.

The twilight faded, taking the words of the inscription beyond his sight. He held his head against the stone, hoping for some psychic connection to the woman he’d loved, still loved with all his heart, but all he felt was the icy coldness of death, cold and absolute death.

He found himself now standing, the tears drying on his cheeks in the cool night air. Above, the stars began to show as the last light of day faded in the west. That light would soon return, the way it always did, but never again would it carry any warmth or any joy. Aunt Misery had been right; happiness was an illusion only fools believed

in, a scam to hide the true nature of an uncaring universe, a straw for drowning men to clutch.

He lifted the front of his shirt, using it to wipe his face as he turned towards his friends. He still had a job to do, a mystery to solve, and perhaps then the universe might take pity on him. Without looking back, he returned to the fountain where they waited in silence, ready now to face his next ordeal.

“Let’s go and see Ben.”

* * *

Jim stared at the wooden bungalow identified by the numerals 57 on the letterbox. Cosy lights shone from behind the closed curtains of the living room, suggesting a happy family going about their everyday evening rituals, lives he was about to turn on their heads.

On the last day of his previous life he’d stood where he was now, having fortuitously met Peter Thorpe and Billy Collins while out for his late afternoon walk. After spending hours telling them of his time on Earth, he’d walked them back to his home where Dornie had come out to greet them.

“Dornie, this is Peter Thorpe and Billy Collins from Earth.”

“You’re not that Peter Thorpe, are you? Jim’s often told me the story about his time on Earth with you, but honestly I thought he was making it all up.”

“No, I’m definitely real and it definitely happened, but in a different version of reality to this one.”

“That’s what Jim’s always said, but I’ve never really understood.”

“I’ve invited them to come around tomorrow morning so I can finish telling them my story,” Jim said.

“That’ll be wonderful; you’re both most welcome. Where are you staying in town?”

“We’re with Rendel and Anthia Harrish,” Billy said. “Rendel’s my wife’s brother’s wife’s brother.”

She counted all the wives and brothers on her fingers before nodding.

“Young Norrie’s folks,” she said. “He and our son are the best of friends. What a small world it is.”

“Well we’d better let you go inside,” Peter said. “The air is starting to turn cool.”

“Yes, the doctor would have a fit if he knew I was standing around out here at this time of night,” Jim said. “Until tomorrow then, my friends.”

But that tomorrow never came, as during the night Jim’s body and soul parted company, leaving him wandering through the darkness of Sheol until attracted like a moth to Pedro’s orange glow.

“Go now, my friends, and do not return to this realm,” he’d said to Billy and Peter after convincing Pedro to let go of his hatred and release them. *“Sheol is no place for the living.”* He realised now that the converse was also true; that the physical world is no place for the dead.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Anton asked.

“Yes.”

A boy who could have been Jim’s twin answered the door in response to Anton’s knocking.

“Is your father home?”

“Sure, I’ll get him for you.”

Pedro put a hand on Jim’s shoulder, stopping him from toppling over backwards as a middle-aged man came to the door.

“You must be Anton,” he said. “Jameed called to say you were coming. Go on through to the living room.”

Ben had changed little in the fifteen years since Jim had last seen him, his hair not yet beginning to grey and his smile as friendly and welcoming as always. With a bit of quick mental arithmetic, Jim put his age at fifty-one.

He remembered Ben’s wedding, held in pouring rain at the riverside chapel. He and Dornie had been so proud of their son that day, looking forward, as all parents did, to many years of watching their grandchildren grow. But fate had other ideas.

Shortly after the wedding, Ben’s work with the Southern Ocean Authority had taken them away from Angust, and Jim had only visited them once before his illness made such travel impossible. Ben’s wife, Suzie, had suffered a miscarriage, making the prospect of any immediate grandchildren unlikely, and so Jim’s life had ebbed

away with the hollow sadness of that unfulfilled dream always in the back of his mind.

“This is Suzie and our son James,” Ben said as they entered the brightly lit room, causing Jim’s head to spin again.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Anton,” Suzie said. “Who are your friends?”

“This is Jim and the Earthling’s Pedro.”

Pedro shook everyone’s hands while Jim tried his best to remain upright.

“Jim’s the spitting image of James, don’t you think?” Ben said. “When I saw him at the door I thought James was playing tricks on me.”

Jim’s knees buckled as the room spun around him before disappearing into oblivion.

“Drink this,” a voice said from somewhere far away. Jim opened his eyes to see Suzie leaning over him and handing him a glass. As he sipped, the bite of the alcohol brought the world back into focus.

“Anton told me who you are,” Ben said, “although I can scarcely believe it.”

“It’s true, although I don’t know how or why.”

Ben picked up a framed photograph, taken some forty years ago when he’d been still just a boy, studying it for a moment before handing it to Jim. Tears threatened to form again as Dornie’s smiling face looked out at him from across the decades.

“Mum died peacefully in her sleep about six months after you,” Ben said.

Jim nodded, brushing at his eyes.

“A year later James was born,” Suzie said. “We gave him your Earth name; I hope you don’t mind.”

Jim forced a smile. “No, not at all.”

“Are you really my grandfather?” the boy asked.

“As strange and impossible as it might seem, yes, I am.”

“So, um, who’s buried in your grave?”

Jim looked at Pedro. “That’s something only the wise men of science can answer.”

James smiled.

“I once read Peter Thorpe’s account of your spirit rescuing him from his evil twin,” Ben said, “but I thought it was only a product of his imagination.”

“It was true enough,” Pedro said, chuckling. “I’m the evil twin.”

“Your name, of course, but weren’t you supposed to be a big fat man with most of your teeth missing?”

“I changed.”

“In the place we went to,” Jim said, “we reverted to the age at which we’d known each other in life, which is how you see us now.”

“So how’d you come back?” Suzie asked.

“After the city we were staying in collapsed, we emerged through a portal onto Earth only to find ourselves trapped in a remnant from a time cusp back when we were really fourteen. From there, and with the help of Billy Collins’ great-grandchildren, we escaped into a sort of time nexus where we met Elissi, Todd, Norrie and the rest of the Collins family shortly before they were abducted by renegade Barradhim.”

“Those men left us for dead,” Anton said, “but we escaped and have now come in search of General Gallagher and his hostages.”

“Did you say a time nexus?”

“Yes. It was inhabited by a fierce animal one of the kids called a bunyip.”

Ben looked at Suzie. “We’ll speak no more of this now, but if you’d like to stay the night, we’ll take you where you want to go tomorrow.”

Anton and Pedro both turned to Jim.

“You’re most kind, thanks.”

“Any time, Dad,” Ben said. “Now who’s for dinner?”

The Southern Ocean Authority

The air was cool and crisp as they set out for their thirty-minute walk to the Angust airfield. Eridani was a decentralised world, its population living in small towns and villages rather than big cities, and most local travel was on foot or by bicycle with motorised transport reserved for those rare longer journeys.

“Jameed said General Gallagher went by boat from Port Jimmac to one of the islands off the southern coast,” Anton said.

“Your friend has good sources,” Suzie said. “I hope you paid him well.”

“Probably too much, but my boss is somewhat renowned for his generosity.”

“Frank always had a weakness for noble causes,” Ben said.

Anton looked gobsmacked. “You know him?”

“He lived on Eridani for several decades prior to the fall of Morgoth. It was all before my time, but Dad probably knows more of what he was up to.”

“Our paths did cross a few times,” Jim said. “Pedro, what was it you said about him back on Earth?”

“A man with fingers in many pies.”

“That sounds awfully messy,” Suzie said.

“You’d better believe it!” Anton said. “My job is mostly cleaning up his messes.”

“Is that what you’re doing now?”

“No, this time it’s someone else’s mess.”

“General Gallagher’s?”

“I believe so.”

“What can you tell us about him?”

“He’s an old-school career soldier, rising through the ranks under Morgoth’s rule before becoming a general in the aftermath of the

Farley uprising. At the time he aided the new civilian government in weeding dissidents out of the military but that was probably more a case of opportunism than support for their cause.”

“What are his weaknesses?”

“He has a lust for power and a tendency to go in with guns blazing when a diplomatic approach might be more prudent. If he has a motto, it’d be something like *attack is the best form of defence.*”

Suzie chuckled. “He’d be best defeated, then, by keeping a low profile and sneaking in under his guard.”

“I’d say that’s a fair assessment.”

They’d reached a fenced-off field at the top of the hill. In the centre a short concrete runway ran east to west, with a control tower and numerous hangars to the side.

“There doesn’t appear to be much activity here,” Pedro said.

“Few Eridanian people travel much,” Ben said. “We only have a plane because our work can take us anywhere along the southern coast.”

“You work together?”

“Yes, that’s how we met.”

“What is it you do?”

“Best you see for yourself when we get to Port Jimmac.”

Jim grimaced again. “That was a pretty low-down trick, naming a town after me.”

“We weren’t expecting you to come back and complain.”

“Was it your doing?”

“No, you can thank Norrie for that.”

“I’ll murder him once we’ve freed him from Gallagher.”

Suzie looked about to say something but changed her mind as Ben led them into the office at the main gate.

“Good morning, Mr Tulee,” the attendant said. “Making an early start today?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I see you’re taking young James with you this time.”

“Um, no, this is actually my nephew, although he could pass as James’s twin.”

The attendant stared at Jim, looking uncertain as to whether Ben was pulling his leg. “He certainly could. Now just make yourselves comfortable in the lounge while I get your plane ready.”

* * *

Below them, the river glistened in the early morning sunlight as they flew south over the foothills of the equatorial highlands. Eridani was broader at the equator than around the poles, suggesting it had spun much faster during its formation than now. Gravitational drag from its low-orbiting moon had slowed the planet to its current twenty-five hour period and, barring other calamities, would in a few billion years bring it into captured rotation, with the planet’s day becoming equal to its lunar month. Jim had often wondered if there’d still be Eridanians here to witness it.

“You said you both worked for the Southern Ocean Authority,” Anton said. “What exactly is that?”

“It was created some fifty years ago to oversee the restoration of our southern ocean,” Suzie said. “These days we’re mostly doing foreshore resettlement and marine biodiversity.”

“You’ve been restoring an ocean? What was it before?”

“A desert.”

Ben turned back from the controls. “Maybe Dad can explain since he was involved in the politics at the time.”

Jim cleared his throat. “Eridani originally had polar oceans in both hemispheres, with a subspace tunnel linking our southern ocean to that of our twin planet on the other side of the fold. But when our early space explorers began mining on the twin with matter imploders, they inadvertently caused the planet to implode and that resulted in our ocean draining out into space, ending up as rings of ice crystals orbiting the black hole remnant of that world.

“What was once an ocean became our Great Southern Desert and the race of people who lived there mostly died out. Some survived in underground enclaves in the foothills while others maintained the shields which they’d built to block the tunnel and prevent our atmosphere from being lost as well, but over the millennia they were

forgotten and we northerners came to believe our southern hemisphere had always been an uninhabited desert.

“Things came to a head about fifty years ago when the shields began failing, and if it hadn’t been for the intervention of Peter Thorpe and Billy Collins, our atmosphere would have been lost. After that, huge ships were built to collect the ice from the remains of our twin planet and gradually the southern ocean was restored. Norrie was the chief scientist overseeing the operation while Elissi and Todd rallied political support for his work. In the first four or five years things were grim, with most of the water they’d collected either evaporating or soaking into the ground, and I remember Elissi’s impassioned speeches before the Council trying to maintain funding for the project, but they persevered and eventually we got our ocean back.

“The surviving southern Eridanians came out of their underground homes, building towns around the foreshore and providing much of the labour force needed to complete the restoration. At the time I retired from office, there would have been at least a dozen such towns up and running and they were starting the process of restocking the waters with fish.”

Suzie smiled. “We had no record of the original fish species from the southern ocean, but it looks like some of them might actually have survived, with eggs either preserved underground or deep frozen in the ice crystals surrounding the twin planet. It caused quite a surprise when the fishermen started catching them.”

“Those fish weren’t the only species to re-emerge,” Ben said, “which is why I think General Gallagher has suddenly taken an interest in this place.”

Suzie looked at him. “Are you sure we should be telling them this?”

“They’re going to find out soon enough. It’s why they’re here, after all.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Jim glanced out the window while Ben made a slight course adjustment. Far below were rugged mountains of mostly barren rock, although he could see traces of greenery deep in the gullies radiating northwards from the equatorial highlands. Those mountains formed a

watershed for both hemispheres, he recalled, with a mostly arid region around the equator, in contrast to more spherical planets like Earth where the tropics received deluging monsoonal rainfall and frequent storms.

Ben turned back to his passengers once satisfied the plane had its nose pointed in the right direction. “There’s a chain of mountains extending deep into the southern hemisphere which, after the ocean restoration, became a peninsula ending in a string of islands. Port Jimmac is on a bay near the southernmost tip of the mainland and it was near there we made the first of our unexpected archaeological finds.

“Prior to the loss of their ocean, the southern Eridanians had been an industrious people, building sprawling cities along the coastline not unlike those of Earth, while we northerners lived in small rural villages much like you see now. Relations were mostly cordial, from what we’ve been able to learn, with considerable trade between the two hemispheres.

“In the hills around Port Jimmac are the remains of such a city. We believe the sea level may have originally been about eighty metres higher than it is now, as we’ve been unable to recover all the water that once made up the ocean, so that old city would have been right on the coast with a trading fleet servicing the nearby islands. That in itself wasn’t surprising, but when we started examining the nature of that trade, things didn’t quite add up.

“We found stores of painted and carved artefacts from a primitive culture unlike anything seen elsewhere on Eridani. Dating tests have put their age at ten thousand years, close to the time the southern ocean disappeared.”

“They weren’t just local artworks inspired by, perhaps, off-world cultures, were they?” Anton asked. “After all, you said those people had subspace technology back then so they would have had contact with other worlds.”

“That was a possibility we considered, but the artefacts don’t match up with any of the cultures known to exist in our galaxy. In any case, we’ve since found other evidence pointing towards a local source of that culture.”

“You mean Eridani has a lost tribe?”

Jim looked out the window at the rocky plateau of the equatorial belt, featureless except for the wind-eroded remnants of ancient impact craters. Ahead, though, he could see the tips of cloud banks on the horizon, something unheard of the first time he'd travelled south of the equator. Back then, even the southern Eridanians were an unknown race to most northerners, so he supposed yet another lost people wasn't too surprising.

"We've found similar artefacts on an island south of the peninsula," Suzie said, "along with the remains of primitive dwellings again dating from around the time of the ocean's disappearance."

Anton's jaw dropped. "Jameed told us General Gallagher went to such an island."

"I think he said it was a nature reserve just south of Hamlin Island," Jim said.

"That's the one," Ben said. "I hope we're not too late."

"Can you land the plane on it?"

"No, it's too hilly and covered in thick forest. The only access is by boat from Port Jimmac."

"There's one other thing," Suzie said, glancing at Ben. "We don't think the primitives were human."

"Not human? But how do you know?"

She looked again at Ben, who nodded. "Some of them are still there."

* * *

The plane broke through the base of the clouds on its approach to Port Jimmac, giving Jim his first glimpse of the southern ocean. Even under the grey sky, the town bearing his name looked picturesque, with leafy residential and business districts nestled around a sheltered bay on the western side of the mountainous peninsula. Boats of all shapes and sizes crowded a marina built along an inlet on the seaward side of town, while others frolicked back and forth across the smooth waters of the bay.

Ben circled over the water before heading back north to a small landing strip set alongside an estuary on the outskirts of the town. As

soon as the plane came to a stop, a car dashed out from the perimeter to meet them.

“Your boat’s ready for immediate departure,” the driver said, ushering them into the vehicle.

“Has there been any word from the island?” Ben asked.

“Nothing so far.”

“I hope Gallagher hasn’t done anything foolish. How many are with him?”

“A dozen Barradhim, four soldiers from his galaxy plus the eight hostages.”

Ben nodded. “Did Gallagher give any indication of what he wanted?”

“Mostly information, I think. He was mighty curious about the island and stuff.”

“Stuff?” Anton asked, glancing inquisitively at Ben and Suzie.

“Best you see for yourself when we get there,” Suzie said.

“Preconceptions can be dangerous,” Ben added.

Pedro looked at Jim, who shrugged.

The car pulled up at the entrance to the marina Jim had seen from the air. After unlocking the gate, their driver led them out onto a sleek twin-hulled cruiser.

“I’m guessing the Southern Ocean Authority has a bigger budget these days,” Jim said to Ben, remembering Norrie’s frequent complaints about their lack of seaworthy vessels.

Ben turned to Anton. “This was actually a gift from your boss.”

“Really?”

“Another pie with Frank’s finger in it,” Pedro said.

“Expensive pies,” Jim said.

“We need something like this here to move quickly around the islands.”

“How long does it take to get to where we’re going?” Pedro asked.

“About four hours if there’s not too much headwind.”

“Is there any food?”

Ben laughed. “It’s good to see you have your priorities right. Yes, I’m sure we’ll be able to scrounge up something to keep you going.”

* * *

Low cloud shrouded much of the heavily forested island, with foaming waves breaking on the craggy slopes facing them. Squalling rain lashed against the windscreen of the cruiser, making their destination look even less like the aquatic paradise Jim had imagined.

“There’s a safe anchorage further around,” Ben said, seeing the worried look on his face.

Jim gulped as the boat ploughed into the trough of another wave. “I’m glad we didn’t come out here in anything smaller.”

“I think it was Norrie’s bringing Frank out here in conditions like this that convinced him to buy us this boat,” Suzie said.

“Frank’s been *here*?” Anton asked, gaping again.

“It would have been ten or fifteen years ago, I’m sure. He was curious about what we’d found here.”

“He never told me about it, but now that you mention it, I do recall him making a few business trips to Eridani back then.”

“Cagey devil,” Pedro said.

What Jim had at first taken to be a narrow cleft in the rock opened out into a small harbour as they rounded the headland. Through the mist and rain, he could just make out a boat moored to a small jetty. Ben immediately stopped the engine, allowing the craft to drift to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” Pedro asked.

“We can hardly go ashore here if Gallagher’s left any men guarding his boat,” Ben said.

“Is there anywhere else we can land?” Anton asked.

“There are a couple of other inlets where we could anchor, but we’d have sheer cliffs and thick jungle between us and the research station.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but that sounds even less appealing to me than trying to dodge any guards around their boat.”

Ben turned to Suzie. “You said something earlier about defeating Gallagher by sneaking in under his guard. Could we anchor here and take the dinghy in?”

“That could work. If we hug the shore inside the harbour and beach ourselves a few hundred metres from the jetty, they’d be unlikely to notice us in this weather.”

“Anyone have any objections?” Ben asked.

Jim looked at Anton, who looked at Pedro, who shrugged.

Ben turned the boat around, heading back north until they were just out of sight from the jetty. “This should do it. Boys, come and give me a hand to lower the dinghy.”

Jim peeled off his shirt. “If we’re going to get drenched, the less I’m wearing the better.”

Pedro, Anton and Ben followed his lead, while Suzie stripped down to reveal a stylish black swimsuit.

“I’m glad one of us came prepared,” Anton said.

The rain intensified as they entered the harbour, lashing down in sheets and reducing visibility to a few tens of metres. Ben guided the dinghy around the shoreline, more concerned now about striking rocks than of being seen from Gallagher’s boat.

“This should do us,” Suzie said, pointing to the stretch of sand just visible through the rain. Ben cut the motor and raised the propeller as they bottomed about four metres from the shore.

“Help me carry the boat up into the bushes,” he said. “We don’t want it being seen when the rain stops.”

“Just as long as we can find it again afterwards,” Pedro said, jumping into the water. “Shit, this is a bloody cold ocean you’ve made!”

“Don’t be such a wuss,” Jim said, helping drag the dinghy across the sand and into its hiding place.

Keeping close to the edge of the forest, Ben led them along the beach towards the jetty. “It might be best if we cut across through the trees and join the track out of sight from the boat.”

“There, um, aren’t any poisonous critters likely to bite us, are there?” Pedro asked.

“No, there’s no wildlife here at all, which is part of the problem.”

“We’ll explain later,” Suzie said in response to the three inquisitive glances.

“The explanation had better be good after all we’ve been through to get here.”

“Hush, we’re close to the jetty now.”

Opening out before them was a cleared track about a metre wide and heading steeply uphill away from the water. As they climbed, the rain turned into fog, shrouding them from any watchful eyes.

“Where are we going?” Jim asked.

“Remember I told you how the sea level used to be about eighty metres higher?” Ben said. “That’s where we found the old settlements.”

Crude steps had been carved into the side of the cliff now towering over them, the rain turning them into a miniature cascade.

“Mind your footing,” Suzie said. “Some of them can be a bit slippery in the wet.”

“I’m not good with heights,” Jim said, testing the traction of each step with his toes before climbing to the next one.

“Shit!” Pedro said as the piece of rock he’d put his weight on gave way beneath him. “They’re crumbly as well as slippery.”

At the top of the cliff the ground levelled out, now sloping gently upwards with low scrub either side of the track.

“This is the original beach,” Ben said. “All the sand’s been blown away over the millennia, but you can still find wave-eroded rocks if you know what to look for.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Jim said, his legs still feeling wobbly after the climb.

“Is that a building just ahead?” Pedro asked, peering into the mist.

Suzie nodded. “It’s our research station. Quiet now.”

A grey prefabricated hut loomed out of the fog, its open door on the side swinging freely in the breeze.

“I’ll check it out,” Pedro said.

“No, wait.”

“It’s okay; I’m the smallest and darkest.” He ruffled his shaggy brown hair, pulling it down over his face in an ostrich-like attempt at camouflage before creeping through the scrub towards the door. After pausing to listen for any sounds from within, he dashed over to the steps, crouching down before cautiously poking his head around the base of the doorway.

“It’s empty,” he said, waving the others over.

“Where could they have gone?” Anton asked after searching the building.

“Perhaps up to the ruins,” Ben said. “We have cameras placed there that might show us something.”

He switched on a set of monitor screens in the far corner of the room, revealing piles of rock that might once have been buildings outside a cave in the base of a cliff. A group of people huddled around its mouth, looking like they were trying to keep out of the rain.

“That’s Gallagher,” Anton said, pointing at one of the images.

“It looks like he’s giving Norrie a hard time,” Suzie said.

“There’s Elissi, Todd, Peter and the Collins family,” Jim said, breathing a sigh of relief that they were all still safe.

Pedro pointed at the dark-skinned man and woman standing beside them. “Who are they?”

“Rangy and Kepi,” Suzie said. “They grew up as children in a nearby southern enclave and came to work with us on the ocean restoration. They’re now our chief archaeologists on the island.”

Ben stared at another screen, frowning. “I can see Gallagher’s four soldiers and nine of the Barradhim, but where are the other three?”

“I think he means us,” said a voice from just outside the door. Jim felt his stomach tighten as three armed men came in to join them.

“Mr and Mrs Tulee, so nice of you to join us; perhaps you’ll be a little more cooperative than your boss has been.” The Barradhim officer pointed to the image of Norrie on the screen. “A stubborn bastard, that one, but the General will break him eventually, I’m sure. Now turn those off and come with us.”

Jim shuddered as the Barradhim ushered them outside into the rain, directing them at gunpoint further up the track.

“So who do we have here?” General Gallagher asked, his Eridanian more fluent than Jim would have expected.

“Ben and Suzie Tulee,” the Barradhim leader said. “I think the Eridanian kid is their son James, but I don’t know who the other two are.”

Gallagher scowled at Anton. “This one’s Halliday’s lackey. Who’s your little Cornipean friend, Anton?”

“I’m an Earthling, if you don’t mind,” Pedro said, hands on hips and looking like he was in charge.

“Same difference, really. So Halliday’s now resorted to sending children to do his dirty work for him, has he?”

“Don’t underestimate me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, squirt. Now perhaps one of you can tell me what’s going on here.”

Ben glanced at Norrie. “It’s an archaeological site, of course. You know, ancient buildings, pottery, that sort of thing. The Southern Ocean Authority is surveying it as part of our foreshore restoration process.”

Gallagher grabbed Jim by the forearm, squeezing enough to make him cry out. “I’ve just about had it with you people! Tell me about the bunyips or I’ll teach this one the true meaning of pain.”

Pedro snarled, moving towards him with raised fists.

“No, don’t,” Jim started to say, but Gallagher squeezed even tighter on his arm, forcing him to cry out again.

“Stop it,” Norrie said, stepping forward. “Enough of this charade; you’re not the only one who can play games of espionage.”

Gallagher looked startled for a moment before bellowing with laughter. “Says you and whose army?”

“Mine.” Norrie signalled to the Barradhim, who turned their guns on Gallagher. “Release the boy and tell your soldiers to drop their weapons, then perhaps we can talk like civilised folk.”

Gallagher gaped, staring firstly at Norrie and then each of the Barradhim. Their leader grinned, shrugging. “Do as he says, Gallagher. You’ve been doublecrossed good and proper.”

Gallagher turned to his own soldiers, sighing. “Best do as the man says.”

Norrie

It took Peter Thorpe several moments to make sense of what he'd just witnessed, partly due to the shock of seeing fourteen-year-old Pedro here, he supposed. While aware of relativistic means of travelling forward in time, nothing came immediately to mind that could explain his presence, for with the exception of time cusps, as far as he knew Pedro had never existed at all in the real world, and certainly not as a fourteen year old.

Part of it also was the place itself, though; this island. It touched something deep within his subconscious, a long-forgotten dream perhaps. When they'd reached the cave and ruined buildings, a creeping feeling had come over him of stepping into one of his childhood nightmares, a sensation he still couldn't quite shake off.

But he'd been forced to cast aside those ponderings when Norrie, the diminutive sixty-four-year-old Eridanian scientist, had suddenly taken command of the Barradhim and disarmed General Gallagher's soldiers. He doubted he'd have been any more surprised if Gallagher had turned into a cane toad and gone hopping off into the rainforest.

"That was certainly a bolt from the blue," Jason said to him.

"Did you have any inkling of this?"

"None whatsoever; I've known Norrie since we were kids but never realised he had any connection with the Barradhim."

While they spoke, Suzie scampered around picking up the guns belonging to Gallagher's men, after which the Barradhim sheathed theirs.

"Thank you," Norrie said. "I really detest violence and guns in particular. Perhaps now we can all move back to the research station where we can dry off and then see about solving the puzzle that's drawn us all here."

Peter again scanned his surroundings, feeling once more a cold shiver forcing its way to the surface. *He'd been here before*, he knew that now for certain, *and something terrifying had happened back then*.

“General,” Norrie said once everyone was comfortably seated in the research station. “You said you wanted to know about bunyips, but so do I, so do we all I suspect.”

Gallagher grunted.

“You’re still not happy with me doublecrossing your infiltration of the Barradhim and I can understand that; if the tables were turned I know I’d be feeling the same way. But for the sake of our respective peoples I ask that you put aside those feelings for the moment. Agreed?”

Gallagher looked around the room, perhaps hoping that reinforcements might magically appear out of the woodwork, but when they didn’t he nodded.

“I understand you have bunyips in your galaxy, but I’ve never seen one in the flesh. Can you describe them to me?”

Gallagher rubbed his chin. “What’s there to describe? They’re small animals, most commonly with brown fur, big brown eyes and about knee-height when fully grown. People like them as pets although their pheromones can be overwhelming at times.”

Norrie attacked the keyboard in front of him, bringing up an image on one of the monitor screens. “Do they look like this?”

“Yes, but didn’t you just say you’ve never seen one in the flesh?”

“I took this picture here on the island. Any idea of how your bunyips could’ve found their way here?”

Gallagher shook his head, but Jenny shot her hand up.

“I think I do! At Elko’s funeral, Barrad said something about his people visiting Eridani, so maybe Gallad and his Barefooters brought bunyips with them from their galaxy and then eventually spread them here.”

“Gallad certainly had a pet bunyip,” Jason said. “He called it Snooky, and Pip named his one after it.”

“That would seem plausible,” Norrie said. “Any bunyips on Genesis would’ve been wiped out when their blue star erupted, but

I'll check with Raphus and Dromaius to see if there's anything in their surviving records about such creatures."

He selected another image. "Does anyone recognise this?"

"It's that creature we saw in the nexus," Peter said, "the one that attacked David."

The leader of the Barradhim stood. "One of the jobs Barrad left us was to maintain the nexus and look after those creatures, making sure they could find food. We were told they originally lived here but lost their habitat when the southern ocean disappeared, so there are portals out of the nexus onto other worlds where they can feed."

"I guess that explains how they came to be on Earth and Eden then."

"When General Gallagher first approached us, we showed him the nexus and he was particularly interested in those creatures."

Gallagher grunted again.

"The policeman on Earth said the one that attacked David had the same DNA as Cornipean bunyips," Billy said.

Norrie nodded. "General, tell me about bunyip baiting."

"What?"

"Let's not beat about the bush otherwise we'll be here until the stars go out."

Gallagher again looked around the room. "Bunyip-baiting is an illegal blood sport in my galaxy. Bunyips are fed Frizian honey which makes them aggressive. They fight each other to the death and people bet on the outcome."

"Does this honey have any other effect on them?"

"It makes them grow, but if they get too big they have to be put down."

"Why?"

"Because, um —"

"Say it, General. None of us are about to start spreading stories to your press about this."

"All right. They have to be destroyed otherwise they'd turn on their handlers. They've been known to kill people and eat them, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Norrie nodded. "But the Barradhim showed you how they could be controlled, am I right?"

“Yes. It seemed like a useful trick to have up our sleeves if we ever needed to deal with that problem back home.”

Peter cleared his throat as a recent memory suddenly clicked into place. “When we were being held at your military base, Pip Ingle said something about the honey being a cure rather than a poison.”

“Ingle’s a trouble-maker and a fool.”

“But he’s right, though,” Norrie said. “Your bunyips’ mutation into their large carnivorous form is part of their natural life cycle, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but we believe there’s an environmental factor in our galaxy preventing it from normally occurring.”

One of the southern Eridanian archaeologists jumped to his feet. “Your people poisoned the bunyips!”

“Sit down, Rangy,” Norrie said. “Becoming emotional won’t do anyone any good.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Gallagher steepled his hands under his chin. “We don’t know what the agent is, but yes, we suspect the early Cornipean settlers may have introduced something into the grass bunyips eat to stop them growing.”

Jenny looked crestfallen. “I guess that shoots my theory about Gallad in the foot. He might have brought bunyips to Genesis with him, but he’d have hardly had time to think about bringing that modified grass. Without that, they would’ve started growing into the carnivores and caused all sorts of mayhem, wouldn’t they?”

“Perhaps, but if Gallad was carting bunyips around he would’ve had the processed food for them, the pellets we call bunyip mix. The grass seed it contains can pass through the bunyips and germinate in their droppings.”

“It might not have survived here, though,” Elissi said, “as Eridanian biology is subtly different to that on your worlds. Without the grass, those pet bunyips would’ve started mutating into the larger animals.”

Rangy again stood. “Growing up in the enclaves, we were told plenty of stories about the olden days before the loss of our ocean. A lot of it was probably mythology, but there were tales of a strange people living on islands off the coast and of fierce animals eating

those of us who ventured there without their permission. Artefacts we've found both here and on the mainland look like substantiating at least some of those stories."

Norrie nodded, switching the displays back to the live images from the ruined buildings. "As Ben said earlier, what we have here is principally an archaeological site, the remains of an ancient people who once lived on this island. When we first arrived here, we found the relics much as you see there, along with carvings and pottery dating back to around that time.

"Of course for most of that ten-thousand-year period, this was all part of the southern desert and devoid of plants and water, with the forest only returning in the last fifty years. Naturally we assumed it was now uninhabited until things started inexplicably moving during the night, which is when we installed the cameras."

He pressed a few keys, bringing up a recording. "These are the first images we captured, mostly just indistinct shadows in the poor light, but after switching to low-light sensors we did better."

Emerging from the cave was a creature, taller than a man perhaps although it was difficult to judge without a reference. Covered in hair and with a face more like that of a wolf than a human, it walked quickly past the camera before disappearing into the forest. Peter stirred uneasily as the image conjured up more feelings of dread from the dark corners of his mind.

"That's a yowie," Billy said.

"A what?"

"They're part of our Aboriginal mythology and are said to inhabit the Pilliga region near my childhood town of Narrabri. I reckon I saw one once as a kid, just like the one on your screen."

"So did I," Peter said, the haunted sound in his voice bringing everyone's eyes onto him. He stared into space as waves of suppressed memories rolled over him, taking him back to what had then been the most traumatic time of his life. Suddenly aware everyone was staring at him, he cleared his throat. "I was fourteen years old and we'd just moved from Brisbane down to Sydney. I was miserably homesick and hated my new school from the moment I set foot in it.

“We’d gone on an excursion to the Blue Mountains to see the Three Sisters near Katoomba and ride the scenic railway down to the floor of the valley, where we wandered out along the track towards the Ruined Castle. As the new boy in the class, I was friendless at the time and consequently ended up walking alone, taking my time to examine plants and rocks of interest. The inevitable happened, I suppose, and I became lost.

“Night fell and the forest came alive around me. I found a creek with fresh water flowing and a leafy hollow where I could at least be comfortable, but even though it was late summer, I was still cold and terrified I’d never be found. In my sobbing I started dozing off, but was soon aware of someone or something standing over me.

“Suddenly there were powerful arms around me, lifting me up and holding me against a big hairy chest with a cloying animal smell. I must have passed out at that point, for the next thing I remember is opening my eyes to daylight and finding myself tied to a rock amongst those ruined buildings here.”

“Are you sure?” Norrie asked.

“Positive, although it was a desert then rather than the forest that’s here now. From the moment we arrived I knew I’d been here before, but it wasn’t until I saw that creature in your recording that it all came back to me.”

“So what happened?” Elissi asked.

“Several of those creatures were milling around a steaming pot; preparing a meal, I supposed, until suddenly realising I was going to be the main course. As a wave of panic washed through me, my thoughts turned back to the friends I’d left behind in Brisbane, in particular the twin brothers Danny and Steve who’d been my best mates. As alike as they were in appearance, they were chalk and cheese in every other respect; Danny always exuberant and boisterous while his brother remained the quiet and introspective one. But if either ever found himself in a scrape, the other would always be there to get him out. In one of those blinding moments of clarity that seem so crazy afterwards, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that the hollowness inside me was the void my own twin brother should have been filling, a twin I was meant to have but, through some terrible quirk of fate, didn’t.”

“Perhaps it was your connection to me you were feeling,” Billy said.

“I dare say you’re right, but I didn’t know you then; not in this reality anyway.”

“Are you thinking of that time cusp where you came to the school in Narrabri?”

“Yes, but perhaps we’re letting hindsight extrapolate beyond what was real. It wasn’t you I conjured up at any rate.”

“It was me,” Pedro said.

Billy stared at him. “You mean Peter created you to rescue him from the yowie?”

“No, it wasn’t quite that simple.” Peter stared into space, trying to make sense of what he was now remembering. “One of the yowies scooped something out of the pot with a big wooden spoon and brought it over to me, forcing me to eat it. It was something vegetable, a bit like cauliflower in texture but with a spicy taste. *Seasoning*, I thought, but I’d never heard of seasoning meat *before* killing it. The creature crouched down, staring at me with its big brown eyes as if it were reading all the jumbled-up thoughts running around in my head. It opened its mouth, revealing a set of big sharp pointy teeth, and I was sure it was about to rip my throat open, bringing my miserable short life to a merciful end, but instead it spoke. ‘*Give back my people,*’ it said, I’m sure, although its speech was grumbling and hard to understand.”

“What did it mean?”

“I have no idea. After that it untied me and carried me into the cave, then the next thing I remember is being back in my hollow beside the creek with the first light of dawn glowing in the east. That’s when Pedro appeared.”

“Did I?” Pedro asked, leaning over and watching him intently.

“I heard soft footsteps, not boots but of someone walking barefoot on twigs and dry leaves, and when I turned around there he was, my twin brother, standing there impatiently with his hands on his hips. ‘*Well don’t just sit there gawking,*’ he said while trying to suppress a grin, and I stood, following him up through the bush away from the creek.

“He set a cracking pace, always just on the verge of moving out of sight and saying nothing more the whole time in spite of my cries for him to slow down. After several hours of scrambling through thick scrub and almost scratching myself to death on spiky leaves and branches, I heard someone up ahead calling my name. I dashed forward, stumbling out onto a track into the arms of a man in orange overalls. I looked around for my twin, but he’d vanished.”

“I have no memory of that,” Pedro said, scratching his head. “Although from your description I’m pretty sure it was me.”

“You said the creature took you through the cave behind the ruins,” Norrie said.

“That’s right.”

“I’ve been wondering about that ever since we found the portal into the nexus on Earth. We should take one of my probes up there when the rain stops.”

* * *

Peter woke just before dawn, as had become the custom for him in his advancing years. He made his way outside, careful not to disturb the others still sleeping in the research station’s dormitory.

The cloud and rain had cleared overnight, leaving the air crisp and cool with a glow in the east heralding the new day.

“Good morning, Peter,” Norrie said, startling him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you. I thought I was the first one up and about.”

“I woke about an hour ago and decided to make good use of the time preparing everything we’ll need at the cave.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you been working with the Barradhim?”

“That’s something I’d like to know too,” Jason said, stepping out to join them.

Norrie smiled. “I’m sorry; I should’ve been a bit more up front with you earlier. At Barrad’s suggestion, we joined forces with them early in the southern ocean restoration project as the government was unwilling to provide the manpower we needed, but it wasn’t until we

discovered the bunyips here that I became aware of what they'd been doing in the nexus."

"So are you trying to establish a habitat for the bunyips on this island?"

"We tried, but as Elissi said, there are differences between our biology and that of other worlds, and our native wildlife doesn't contain the nutrients they need to survive in the long term. We were hoping we might eventually discover where their home world was and return them there, and now it looks like we might have an answer to that."

"What about the grass on Cornipus that inhibits their growth?"

Before Norrie could answer, Rangy and Kepi stepped out carrying a large box between them. "Shall we go?"

"As soon as the others are ready."

Anton and the Barradhim remained behind at the research station, keeping guard over General Gallagher and his soldiers, while everyone else assembled at the ruined village where Norrie, Rangy and Kepi set up their equipment. Without quite knowing how it happened, Jason found himself carrying the probe deep inside the cave.

"There's something starting to show," Norrie's voice called from outside. "Keep going in."

Jason muttered obscenities under his breath, half expecting a bunyip to leap out of the shadows at any moment and bite his head off.

"That's it! Put it there!"

After setting the probe down on its tripod, he returned outside, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the sudden sunshine. "What is it?"

"The same thing we saw at that waterhole on Earth."

"A Mandelbulb?"

"Yes, it's a nexus of all possible time lines."

"I've programmed an orb with the parameters needed to open it," Rangy said. "Let's see what's in there."

"Is that a good idea?" Jason asked, but everyone ignored him.

When Rangy activated the orb, the walls of the cave vanished, revealing the interior of the nexus stretching out before them.

“I was expecting a shimmering portal or something,” Peter said as he stepped through, looking around in amazement once more at the chaotic coral-like structure surrounding him. “It’s as if the whole nexus is an extension of the cave.”

“It is,” Rangy said. “Our ancestors made it as part of our pact when the ocean disappeared.”

Norrie frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry, sir, we should’ve told you before but, well, we weren’t sure if you or the other northerners would understand.”

“You mean us,” Ben said, taking hold of Suzie’s hand.

“Everyone, really. When the ocean disappeared, our ancestors built this as a sanctuary for the island people, a place to preserve their race until we could find their home world.”

“Are you saying they’ve all been living in here for ten thousand years?”

“Not exactly, no. A few have lived here, travelling out to other worlds to feed and sustain their physical form, but this does far more than that. As Norrie said earlier, it’s a nexus of all possible time lines.”

“But what exactly does that mean?”

“The off-worlder who helped build this place had the ability to manipulate time cusps,” Kepi said.

“You mean Barrad?”

“No, not Barrad; it was the other one, Elko. Barrad came much later, after Elko died, and then the Barradhim took over after his death.”

“That’s right,” Elissi said. “Back in my youth when I was working for Elko, he told me about this place. That’s why Todd and I insisted on coming to Earth when we received the call about David.”

Jim glanced around the cavern, listening to a faint echo from far away. “I can hear voices, multitudes upon multitudes of tiny voices, but I don’t know what they’re saying. When Pedro and I were in the City of Towers we aided the souls of the newly dead and I’m sensing something similar here, yet —”

Pedro placed his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “They aren’t the souls of the dead, Jim. They’re like me; they were never born.”

“I can hear them too,” Peter said, gazing around the cavern.

One of the yowie creatures emerged from a crevice in the wall, stepping up to Peter and placing its hands on his shoulders. Its mouth opened, again revealing a set of long sharp teeth any dentist would be proud of.

“I saved you once long ago,” it grumbled in what was passably Eridanian. “Now I ask you to do the same for me. Hear the cries of our children and make the poisoning stop.”

“How?”

“Follow me.”

The creature led them back out of the nexus and deep into the forest, following a trail that seemed to open up before them without being at all obvious. Just as Peter’s ankle was beginning to remind him that it wasn’t yet ready for strenuous exercise, they emerged onto a rock ledge overlooking a clearing.

Below them, small animals like the one in Norrie’s photo grazed under the supervision of half a dozen yowies, while on the far side were several crudely-made huts.

“These are our children,” the yowie said. “The grass here isn’t very nourishing for them but it’s the best we could find on this world.”

It called out to those below, bringing another yowie and one of the small bunyips up to meet them. “This is my husband and youngest son.”

Peter glanced back and forth between the little bunyip and the yowies, noticing for the first time the similarities between them; the colour of their fur, the shape of their hand-like paws, but mostly their big brown eyes. “You mean these are *literally* your children?”

“Of course. The older ones sleep during the day then go through the nexus to hunt on other worlds at night, building up their bodies for the changing.”

“The changing?”

Before the yowie could answer, an adolescent bunyip emerged from one of the huts, snarling, baring its teeth and pawing at the ground. A moment later a second one emerged, answering the challenge, while the remaining yowies and younger bunyips gathered around them in a circle to watch.

“What are they doing?”

“It’s our rite of passage; each must best his or her peers before moving into adulthood.”

The first bunyip leapt at its opponent, but the latter saw it coming, deflecting the attack before mounting a counter-offensive. They scuffled in the dust until one of the adults whistled, at which point they separated and returned to their circling.

“In ancient times, before we became civilised people, this was a fight to the death, a survival of the strongest, but it’s long since become a ritualised bout, more symbolic than physical.”

At the sound of another whistle, the bunyips leapt at each other again, stirring up a cloud of dust around them. In a spinning mass of fur, claws and teeth, one of them gradually gained the ascendancy, eventually pinning its opponent to the ground and symbolically biting its throat. The defeated bunyip slunk back to the hut, head lowered, while the victor pawed at the ground, snarling at its vanquished foe.

“What happens now?”

“That one has become the leader of the hunt and will have first choice of any kill they make. Once his body has built up its reserves, he’ll find a hiding place deep in the forest where he’ll sleep while changing into adult form.”

“Amazing,” Peter said. “But what are the voices I heard in the nexus? Didn’t you say *they* were your children?”

Jim stared at the young bunyips, remembering something Charon had said to him as they were leaving Sheol. ‘*Hear the cry of the bunyips and discern its true meaning if you can.*’ But which bunyips; the ones here or the ones back on Cornipus where their species originated? *Those poisoned ones who can’t grow into adults*, he thought, and in a flash of inspiration everything just slipped into place. “It’s a nexus of all possible time lines, including the one where Cornipus wasn’t colonised by the people from Meridian. The voices in there are the unfulfilled souls of the adults those poisoned bunyips should have become.”

The yowie smiled. “You are right; you understand now and must give them back their lives and their home.”

“You mean reclaim Cornipus?” Pedro asked. “The people now living there won’t be too impressed with that idea.”

“But that’s our pledge,” Rangy said.

“Perhaps they could coexist,” Jenny said, but Jason shook his head.

“The adolescent bunyips see people as part of their food chain. That’s probably why the early settlers went to the trouble of engineering that poison into the grass.”

Rangy nodded. “We’ll have to take it by force then.”

“Our Barradhim don’t have enough firepower to do that,” Norrie said. “Not that I’d want to anyway, although I do think the bunyips have a pretty strong case for their claim of prior occupancy.”

Jenny’s face lit up. “Lorina once told me that her galaxy’s constitution has strong legal protection for indigenous beings. It was meant to safeguard the Dolphins on Bluehaven but it ought to apply to the bunyips too.”

“You mean mount a court challenge?”

“It’d be an easy first step and you never know, a workable solution might come out of it.”

Elissi stroked her chin. “One of them will have to come with us if we’re to legitimise their claim.”

The yowie nodded.

“General Gallagher won’t like it,” Norrie said.

Terra Nullius

“You want to do what?” General Gallagher shouted.

“Reclaim Cornipus for the bunyip people,” Norrie said. “After all, they were the original inhabitants before you lot tried to annihilate them.”

“You must be out of your goddamned minds.”

“We’ll go by the book, of course,” Elissi said, “and present our case to your Supreme Court, but your laws governing the protection of indigenous sentient species are quite strong and I’m sure we’ll succeed.”

“What the court says is irrelevant. As I’m sure you know, I’m now the highest authority in my galaxy, and if you want to resettle those *creatures*, do it on one of your worlds.”

Anton walked into the room, grinning. “I’m afraid I have bad news for you, General.”

“What?”

“I’ve just been speaking to my boss and he told me the chiefs of staff have relieved you of your command. General Piper is now head of Special Operations and he’s handed the galaxy back to civilian rule.”

“That’s preposterous!”

Anton’s grin broadened. “You’ll never guess who the new Supreme Councillor is.”

“Not Halliday?”

“Guess again.”

“Well it can’t be Ingle since he’ll be dead by now.”

“No, it’s not Ingle.”

“Who then?”

“Your old friend Mark the Bewildered.”

“Give me your goddamned phone!”

Gallagher snatched it from him, his hand shaking with rage as he punched in the number.

“Put me through to General Walker!”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“General Gallagher.”

“One moment please while I see if he’s available.”

“He’d better be!”

“Gallagher, what the devil are you up to?”

“Trying to stop the Eridanians from invading Cornipus, sir.”

“Explain yourself.”

“They want to hand the planet back to the bunyips.”

“I see. Piper was right then, though I’d have scarcely believed it.”

“You mean Piper agrees with me?”

“Gallagher, I’ve always had the greatest respect for you, both as a soldier and a person, but the strain of command can take its toll even on the best of us.”

“General, with all due respect, sir, you’re not listening to me.”

“I had no choice but to relieve you of your command, Gallagher. You’re to return immediately to Nimber and report to Dr Friedman for assessment and treatment.”

“Sir, listen to me! The bunyips are taking over Cornipus!”

“Enough! Your orders are to return immediately and I’ll treat any further dissent as mutiny.”

Gallagher hurled the phone at the floor, jumping up and down on it until nothing recognisable remained.

“When you’re done, General,” Norrie said, “we should make haste to Meridian.”

Gallagher glared at him for several seconds before lowering his gaze. “You’ll regret this, I promise.”

“We’re going to win,” Rangy said to the yowie standing beside him, “and your people will have their home back.”

The yowie turned to him, whispering something in his ear.

“Sir,” Rangy said to Norrie, “our friend needs to bring her family with her.”

“Of course. Tell her to bring them down to the boat. We’ll depart as soon as she’s ready.”

Jim returned to the cruiser with Pedro and Ben, while Suzie and Anton remained behind with the others. The raging seas of the previous day had completely calmed, allowing the dinghy to skim along out of the harbour. He'd been a little worried that the cruiser might have broken anchor during the storm and been washed up onto the rocks, but it remained exactly where they'd left it, showing no sign of damage or water ingress.

When they returned to the pier, the yowie had been joined by its mate, their cub and two adolescent bunyips, the sight of which caused a cold shiver to run up and down Jim's spine.

"As long as the adults are with them," Rangy said once they'd docked, "there's nothing to fear from the adolescents. It's best to stay away from them when they're alone, though."

Jim nodded, taking note of the strong limbs and powerful jaws of the creatures. He planned on giving them a wide berth even when the adults were around.

"General Piper has ordered Gallagher's spacecraft to be flown to Port Jimmac," Norrie said. "From there we'll go directly to Frank Halliday's place on Meridian where the Supreme Councillor will be meeting with us."

"Thank you," the female yowie growled.

* * *

"Elissi, Todd, it's wonderful to see you again," Frank said, shaking their hands as they emerged from Gallagher's military shuttle.

"Madam High Councillor," Mark said, bowing deeply to her.

"Quit it, Mark," Todd said. "You know how we hate formality."

"Of course he knows," Elissi said, "which is why he's doing it."

Frank turned as Anton and Norrie escorted the yowies and bunyips from the ship. "Take them down to the back shed; they should be comfortable there. I've made sure there's no honey-grass on the property so they'll be safe."

"Honey-grass?" Elissi asked.

"The stuff from Cornipus that stops them growing," Mark said. "Unfortunately it's spread across all the worlds of this galaxy now."

Anton shook his head. "A bit of a bummer, that."

"Yes; even if a favourable outcome is reached for the bunyips, it'll be difficult resettling them on any of the worlds here."

"I might have a solution to that," Mog said. "My grandfather is this galaxy's preeminent expert on grasses and reckons he can engineer a form of spinifex containing the antidote to honey-grass."

"Really?"

"He said it would destroy the bunyips' receptors to chlordiazepoxide, giving them life-long immunity."

"That's fantastic news!" Rangy said.

"Don't get too far ahead of yourself," Elissi said. "There's a long way to go yet."

"Come on up to the house," Frank said. "Russell and Clem have prepared a feast of afternoon tea for you and then I'll introduce you to the lawyers who'll be presenting your case to the court."

Mark stood, tapping his coffee mug with a spoon to grab everyone's attention. "On behalf of our galaxy, I welcome High Councillor Elissi and her entourage, and offer my sincere apologies for your earlier treatment by General Gallagher and his staff.

"As acting Supreme Councillor, your visit has placed me in an awkward position as, while I'm sympathetic to the cause of your bunyip people, I must also represent the interests of the current population of Cornipus. As a result, I must remain strictly neutral in this matter and will abide by whatever judgement the court may choose to hand down."

"Chicken," Chris said.

"You're right, I am, but remember I never wanted this job. It was Morgoth overruling the courts, putting himself above the law, that marked his transition from head of state to despot, and I'll not go down that path, Chris, not in a million years."

"Sorry, Mark."

"My responsibility will come in implementing the court's decision without starting a war in the process, and I'll be calling on you all to help. Whatever happens, at the end of the day we must find a solution everyone can live with."

Elissi smiled. "I'm most appreciative of the way you're handling this, Mark, and Eridani will work with you in whatever way we can."

"With your leave, High Councillor, let me now introduce Brian Lachlan and his son Owen who have offered to present your case to the court."

Owen stood. "Dad volunteered to come out of retirement for this."

"Please forgive an old man for not standing," Brian said. "I devoted my professional life to making our legal system fair and equitable, and I believe this case will be a true test of whether I succeeded, which is why I've taken such an interest in it."

"I'm well aware of the great work you both have done," Elissi said, "and couldn't ask for a better team."

"I experienced something of Brian's prowess when he prosecuted me in that dolphin-slaying affair," Mark said. "You're in good hands, I assure you, but I'm afraid I'll have to leave you now as I have pressing business back in the capital."

Elissi kissed him on the cheek. "You've been a most gracious host, even for a great-nephew. Now run along before the bureaucrats start thinking they're in charge."

"David," Lorina said, turning to the kids. "Take Loraine and Joel to see your father off, then you can play around the back while we discuss boring legal stuff with Brian and Owen."

"Come on," David said to the other two, still trying to decide whether he should be pleased or angry at being sent outside to play.

Brian cleared his throat. "The constitution of Cornipus is founded on the tenet of *terra nullius*, meaning there were no prior sentient occupants at the time of first settlement. To overturn that, we must establish that the bunyip people were living there first and that they were a sentient species."

"Couldn't the Cornipeans just block us by changing their constitution?" Norrie asked.

"No, because they can't exclude the indigenous rights explicitly enshrined in the overriding galactic constitution."

"I see."

"Mog and her grandfather have provided documentary evidence from the Great Library of Cornipus confirming the presence of

bunyips at the time of first settlement, so it'll be difficult for the defence to claim otherwise. Therefore I expect this case to hinge on the much more subjective question of sentience."

Brian motioned for the man beside him to stand. "This is Doctor Eugene Hoffman, one of our galaxy's leading xenopsychologists, who will be our expert witness on this matter."

"Thank you for offering your services," Elissi said.

"I understand you've brought specimens of this species with you and I look forward to studying them."

"They're not specimens!" Rangy said. "They're just as much people as we are."

"Hush," Brian said. "That's just the sort of emotional rhetoric we must avoid at all costs. I'm sorry but the doctor is right; if we're to have any chance of success, your bunyip people must be presented objectively as specimens."

Rangy shook his head, looking unconvinced.

"Rangy, go and ask the two adult *specimens* to come and join us," Norrie said.

The psychologist cleared his throat as Rangy dashed from the room. "While sentience is really a continuous spectrum, ranging from the almost totally instinctive behaviour seen in reptiles and birds through to fully sentient beings like ourselves, from a legal perspective there is a set of requirements that must be met before a creature can be considered sentient.

"Firstly, it must have sufficient intelligence to learn and understand its surroundings in order to cope with new situations. If you take a simple creature from a tropical environment and place it in a colder climate, it will die, whereas sentient beings will find materials to use for clothing, vegetation they can burn, warm places like caves in which to live, and so forth. It's not a sufficient condition for sentience, obviously, but is generally considered a necessary one.

"Secondly, the creature must be able to demonstrate an awareness of self and be able to distinguish between its own mind and that of others. A good indicator is the use of individual names, whether in language or through other forms of communication such as body markings, although we must be careful to differentiate between true self-awareness and simple territorial displays. Abstract language

structures capable of representing ideas and thoughts are also strong indicators of this.

“Spiritualists will say the third element of sentience is consciousness, the possession of a soul, but we’re yet to develop an objective test for this that will stand legal scrutiny. Instead we look for elements of indicative behaviour, such as abstract artworks or religious beliefs. Unconditional sacrifice of possessions or even life to help a stranger or unrelated species is also a strong indicator of a soulful consciousness. A willingness to put others before self is truly a hallmark of the highest levels of sentience.”

Rangy re-entered the room, followed by the two yowies.

“Ah, our specimens have arrived,” the psychologist said. “Do they possess any language skills?”

“They speak Eridanian fairly well.”

“Excellent.” He pulled two translator headsets from his bag, keying in the settings for that language. “Could you put these on them?”

The yowies looked confused as Rangy helped fit the headsets, but smiled as soon as someone spoke.

“I’m Doctor Hoffman. What are your names?”

“Names?”

“What do you call each other?”

The yowies gave him a blank look.

“How do you identify one another?”

One of them smiled. “Now I understand; we know each other by smell.”

“I see; bunyip pheromones, of course.” Hoffman wrote something on his notepad. “Do you use any form of writing?”

The yowie glanced at Rangy. “The dark humans taught us to read their words, but we have no need for writing as we can remember all we need to know.”

“Dark humans?”

“That’s their term for us southern Eridanian people,” Rangy said. “They call the northerners the pale humans.”

“I see.” He turned back to the yowies. “Can you count?”

“Count?”

“Do you understand numbers? How many people are in this room?”

The yowies looked at each other. “Two.”

“How many humans are here?” Norrie asked.

“Eighteen.”

Hoffman looked around the room, counting to himself. “You’re correct, and the speed of your answer demonstrates great numeric awareness. Your distinction between people and humans is also intriguing. Do you consider yourselves superior to us?”

The yowies stared at him blankly.

“They have no concept of superiority,” Rangy said.

“That’s very noble of them, I’m sure.” Hoffman turned back to them. “Can you make fire?”

“Yes, we use it for cooking.”

“What do you cook?”

“Our vegetables and the meat our adolescent children bring back from their hunts.”

“Do you cultivate your vegetables?”

“We plant seeds and stop birds from eating the growing plants. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, thank you. Do you make your own cookware?”

“The dark humans give us metal cauldrons and cutlery, but we make our own serving plates and pots.”

Rangy handed the psychologist a photograph. “These are examples of their pottery.”

“That’s good; it shows a high level of manual dexterity. Now do you make any tools?”

“We are strong and don’t need tools.”

“What about clothing?”

“We have fur to keep us warm at night. Why do silly humans need to cover their bodies so much?”

“I’ll take that as a no.” He wrote another note on his pad. “Do you have any religious beliefs?”

Again the yowies gave him a puzzled look.

“Do you believe in any gods?”

“We don’t understand what gods are.”

“Do your people have souls or spirits?”

“The spirits of our lost children are in the nexus; they are the souls of the poisoned ones.”

“What is this nexus you speak of?”

“It was made by the dark humans long ago and is a place where all things are possible.”

“Why are you here?”

“We came to free our children from the poisoning and to return to our home.”

“You mean Cornipus?”

“That’s the name you use, but to us it’s just *home*.”

Hoffman looked back through his notes. “Thank you; I think that’s all I need for now.”

The yowies removed the translator headsets, passing them to Rangy who handed them back to Hoffman.

“The specimens do show evidence of sentience, but I’m not sure whether it’ll be sufficient to convince the courts.”

“It seems clear enough to me,” Rangy said.

Norrie placed a hand on his shoulder. “Hush, my friend. The doctor’s on our side and is just trying to find the strengths and weaknesses in our case.”

“That’s right,” Frank said. “Now perhaps you could take them back to the shed while I start preparations for dinner.”

* * *

Joel tapped the cricket bat on the ground as Loraine began her run-up, while David crouched behind the wicket, eager for a snick or a stumping chance. Earlier in the week, Frank had found an old cricket set in his basement, part of the collection he’d brought from Earth thirty years earlier following Morgoth’s demise. The bat’s handle was a little loose and the ball a bit flat on one side, but it was good enough to keep the three bored twelve-year-olds amused.

Lorraine’s delivery pitched just short of a length. *Keep your eye on the ball*, Joel’s father had admonished him ever since he was old enough to wield a bat, but on this occasion he had little choice as it spun off a clump of grass and flew straight at his head. Ducking, he

raised the bat in periscope fashion, only to sky the ball off its end. David took half a step sideways before comfortably taking the catch.

“How is he! How is he!” he cried while dancing around, repeatedly throwing the ball in the air and catching it again. “Another duck for Morison as Collins and Collins strike again!”

Joel poked the bat at the villainous clump of grass, trying to flatten it before stomping on it with his heel for good measure.

“Sorry,” Loraine said, wandering down the pitch to join him. “I didn’t mean it to be a bouncer.”

Joel shrugged, waiting for David to calm down before handing him the bat and walking around to replace him behind the wicket.

David tapped the ground as Loraine began her run-up, while Joel crouched behind the stumps, ready to exact his revenge should David snick it or sky it like he had. He did neither, though, instead driving the ball smoothly out through mid-off where it thumped into the wall of the shed.

Joel ran after it, but lost sight of it in the long grass. He was trying to find it when a noise from behind caught his attention. With a growing feeling of dread, he stood to find himself face to face with one of the adolescent bunyips from Eridani.

“Oh hell,” David yelled as he ran over to help. “Keep looking it in the eyes, Joel; if you turn and run it’ll charge for sure.”

He turned to his sister. “Loraine, run up to the house and get help – quickly!”

The bunyip stared at Joel, pawing the ground as its nostrils began to flare. Joel stared back, trying not to blink or wet himself, while inside his chest his heart pounded so hard he was sure it was about to burst. ‘*Oh God,*’ he thought, ‘*make it turn to stone like that statue on Cornipus.*’

David raised the cricket bat, remembering how Anton had used a tree branch to fend off the bunyip in the nexus, but the moment he did, a second bunyip emerged from the bushes, placing itself between him and the first. “Oh hell,” he said again, “oh bloody hell.”

The first bunyip crouched, its opening mouth revealing long sharp teeth dripping with saliva. A cloying odour filled the air, a signal no doubt to the other one that dinner was about to be served. Joel

struggled to stop closing his eyes, hoping against hope it was just a bad dream and he'd wake up safe in bed at any moment.

The bunyip leapt. Joel tried to duck – he knew he had to if he was to have any chance of surviving – but his muscles refused to move. Urine ran down his leg as a timid little squeak escaped his lips, not that it mattered in the handful of milliseconds left in his life.

This was it, then; the moment when everything that had been Joel Morison would be gone; his flesh becoming meat in the bunyip's belly, to be digested then unceremoniously dumped as – *thump!*

Flesh pounded into flesh, but it took Joel a moment to realise his flesh wasn't part of that collision. A third adolescent bunyip had sprung out of nowhere to take the first one mid-leap. Fur, claws and teeth spun in the dust as the second bunyip ran in to join the melee. *But where had the third one come from?* He was sure, absolutely sure, only two had come from Eridani along with the yowies and a small cub.

With a sickening sound of teeth biting into bone, the fighting stopped. The two Eridanian buniyps, now bloodied and beaten, slunk back to the shed while the third one stared up at Joel, its mouth open and long tongue licking its lips. *After all that I still get to be eaten,* he thought, but instead the bunyip limped over to him, laying its muzzle across his feet.

“Number Five?” he whispered as a hot wetness ran down between his toes. The bunyip looked up at him from amid a growing pool of blood, its eyes full of sadness, compassion, love and knowledge far beyond a twelve-year-old's ability to understand; yet he now understood far more than he could, far more than he would ever want to.

From the corner of his eye he saw the yowies running towards him from the house, closely followed by Clem, Mog and Russell. Number Five tensed, a weak shudder running through him. As Joel looked down in shock and disbelief, the former bunyip-baiting champion's eyes slowly closed and his body fell limp.

Far away, in a nexus of all possibilities, one of the tiny voices crying out for life cried no more.

Judgement Day

“Give me your shirt.”

“Huh?”

“Joel, give me your shirt,” Russell said. “I need something to stop the bleeding.”

Joel peeled it off, a dazed look still on his face as he handed it over. Beside him, Mog embraced Clem, holding his head against her shoulder as he cried out in grief.

Loraine took Joel by the hand, leading him over to where David was standing, still with the cricket bat raised in defence.

“Oh brother,” David said, dropping the bat as he saw them approach. “I thought, I really thought –”

It was all too much for him. In an avalanche of sobs, he wrapped his arms tightly around Joel, now the only thing keeping him from falling helplessly to the ground. Joel hugged him back, his own tears flowing as the reality of it all washed over him.

“If you hadn’t – *sniff* – hadn’t told me to keep staring at it –”

“Joel, don’t – I don’t want to think – can’t think –”

“Number Five – he saved me, but, but –”

Again it was all too much. Tears now flowing freely, they gripped each other as tightly as they could, each wholly dependent on the other for support. Loraine wrapped her arms around them both, doing her best to comfort them.

David eventually disentangled himself, now smiling as he ruffled Joel’s long shaggy hair. “Don’t let this go to your head; you’re still a git, you know.”

“And proud of it!”

David chuckled, pulling Joel’s forelocks down over his eyes. “Mum’ll be furious you lost that shirt she bought you.”

“Russell took –”

Joel suddenly froze.

“What’s wrong?” Loraine asked.

“It can’t be, but, but surely –”

“What?”

“*Corpses don’t bleed.*”

“Huh?”

“Russell took my shirt to stop Number Five’s bleeding, but, but if he was dead –”

David leapt in the air. “He wouldn’t bleed, of course!”

The three ran back to where Russell, Rangy, Kepi and the two wowies remained huddled around Number Five.

“Wh-what’s happening?” Joel asked.

Russell turned to face him. “He’s going into his – what did you call it – his metamorphosis, but the adult ones say he’s too young. His injuries are deep – so deep he should really be dead – but his body’s reacted by starting to change.”

“Will he live?”

“I don’t know – none of us know – but we’ll do everything we can to help him, I promise.”

Joel sniffled again as David and Loraine each put a hand on his shoulders.

* * *

Peter entered the room where Clem and Mog sat hand in hand watching over Number Five. “How is he?”

“Stable, I guess is the word,” Clem said. “The vet Frank brought in dressed the wounds and gave him a shot of antibiotics, but now we just have to wait and see what happens.”

“The creatures they become – no, I shouldn’t call them that – the *people* they become are gentle folk, in spite of appearances and the legends we have about them on Earth. I’m sure you’ve been a great teacher for him.”

“I really think it was the other way around. He saved me from the assassin on Blunt’s farm and now, now he fought off his own kind to save Joel. “If he survives –”

Mog squeezed his hand. “Be positive, remember.”

“All right; *when* he survives I’m sure there are great things in store for him. My grandfather sensed it, and now perhaps I do too.”

Peter cleared his throat. “That psychologist fellow wants to have a word with you, to ask a few questions about Number Five, if you don’t mind.”

Clem visibly tensed but it was Mog who spoke. “Tell him that’s fine.”

Peter stepped from the room, returning a few moments later with Doctor Hoffman.

“Is this the creature that saved the boy?”

“He’s not a creature,” Clem said, trying his hardest not to snarl.

“I’ve just been viewing the recording from Frank’s security cameras. Most remarkable, I must say. Now what was the relationship between the creature and the boy?”

“What do you mean? Are you asking whether they were, like, *dating* or something?”

“Did the boy ever feed it?”

“No, of course not. They only met when we arrived here with Mark and Lorina’s family, and then we left Number Five behind when we went to Cornipus.”

“Why is it called Number Five?”

“He was a house bunyip in Blunt’s baiting ring, and that was his number.”

“Yes, Frank told me you infiltrated them; a nasty business indeed.”

“Why are you asking all this?”

“You may remember me saying that a willingness to put others before self is a hallmark of the highest levels of sentience.”

“Vaguely; I didn’t really understand all that psycho stuff.”

“From what I saw in the recording, and from what the children have said, this creature willingly sacrificed itself to save the boy from certain death at the hands of its own species. I doubt there are many humans who’d have done that.”

“Pip has, but you’re right; I doubt there’d be many others.”

“In my opinion, and in what I’ll be presenting to the court, this act is conclusive proof of the sentience of its species.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, of course.”

“I hope your pet makes a speedy recovery.”

Clem started to stand, but Mog pulled him back down. “In spite of what you’ve just said and what you saw, you still really don’t get it, do you?”

“I’m not sure –”

“Number Five *isn’t* a pet and he certainly isn’t a creature or specimen. Sure, he has a muzzle and fur and until now has walked on four legs, but inside, where it really counts, inside he’s a person just as much as you or me; or more so, I think. *That’s* what it means to be sentient, and that’s why we have to restore their civilisation for them.”

The psychologist nodded. “Thank you for your time.”

* * *

Pip eased himself into the chair in front of his ultranet terminal, allowing Snooky to jump up onto his lap.

“I’ve been putting this off for too long,” he said to the bunyip while watching his unread e-mail count climbing up and up. “How can there be seven hundred and sixty-eight of them? By the time I’ve read them all, there’ll be another seven hundred and sixty-eight to read.”

Snooky gave him a sympathetic look.

Clem had written him a sorting application that did a remarkably good job of separating the wheat from the chaff, so he let it do its thing while scratching Snooky behind the ears.

“That’s a little better,” he said once the sorting had finished, going firstly to the *Personal Correspondence* folder. “I’d better make sure none of my great-aunts has died, or perhaps remarried.”

There were no dead or remarried aunts, great or otherwise, but there was an e-mail from his long-lost friend Damon. He opened it.

‘Hi Pip. Sorry I haven’t written for so long but our ultranet node has been playing up. Dad thinks he’s fixed it for now but doesn’t know how much longer it’ll keep working, so I’d better say everything that needs to be said while I can.

'Herbert Douglass, the last of the surviving Barefooters, passed away yesterday, leaving just me and Dad here. For some reason, he hasn't been affected by the rapid aging that claimed all the others; perhaps Jacob might have some thoughts on it.

'This planet is a very lonely place now all the others have gone, and I think it's time we came home. If Hamati and Chris are willing, could you possibly arrange for them to open a portal for us? We're not in any danger so there's no hurry, but, well, it is rather lonely here.

'You mentioned something about bunyip-baiting in your last e-mail. How'd it all go? Did Blunt resign, and if so, who's now running the galaxy?

'I hope the Black Delphinidae's still going from strength to strength. Give my regards to Russell, Clem and Jacob and I look forward very much to seeing you all again soon.

'Damon.'

Pip slapped his forehead, hoping Chris was still on Meridian with Frank.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice," Pip said to Hamati, Chris, Jason and Jenny as they gathered around the portal set into the floor of one of the old relics on Huntress. He removed the Black Dolphin amulet from around his neck, pushing its head into the socket above the portal. The metal plate before them quickly dissolved in a dull shimmering light.

"After you," Hamati said, ushering them in.

"If Mark were here he'd be telling us how much he hates this place," Chris said, regaining his balance after the ninety-degree rotation accompanying that portal's transition into Sheol.

"I'm inclined to agree with him," Jenny said. "Should we all join hands?"

"I understand the City of Towers has entirely collapsed now," Pip said, "so we can't use the shortcut through there."

"I know," Hamati said, "but I can remember the long way around. Follow me."

The five trotted off into the darkness, the echoes of their footfalls the only sound to be heard.

“It is here,” Hamati said, coming to a sudden stop.

“How can you tell?” Jenny asked.

“I feel it, perhaps even smell it.”

“How do we get through?”

“I think that’s where I come in,” Chris said. “Jase, I’ll probably need your help with this.”

“I’m guessing that’s why Pip wanted me along. I need to touch your forehead, is that right?”

“That’s what Damon did last time.”

Jason had just begun probing Chris’s mind when he felt a sudden pinpoint of pain radiating out of him. Bright light flashed around him, accompanied by the sound of wind rustling leaves and the touch of loose soil under his feet.

“Well done,” Pip said, glancing at the familiar countryside now surrounding them. Ahead, the dusty track onto which they’d emerged headed down into a valley, its two irregular wheel ruts now overgrown with grass and weeds. Birds called in the surrounding forest, startled perhaps by the sudden arrival of five humans into their midst. “The Barefooters’ village is down this way, assuming they haven’t moved.”

“Did Damon give any indication they had?”

“No, but it’d be just like him to forget to mention a small detail like that.”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

From a little further down, at a point where the creek the track had been following joined a broader stream, they caught their first glimpse of the village. Not much had changed since their visit twelve years earlier, with its cluster of stone houses surrounding a central square. The only thing missing was the marquee that had previously covered the plaza.

“This place still feels kind of creepy,” Chris said, “like a picture from a history book that’s been brought back to life by a mad scientist or two.”

“I think the Barefooters may have been trying to recreate Cornipus as it was a million years ago,” Pip said, remembering some of the earlier correspondence he’d received from Damon. “It does have a melancholy look to it, but they were just homesick, I suspect.”

“I can’t help thinking of that crazy one called *The Proctor* who wanted to kill Jason,” Jenny said.

Jason felt a twinge in his groin, a reminder of the procedure their resident surgeon had carried out as a result of the Proctor’s ruling. “I bear the scars of that in more ways than one.”

“They’ve all gone now,” Pip said. “Only Damon and Damien remain.”

As he spoke, two familiar figures came running up the track to meet them, both in just the loin cloths he’d seen the Barefooters wearing on his previous visit. Damon came to a stop in front of him, staring into his eyes before wrapping his arms around him.

“Thanks for coming,” Damien said, embracing each of the others in turn. To Pip, he looked no different to when he’d last seen him two years earlier, although his steely-grey hair was a good deal longer than it’d been back then. Damon’s hair had also grown, along with a substantial beard.

“Come down to the village for some refreshments,” Damon said, “and then we can catch up on what’s been happening.”

Damon handed Pip a mug of tea. “So has anything much been happening back home?”

“*Anything – been – happening?* Gosh, where do I begin?”

Pip’s tea turned cold as he recounted the shooting of Alistair Blunt, Gallagher’s coup and his own imprisonment, rounding it out with Piper’s counter-coup and the discoveries Clem had made on Cornipus.

“What does Mark think about being Supreme Councillor again?” Damien asked.

“I’m not sure,” Chris said, “but Lorina went ballistic when Piper first suggested it.”

“Maybe we should all come and live here instead of going back,” Jenny said.

Damien nodded. "It's not a bad place if you like wide open spaces, and as I think I might have mentioned last time, the fishing's pretty good."

"You and your bloody fish!" Jason said, copping a poke in the ribs from Jenny for his insolence.

Damien chuckled. "So what's Jacob's take on all this bunyip stuff?"

Pip turned pale. "Jacob died a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Clem must be devastated."

"Yes, Lorina told me he took it pretty hard. Jacob was very old, though, and lived to see his dreams fulfilled. We can't hope for much more than that, can we?"

"That's so true."

Damon stood, running his hands through his tangled hair. "There's one last thing we should show you before we leave."

Pip took a sip of his cold tea, grimacing before pouring it out.

"This is where we buried the Barefooters," Damon said, leading them into a cemetery behind the village. Hundreds of headstones, some now leaning decidedly askew, filled the field. He took them over to a fresh plot in the far corner. "Herbert was the last, and his final words were to thank Mark for giving his life purpose and meaning."

Pip nodded, kneeling on the grave to read the inscription while remembering the elderly man who'd convinced the Barefooters to help Mark overthrow Gallagher and Hoskins in their attempt to have Lorina's pregnancy terminated. But for his courage and conviction, David and Loraine would never have been born, and the restoration of Huntress and the Black Delphinidae would have remained nothing but a pipedream for Clem and his people.

While they stood in quiet reflection, clouds began rolling in from the sea as the on-shore wind picked up.

"We should make a move if we don't want to be drenched," Damien said.

"Form a circle around Chris and all join hands," Jason said. "You can do the honours this time, Damon."

Once everyone was set, Damon began probing Chris's memories, searching for the trigger the Dolphins had implanted in him as a child. A moment later, the last humans on this planet of exile vanished into Sheol.

* * *

"Very impressive," Mog said as Frank led them into the sandstone and marble monolith that was Meridian's Supreme Court building.

"Our legal profession never skimps on accommodation for itself," Brian said.

"I thought this place would be teeming with reporters."

"We've managed to keep the proceedings a secret so far," Mark said, "as if word got out about your case, it'd probably trigger panic on Cornipus and an unprecedented collapse of the galaxy's financial markets."

"You're going to have a hell of a job selling the idea if the decision goes our way."

"I know, and I'll need all of you to pitch in and help."

"Either that or we catch the first flight back to Earth," Lorina said. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing?"

"I can't see any other course of action that'll give justice to the bunyip people."

"I suppose you're right, but the humans have been on Cornipus for an awfully long time."

"The courtroom's through here," Owen said, leading them into a narrow corridor at the far end of the foyer. At its end, heavy panelled doors opened onto the spacious gallery overlooking the galaxy's Supreme Court. The five members of the full bench sat resplendent in their purple robes and pink mortarboard hats, each studiously examining the reams of paper stacked in front of them.

The centre judge, older and fatter than the others, looked up at the gallery and coughed.

"All rise please," the attendant bellowed.

"Please be seated," the judge said once everyone had stood. "This special session of the Supreme Court has been called to receive judgement on petition number 4285731, lodged and presented by the

honourable Brian Lachlan of Bluehaven on behalf of the plaintiff, the so-called bunyip people of Eridani.

“This petition strikes at the very core of our galaxy’s legal foundations and I understand why Mr Lachlan insisted on presenting it directly to the full bench rather than following the more normal procedure through the lower courts. By doing so, though, he has ruled out any opportunity for appeal, hence the decision I now present is the final word on this matter.

“At its heart is the Constitution of Cornipus, and in particular the preamble which states, under the tenet of *terra nullius*, that all lands, waters, minerals, plants and animals are initially declared the property of the duly constituted government of that planet, to be used, sold, leased or reserved as that government may choose, subject to any subsequent limitations imposed by either the constitution or duly enacted laws.

“The plaintiff has challenged the validity of *terra nullius* in relation to Cornipus, tending evidence of a sentient species occupying that planet prior to and during the arrival of the first settlers from Meridian. Historical evidence was also presented claiming that those first settlers, intentionally or not, precipitated the suppression of those beings through the genetic manipulation of a plant known as honeygrass.

“It was further claimed that a number of those beings have in fact survived on the planet Eridani in the Milky Way galaxy, with DNA evidence submitted to corroborate their link to Cornipus. As such, it was claimed that said beings should be entitled to sovereignty over Cornipus under Clause 75(b) of the Galactic Constitution enshrining the rights of indigenous sentient species.

“Central to this claim is the notion of sentience and its interpretation in the context of Clause 75(b). Evidence was presented by the plaintiff’s expert witness, Doctor Eugene Hoffman from the Cornipean Institute of Xenopsychology. Doctor Hoffman’s credentials have been placed on record for the purpose of this judgement.

“In opposing the petition, the Attorney General of Cornipus argued that sentience has never been legally defined, citing the Bluehaven Dolphins as an example of the danger in applying human

psychology to non-human species. She also argued that the absence of non-human sentient species from Cornipus for over a million years should extinguish any claim the Eridanian beings might have.”

Clem jumped out of his seat as the judge banged his gavel, having almost fallen asleep during the preamble. The judge glared at him, scowling.

“After giving due consideration to the arguments presented on behalf of the plaintiff and defendant, this court has reached its verdict. Firstly, the plaintiff’s claim of sentience in relation to Clause 75(b) is sustained on the basis that this clause has applicability irrespective of any legal definition of that term, given the nature of the evidence provided. On this matter, the court was particularly moved by the self-sacrifice of one such being in saving the life of a human child from another of its species, and considers that in itself sufficient justification to warrant the application of Clause 75(b).

“Secondly, this court has determined that, as a matter of historical record, the tenet of *terra nullius* in the Constitution of Cornipus is invalid and recommends to the Attorney General that an alternative wording for the preamble be drafted at the earliest opportunity and presented to this court for ratification. However, it is also the determination of this court that the invalidation of *terra nullius* does not necessarily invalidate the remainder of the constitution, and in particular, this court rules that indigenous title is extinguished on all privately owned and leased land, water, minerals and biological resources of that world.

“Thirdly, the court is mindful of the great expanse of time since the indigenous sentient beings last set foot upon Cornipus, and of the developments, buildings and settlements that have changed the face of all but a few remote and inhospitable parts of that planet. The court noted that the plaintiff has made no claim against such developments, buildings and settlements, and considers the task of removing such and restoring that world to its state at the time of last occupancy to be an unduly onerous and, in every practical sense, impossible one.

“Therefore, while recognising the compelling arguments presented by the plaintiff, for the reasons just stated it is the decision of this court that their petition be denied.”

“That’s an outrage!” Rangy cried as the judge struck his gavel.

“Silence!” bellowed the attendant. “This court is now closed; please clear the gallery at once.”

“Come on,” Brian said, “before they arrest us all for contempt.”

“They can’t do this, surely,” Norrie said.

“I’m afraid they can and they have.”

“Are there absolutely no avenues of appeal?”

“No. As the judge said, we forfeited that right when bypassing the lower courts.”

“Bastards.”

“So where do we go from here?” Elissi asked.

“Back to my place,” Frank said.

* * *

“It’s outrageous,” Russell said, sipping his coffee as they sat around the table in Frank’s dining room.

“I’ve half a mind to declare war on this galaxy,” Elissi said, “but we’d end up just being blown away and the bunyip people would still be without a home.”

“Would the other worlds in your galaxy chip in to help?”

“Perhaps, but even so, I doubt our combined resources would be enough to put much of a dent in the military arsenal here.”

“What other options are there?”

Clem scratched his head. “Maybe the Cornipean government could be persuaded to create a reservation for them in one of those remote and inhospitable regions the judge mentioned.”

“*Remote* might be okay, but *inhospitable* sounds, well, inhospitable.”

Rangy shook his head. “Even if the bunyips and yowies found those regions to be sufficiently hospitable for them, in time their population would grow to the point where conflict would be bound to occur. It’d be a short term solution only.”

Mog entered the room, trying to suppress a grin. “This whole question might just have become moot.”

“Why?” Elissi asked. “What’s happened?”

“I’ve just been speaking to my grandfather. You know; the botanist and grass specialist on Cornipus. I’m afraid he might have done something rash.”

“What?”

“Remember I said he’d been working on engineering a honey-grass cure into spinifex?”

“Yes.”

“After he heard the verdict, he released it into the environment.”

“So?”

“Do you have any idea how many pet bunyips there are on Cornipus?”

“Quite a lot, I gather.”

“Millions, maybe even tens of millions, and in a few short months they’ll all grow into adolescents and start gobbling up whatever meat they can find.”

“Including humans?”

“Yes.”

Part Five

Cry of the Bunyips

The Enemy Within

General Piper shook his head. “You can’t be serious.”

“It could be worse,” Mark said.

“Yeah? How?”

“Err, I’m not sure, but I could probably think of something if I tried.”

“You were supposed to sort everything out and put this galaxy back on an even keel, but wiping out our most populous planet isn’t a good start, is it?”

“At least we’ll have a few months before the bunyips start eating people.”

“Wonderful. What do you propose doing with that time, apart from handing out appetizers to the little beasties?”

A knock on the door saved Mark from having to think of a reply.

Piper turned to face the nervous young lieutenant standing in the threshold. “Yes?”

“Sir, General Walker sends his compliments and advises that he’s assigned you an aide.”

“I don’t need an aide.”

“You don’t have any bloody say in the matter, Piper,” the aide said, pushing aside the lieutenant and barging in.

Mark took a step backwards. “General Gallagher?”

“It’s Colonel Gallagher now, your righteousness, thanks to your Eridanian friends. Walker reinstated me when he heard what you’ve done on Cornipus, but knocked me back a couple of pegs for insubordination.”

“*You’re* to be my aide?” Piper said, groaning. “They say bad news comes in threes, but I hate to think what the third —”

Before he could finish, his phone started ringing. “Yes sir, he’s here now. Of course, sir; I will, yes sir.”

“Was that Walker?”

“Yes. His orders are for the three of us to put aside our differences and come up with a solution to this mess.”

Gallagher scratched his chin. “I say we just mobilise all our forces to Cornipus with orders to kill every bunyip they can find. That should at least minimise the civilian casualties.”

Mark shook his head. “The judiciary won’t wear it. With the Supreme Court acknowledging the buniyps’ sentience, killing them is tantamount to murder.”

“Not if we declare war on them; make them enemy aliens.”

“They’re hardly aliens; they were on Cornipus before you were.”

“Well then declare war on bloody Cornipus!”

It was Piper’s turn to shake his head. “We can’t unless they secede from the empire.”

“What about that botanist? Can’t he engineer a counter agent to the thing he’s released?”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Mark said. “My understanding is it destroys the buniyps’ receptors to honey-grass and there’s nothing else known that’ll stop them from growing.”

“Aside from a bullet between the eyes, you mean. Where is he anyway? Have your civilian police arrested him yet?”

“No, he’s gone to ground apparently and no-one’s been able to find him.”

Gallagher shook his head, but Piper smiled. “If we can’t get rid of the buniyps, perhaps we can make people unpalatable to them. They respond to pheromones, don’t they? Is there something we could use that has a ‘*don’t eat me*’ smell?”

“That’s not as silly as it sounds,” Mark said. “Leave it to me.”

“We still need a fallback measure,” Gallagher said. “What about building isolation camps to separate them from the people?”

“Where would you put them?”

“Divot courses,” Piper said. “All towns have them and most are already fenced. They’d be perfect.”

“Divot?”

“You call it *golf*, I believe.”

“Ah.”

“*Divot courses?*” Elissi asked.

“They call them golf courses on Earth,” Mark said. “Lots of grass and trees, and most of them have water hazards the bunyips and yowies could bathe and swim in, if that’s what they do. Practically every town on Cornipus has one, and most have security fencing, so it seemed like a good solution.”

“You mean to create bunyip ghettos, then.”

“It’d be short term only, until we can figure out a better solution.”

“Those sorts of *short term* solutions have a history of becoming permanent.”

Lorina squeezed Mark’s hand, trying to stop him exploding. “We’ll just have to make sure there’s a long term solution, won’t we?”

Elissi shook her head, still far from convinced.

“The Cornipean divot players won’t be too impressed,” Anton said.

“I don’t give a hoot about your bloody divot players!” Mark said, his face turning purple. “We’re talking about people’s lives here, for Pete’s sake, and when I say *people* I mean both species.”

“Everybody calm down,” Frank said. “Yelling at each other’s not going to solve anything. Come out the back for some afternoon tea and then we can see what pooling our respective intellects might produce.”

“Thank you, Frank,” Lorina said. “I have half an idea starting to form and perhaps after some of your wonderful cake we can see if it makes any sense.”

“So what’s your idea, Lorina?” Mark asked, brushing the last crumbs from his chin.

“I was trying to think it through logically, that’s all. We all agree Cornipus is the bunyips’ home world, but because of their carnivorous adolescent phase, they can’t share it with humans. Mark’s divot course proposal might buy us some breathing space, but I agree with Elissi that in the long term it’d create more problems than it solves.”

“So what’s the answer?”

“I don’t know what the magical answer is, and perhaps there isn’t one, at least in that sense, but to my mind the only logical solution is to find a compatible planet they can colonise, a *Cornipus Mk II* if you like.”

“That’s a pretty tall order.”

“What about Huntress?” Billy asked. “That’s only recently been restored and the human population is just a handful of Barungi towns plus the Black Delphinidae seminary and village.”

Mark shook his head. “I told the Barungi they’d have autonomy over their world and I’ll not go back on my word. While their population may be small now, it’ll grow over time and Huntress doesn’t have that much more land area than Bluehaven. It may take quite a few generations, but ultimately there’d be conflict.”

Rangy looked at Billy. “Well what about Earth’s twin planet?”

“You mean Eden?”

“Yes. That’s a nature reserve with no human population, from what I’ve been told. For centuries the Eridanian bunyips have been going there through the nexus to hunt.”

Billy shook his head. “The similarities in vegetation and wildlife suggest there may be natural portals between Earth and Eden, like the one between Eridani and its former twin, and if the bunyips were to find those it could be devastating for our world. In any case, the presence of a sizeable bunyip population on Eden could upset the ecological balance on what is a pristine nature reserve of galactic significance.”

“Isn’t that being a tad selfish?”

“No, Billy’s right,” Elissi said. “I too had thought of Eden as an alternative home but reached the same conclusions as him.”

“I’ve heard that Bluehaven has an uninhabited twin,” Russell said. “What about that?”

“It’s certainly uninhabited,” Lorina said, “but that’s mostly because of its toxic atmosphere.”

“Damn.”

Everyone looked at each other, hoping someone else might have a bright idea.

“I’ll go talk to the people in Galactic Cartography,” Frank said. “They may have come across a suitable planet in the course of their explorations.”

“We should ask Damien when Pip brings him back,” Lorina said. “He did a lot of exploration in his younger days and might have come across a suitable world.”

Elissi nodded. “Let’s hope something turns up then, because as you said, that’s probably our only hope of a long term solution. So what do we do short term?”

“I think Mark’s divot course suggestion is a good one, but we need to persuade the people of Cornipus to hand over their family pets before anyone starts getting eaten.”

“Gallagher wants to send in the troops to round them up,” Mark said.

“That’s probably a bit heavy-handed, at least initially.”

Russell grinned. “When Mark was previously Supreme Councillor, he came across well in his televised addresses to the galaxy. Could something like that work as a first step?”

Lorina nodded. “Perhaps an interview on one of the talk shows might be the best approach. If the presenter played the part of the devil’s advocate, we could kill off a lot of people’s concerns before they get out of hand.”

Mark grimaced, opening his mouth to voice his objections, but not finding anything convincing to say, he closed it again and sighed.

* * *

Mark approached the two Eridanian yowies, trying to figure out how best to ask his question.

“You have a puzzled smell,” the female said.

“Do I? Yes, that’s kind of what I want to ask you about. I was wondering if there’s a smell your adolescents would recognise to stop them from eating humans.”

The yowies looked at each other. “On the worlds you call Earth and Eden there are poisonous plants the adolescents know not to eat. Would the scent of one of those do what you want?”

“I don’t think so. We need it to work with the bunyips on Cornipus and they wouldn’t know about those plants.”

“I understand what you mean.”

The male yowie rubbed his muzzle. “There’s a smell our females have when they’re carrying a child, and our adolescents instinctively know not to harm them.”

“That’s great! All we need now is to figure out how to recreate it as a cologne.”

“I’m carrying a child,” the female said, “so just make it smell like me.”

Mark sniffed, but could smell nothing. “I’m going to need our perfume experts to do that, I think.”

“I’ll help in any way I can.”

“Thank you.”

* * *

“Good evening and welcome to *Friday Night Live*. With me tonight is Supreme Councillor Mark Collins along with two most unusual guests. We’ll come to them in a moment but firstly, Mark, I believe you’ve unravelled what was behind the bizarre behaviour of General Gallagher and the upheaval that saw you step in as acting head of state.”

“Indeed I have, and I must firstly thank the Eridanian High Councillor for her assistance in this matter, for as you’ll see, Eridani held a vital key in solving this mystery. I’m getting ahead of myself, though, for this all began more than a million years ago at the time the first settlers from Meridian arrived on Cornipus. The history books, and indeed the Cornipean constitution, all say that world was uninhabited, but they were wrong.

“A most unusual sentient species lived there, possessing three quite distinct phases of life. The children were herbivores, resembling small animals and living on native grasses and the vegetables cultivated by their parents. As they grew into adolescence, though, they became carnivorous, fighting each other for the right to lead the night-time hunt for meat. Once strong enough, they’d lapse into a

deep sleep lasting many days as their bodies transformed into the bipedal adults.”

“So what happened when the first settlers arrived?”

“We don’t know for certain, as very few records have survived from that time, but conflict arose between the newcomers and the natives, leading to loss of life on both sides. The settlers, unaware that those three phases were in fact the same species, developed a genetically engineered grass to pacify the aggressive adolescents. It contained what to humans is a mild sedative, and from all accounts it achieved its goal. Unfortunately it also had the side effect of stopping the natives from progressing beyond their first phase, and in due course the adolescents and adults disappeared.”

“What about the children? Surely they would’ve died out too, being unable to reproduce.”

“Actually no, for although they were unable to grow in size, they still reached sexual maturity. Being passive herbivores, they not only survived but thrived in the wake of the colonists.”

“You mean they’re still there to this very day?”

“Of course; you call them bunyips and the genetically engineered plant that stops them from growing is honey-grass.”

“You’re having me on, surely.”

“I wish I were, but no, the animals the Cornipeans adopted as pets are the remnants of that ancient sentient race.”

“But how do you know all this?”

“One clue was in an ancient statue found in Longville, depicting an adolescent and adult attacking the early colonists. The inscription on it says *Remember the Night Terrors*, and it’s easy to imagine what a terrifying time that must have been for both species.”

“So what’s the Eridanian connection?”

“We all know that at the height of the War of the Barefooters, Gallad and his people fled to the Milky Way galaxy, but what isn’t recorded is that they had a number of bunyips with them. Honey-grass seeds, carried in their droppings, took hold on the world they landed on, keeping them in their herbivorous form, until many generations later their adopted world was devastated by an exploding star and some of the descendants of those Barefooters fled to Eridani. The biological differences of that world prevented honey-grass from

germinating, and in due course the bunyips began growing through adolescence and into adulthood.”

“How did the native Eridanians react to that?”

“Perhaps surprisingly, they welcomed them, setting them up on an island in the southern hemisphere and engaging them in regular trade. But a catastrophe on that world saw their southern ocean disappear, leaving the bunyip people stranded, and in order to help them, the Eridanians built a subspace nexus giving them access to other nearby worlds on which to feed, specifically Earth and its twin planet Eden. My own ancestors, the Aboriginal people of Australia, saw them as monsters, calling the adults yowies, while their word for the adolescents became rendered in our own language as *bunyips*.”

“What an amazing coincidence.”

“Not really, as the Barefooters who brought the bunyips to Eridani would have used that name for them, which the Eridanians then adopted into their own language. The adult bunyips learned to speak Eridanian and would have used that name for their own species, passing it on in due course to the Aboriginal people on Earth.”

“I see. That of course brings us to the two guests I mentioned earlier.”

The yowies stepped out of wings, shaking the presenter’s hand before taking their seats beside him.

“These are two of the adult bunyips from Eridani,” Mark said, “and are what our own Cornipean bunyips should grow into were it not for the introduced toxin in honey-grass.”

“They seem friendly enough,” the presenter said, although his body language painted a different picture.

“Yes, and they’re quite fluent in Eridanian too.”

“So what are they doing here?”

“Long ago, when it became apparent that the Eridanian biosphere couldn’t sustain them, the southern Eridanian people made a pact to help them find their home world. When they realised Cornipus was that lost home, the Eridanian High Councillor, through her contacts here, made representation to our Supreme Court claiming recognition for them as Cornipus’s original sentient species. The court granted them that, overturning the tenet of *terra nullius* in the preamble of the Cornipean constitution, but rejected their claim of sovereignty

because of the vast expanse of time that's elapsed and the almost total redevelopment of the planet's surface that's occurred since then."

"What's your government's position on this, Mark?"

"As I'm sure you know, I'm acting as caretaker only, but even if that weren't the case, I'd still stand behind the court's decision. As I said to one of my compatriots just days ago, it was Morgoth overruling the courts and putting himself above the law that marked his transition from head of state to despot, and I have no intention of following in his footsteps."

"I'm sure many of us are relieved to hear that. So what happens now?"

"My aim has always been to reach a settlement which is equitable and fair to both the bunyip people and the human inhabitants of Cornipus. We're currently working with the Eridanians to find an alternative home for the buniyps, ideally on an uninhabited world as the carnivorous nature and great strength of the adolescents makes cohabitation with humans too risky. However we do have a more immediate problem to deal with."

"What might that be?"

"A botanist working in the Great Library of Cornipus has been researching the nature of honey-grass for many years, and in anticipation of a favourable outcome for the bunyip people in the Supreme Court, engineered another grass containing its antidote. Following the verdict, though, he released it into the environment and, being a wind-borne seed, it's quickly dispersed across the planet. Soon it will germinate, and when the buniyps start eating the shoots they'll begin following their natural growth cycle, becoming the carnivorous adolescents before eventually transforming into adult form."

The presenter turned pale. "There are a lot of buniyps on Cornipus."

"Upwards of ten million, I'm told, and that doesn't include those still in the wild. Obviously this poses a great risk to public safety, which is why I'm here tonight to announce that bunyip protection stations will be established in each Cornipean town, using the existing divot courses where appropriate. Local government officials will be contacting each household with arrangements for the collection and

transfer of bunyips. As additional protection, we've developed a cologne based on bunyip pheromones which we hope will ward off attacks by the adolescents."

"But what if people don't want to just give up their pets? In many homes the bunyip is considered one of the family and children in particular will be devastated."

"To put it bluntly, and with the greatest of apologies to those families, I'd rather see children devastated than eaten, and that's the risk we'd be taking if we failed to act. You must also consider this from the point of view of the bunyips. Imagine if the tables were turned, with some other species drugging human children to stop them growing so they could keep them as pets. Would you be outraged? I know I would."

The presenter stood. "How dare you? Many families, my own included, have had pet bunyips for generations and have always treated them with the greatest kindness and respect. How dare you accuse us of child abuse? How dare you!"

Before Mark could respond, the two yowies stood, one grabbing him around the neck and the other doing likewise to the presenter.

"Enough talk!" the female said in the Meridian common tongue. "We will NOT be put into your so-called *bunyip protection stations* to be transported to some off-cast planet, nor will we tolerate the poisoning of our children to satisfy your need for pets. The time for talk is over! Heed the cry of the bunyips; give back our home and our people or these humans will die."

* * *

"I have snipers on hand to take out the creatures," Colonel Gallagher said to everyone gathered outside the studio.

Lorina looked horrified. "No, don't. If you kill them we'll have ten million more following with no chance of controlling them. In any case, you might hit my husband."

"Let me talk to them," Rangy said. "They know me and trust me."

Gallagher looked at Piper.

"Go on then, but if you fail I'll have no choice but to give Gallagher the nod."

Rangy stepped into the studio; his arms raised in what he hoped would be a recognised sign of parley. “Don’t do this! You must give us time, just a little more time to find a new home for you and your people.”

“Go away, Rangy. Your pledges and promises are worth nothing now. Send us the child you call Joel; we’ll speak only to him.”

“But surely —”

“Send us the child or we’ll kill these two word-mongers.”

Rangy gave them one last pleading look before returning to Lorina and the others. “They want to talk to Joel.”

“What?”

“They said they’ll only talk to him.”

“No way; absolutely not!”

“It’s okay, Mrs Collins,” Joel said. “I think I know why they want me.”

Loraine took hold of his hand. “It’s to do with Number Five lying down on your feet, isn’t it?”

“I think so, yes. Number Five defeated their sons then yielded to me. I think it’s highly, um, what’s the word?”

“Symbolic,” David said.

“That’s near enough. I have to do this, truly.”

Loraine glanced back and forth between her father and Joel, before releasing his hand and kissing him on the nose.

“Don’t do anything rash,” David said, hugging him. “You’re the only best mate I’ve got.”

Lorina frowned, shaking her head but making no effort to stop him as Joel walked slowly into the studio. Loraine covered her face, her tears flowing freely as she tried to choke back her sobs. David wrapped her in his arms, comforting her as best he could.

Under the glare of the studio lights, the yowies stood watching Joel approach, their faces unreadable.

“Come to me,” the one holding the presenter said. “You smell of fear, Earth child, great fear, am I right?” It reached out its hand towards him, placing its needle-like claw just below his throat.

“Y-yes.”

Joel squeezed his eyes shut, focusing on not wetting himself on galactic television as the yowie dragged its claw from the top of his sternum right down to his navel.

“You are very brave, Earth child.”

Joel chanced a peep, fully expecting to see at least a stream of blood running down his chest and stomach, but there was barely a scratch mark on him.

“The one you call Number Five was right to honour you.”

“Huh?”

The yowie grabbed Joel’s hair, pulling until it hurt.

“Ouch!”

“You have good fur on your head, Earth child.”

Joel had always liked wearing his hair long, much to the consternation of his crew-cut father, but was now having serious second thoughts.

The other yowie pushed Mark forward. “This human also smells of Earth. Do you know him?”

“Yes, he’s Mark Collins, my friends’ father.”

“Are they the male and female children over there?”

“Loraine and David, yes.”

“You call them friends.”

“I think Loraine has a crush on me, making David a bit jealous, but yeah, they’re my best friends, well my only friends really.”

“Would you give yourself to us to save their father?”

“No Joel, don’t!” Mark said.

“Yes, of course I would.”

The yowies exchanged glances before releasing Mark and the presenter. “You can both go now while we keep this one as our pet.”

“No!” Mark shouted. “This is ridiculous!”

Joel shook his head. “Do as he says, please, for Loraine’s and David’s sakes. I’ll be okay, I promise.”

“You harm one hair on his head, you hear me, just one hair and I swear I’ll personally annihilate every goddamned bunyip in this galaxy!”

The yowie glared at him, forcing him to turn away, while running its claws back and forth through Joel’s shaggy brown locks.

Number Five

What distinguishes dreaming from wakefulness? In my dreams I'm awake, yet when awake I dream.

I can remember my mother's smell and the taste of her milk, but not her eyes or her face. The demons took her away too soon, placing me with others of my kin, cheerful fellows mostly who showed me what I could eat and where I could go.

I soon fell into the routine of grazing by day and returning to the pen at night, sleeping snugly in the fresh soft straw the demons provided for us. To a youngster like me, everything smelled and tasted new and exciting, but nothing compared to the tender juicy clumps of what the demons called honey-grass. Sweet and tangy, every mouthful just made me ache for more. Like everyone else, I was hooked, and so the dreaming began.

In wakefulness we're aware of time and space; our senses give us light and dark, hot and cold, shadows, wind and rain. But in the dreaming there's only mind; an awareness of self and of others in a place where everything's possible but nothing's fulfilled. In the void we cry where none can hear, pining for a life we've never known and can never have.

The days passed by, melting into seasons of blossoms and fruit, seed and regrowth. In the wakefulness I grew, challenging my kin in games of strength and winning the approval of the ever-present demons. "That one's a goer!" they'd sometimes say. "A champ in the making for sure!" A scratch behind the ears and a handful of honey-grass pellets – what more could anyone want? Yet I knew the answer to that lay in the dreaming, hiding amongst those cries of despair.

One of my kin, older and stronger than most, became our hunt-master, fending off all challengers to his crown. He'd often take me

aside, teaching me tricks to confuse my opponents, but one day other demons came and took him away. For a while I heard his voice in the dreaming, crying out in triumph and in pain, but soon that too had gone.

More demons came, shouting and pointing, nodding and shaking their heads. "This one here!" one of them yelled, and before I knew it I'd been snatched up and placed in a box. Accosted by smells of metal and machinery, I was jostled about, bouncing every which-way as motors roared all around me.

"Clear for takeoff," a demon voice said and suddenly I was flying, or falling, or probably both. Up became down and in became out as the smell of urine overwhelmed all others. I took refuge in the dreaming, adding my voice to the chorus of cries.

When next I woke I was still in my box, stacked amongst others in a darkened room. Smells of fear and puzzlement surrounded me, adding to my own. A demon came in, giving us water and honey-grass pellets to calm us down. In the dreaming the voices dimmed, but it was the calm before what would be the greatest storm of my life.

I woke as light filled the room, not daylight but harsh demon light glaring from above. Many voices approached, all speaking with great excitement of a contest about to unfold.

"These are the house bunyips used in the preliminary bouts," said a nearby voice. "The big players breed their own, and you'll see those later in the evening if you make it that far."

A young demon stepped up to the boxes, peering into each one in turn. I backed into the corner, fearful of what he might do to me, when suddenly I smelt through his disguise. This was no demon.

"Pick one."

"Huh?"

"See the numbers on their collars? Pick one and place your bet."

"Number five," the angel said, giving me the name I'd carry forever more.

"Come on then, let's find a bookmaker," said the old demon with him, leading him back into the crowd.

My mind still spinning from what I'd just witnessed, I hardly noticed when the light concentrated itself into the centre of the room,

drawing most of the demons with it. Four of them approached me, though, each taking one of the boxes from around me and carrying it towards the light. My waking body smelt the fear of those inside while my dreaming mind heard their cries of confusion. But was there something more? Something about challenge, perhaps, and rising to the occasion?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a female demon said, her voice made painfully loud by some demon magic. “The first elimination bout is between numbers four, six, nine and ten.”

An aroma, something akin to honey-grass but sweeter and more intoxicating, came to me from the centre of the room. I pushed my face against the wire covering the front of my box, trying to see what it was, but saw only the backs of demons seated row upon row around the source of that smell.

From the four that had been taken, I smelt anxiety mixed with the thrill of excited expectation I normally associated with the games of strength we’d played back home. In a flash of deductive brilliance, I realised this was just the next level of the sport; the best from each community challenging each other while the demons gathered to watch. But if that’s all it was, why was the angel here?

Voices yelped as the competition began and the smell of excitement grew, but almost immediately I sensed something was wrong. From the part of my mind in the dreaming I felt great pain as the crying intensified. The demons too began crying out, but in cries of rapture, not pain. “Number ten’s out!” the female demon yelled as the smell of spilt blood filled the air, but rather than stopping to care for the injured, the fighting intensified.

“Six is gone so it’s between four and nine now!” she cried as I smelt more blood being spilled. For a moment I caught sight of the angel, sitting with his eyes closed and a most pained expression on his face. Why was he here?

A haunting squeak came from the centre of the room, while in the dreaming the crying suddenly stopped. “A win to number nine!” the demon said. “Do we have a new champion in the making?” Only one of the four was returned to his box, the fate of the other three uncertain, although the stench of blood and death left little doubt in my mind. The light spread back out to fill the room as the demons

stood, chattering away to each other in excited tones. Suddenly the angel was crouching before me, staring at me with sorrowful eyes. My dreaming mind felt great serenity and calm, but my wakeful self remained apprehensive and confused.

The light around me dimmed once more, drawing the angel back to the centre of the room. A young demon took hold of my box, carrying me through the crowd before opening the wire grill and placing me in a brightly-lit pen. Three others were similarly brought in to join me, each as nervous and apprehensive as I was.

“In this round we have numbers one, five, eleven and thirteen,” the female demon said in her magnified voice. Number Five, that’s my name, so this was to be my moment of glory, or more likely ignominy. I focused my mind on trying to remember all the tricks the old hunt-master had taught me, but it had mostly gone blank.

The female demon lowered a bowl of the stuff I’d smelt earlier, its intoxicating aroma wiping everything else from my mind. As one we were drawn towards it, anticipating with watering mouths the wonderful taste it must have.

I swallowed, my dreaming mind crying out in delight as the delicious sweet honey filled my stomach. Its taste was similar to honey-grass, in the way a sapling is similar to a forest or a drop of water is similar to a lake. My muscles tensed as my dreaming and wakeful minds became as one, my senses honed like never before. I was to be the new hunt-master, of that I was certain, and the sooner I could dispatch those other three pretenders, the better.

Before I knew it, the battle had begun, the four of us wrestling, twisting, biting, doing anything to gain an advantage over each other. One of my opponents cried out in pain as the smell of spilt blood filled my nostrils, but that only spurred me on.

“Number one is out!” the demon shouted as a hand reached down to remove one of my opponents, but I tried to remain focused on what the other two were doing, aware any lapse of concentration would be my undoing. I twisted around, barely avoiding a set of jaws intent on crushing my throat, when my attacker suffered the fate he’d intended for me.

“Number thirteen’s gone!”

Just two of us left now, circling each other in search of a weakness. My opponent leapt at me, catching me on the leg, but without thinking I twisted around and bit off his ear. We separated, taking stock of our injuries while circling in wait of an opportunity to strike.

Behind me the angel sighed, distracting me for just a moment. I sidestepped as my opponent began to leap, but it was a sham, leaving me vulnerable to his real attack. Concentrating totally on his jaws, as the old hunt-master had taught, I whipped my neck back just as he struck, leaving him biting on air. As he sailed past I kicked him in the groin, bringing a satisfying yelp from his lips, before seizing my advantage and crushing his throat.

The taste of blood brought me down with a thud. I stared at the remains of my opponent, not taking my eyes off him even as the demon lifted him out of the pen. Had I done that? Had I killed him?

Before I could let the ramifications sink in, another demon lifted me up, thrusting honey-grass pellets into my mouth. My dreaming and wakeful minds separated as the world around me vanished, leaving me in blissful oblivion.

When I woke I was back in my box, the demons now gathered around the light as another four did battle. I began to see the pattern; four groups of four, with the victors then fighting each other for ultimate supremacy. I looked down at my stinging leg, wondering if I'd be up to the task, but the thought of again tasting that wonderful elixir drove all such concerns away.

The room grew suddenly quiet as a group of demons entered from behind, amongst them one of seemingly great importance, their king perhaps. From the box one of the lesser demons carried came the odour of a seasoned hunt-master, asserting his authority over the rest of us and daring any to challenge him. That put a whole new complexion on things; there'd be no fourth bout, I realised, instead I and the other two winners would be facing this reigning champion. I hunkered down in the back of my box, but as my dreaming mind sensed the other two, a crazy thought began to emerge. 'We can do

it,' I said, 'we can beat this overrated stuck-up bastard if we work together.'

"Ladies and gentlemen," the female demon said as the light drew into the centre once more. "You've seen the cunning and guile of our three challengers this evening, but will it be enough? I present to you our reigning champion, seven times victor, our one and only Chopper!"

The other demons bellowed and cheered, crowding in around the central pen.

"Our challengers tonight are numbers nine, five and two. You have three minutes, ladies and gentlemen, three minutes in which to collect your winnings or place new bets."

Demons carried us into the centre, placing us down before our opponent. 'Is this all you could find to challenge me?' his aroma said as he stared at each of us in turn. 'These cubs fallen from their mothers' teats?'

He was big, far bigger than even our old hunt-master. The other two challengers looked at me, asking whether rolling over and playing dead might be our only hope. My dreaming mind had other ideas, though, telling me size doesn't matter, but before I could mount a counter-argument, the female demon placed the bowl of elixir in front of us and all other thought disappeared.

Once again my waking and dreaming minds merged as that wonderful draught surged through me, raising my awareness to great heights. I glanced at my two companions, giving them the nod, my muscles tensed waiting for just the right moment to strike.

'Now!' I yelled, both vocally and in the dreaming, and as one we leapt at our opponent, taking him by surprise. In a tangle of claws, teeth and grappling limbs, we became primal creatures devoid of conscious thought, each driven by the simple will to survive. A distant corner of my mind caught the smell of blood as one of my companions fell limp.

"Number nine's down!" the female demon screamed, but I couldn't afford any distractions.

Pain flared in my side as someone's claws or teeth found their mark. 'It's only a flesh wound,' my inner voice said. 'Keep fighting or die!'

I heard the sound of crushing bone as the master's teeth found the throat of the remaining challenger, but in a moment of stunning clarity where the future merged with the present, I saw my chance. Ignoring the pain screaming from my torn flesh, I twisted myself around, stretching every muscle to breaking point, positioning my jaws where I knew my opponent was about to move. In what was now a slow-motion dance, the master's throat slipped into my waiting mouth, and all I had to do was gently bite, his size and momentum doing the rest.

A great weight fell across me, driving all breath from my lungs. Away in the distance I could hear the demons' shouts, but my mind and body were utterly spent. Longing now for death's cold embrace, I almost let go before sensing the presence of the angel. With the last of my strength, I twisted myself out from under my bulky opponent's body, drawing in at last a wheezing gasp of air.

A demon reached down to take me, but I was having none of that. Lashing out, I almost had his fingers, but he was just a fraction too quick.

"Our new champion still has some fight left in him," I heard the female laugh. "Ladies and gentlemen, the winner is – number five!"

The smell of blood aroused me. Forcing my eyes open, I found myself lying in the corner of the pen with a blood-soaked cloth tied around my wounded side.

"I have a bid of five thousand from Mr Blunt," the female demon cried. "Are there any further bids?"

"Six thousand." I looked up to see the angel raising his hand.

"Seven," the demon king said in reply.

"Eight."

"Ten."

The angel fell silent.

"Do I hear any advance on ten thousand?"

"Second call."

"Third and final call?"

I watched the angel pleading with his companion, but he just shook his head.

“Sold to our Supreme Councillor for ten thousand! Congratulations, sir.”

The angel stepped down beside me, his eyes full of sadness and defeat. “I’m sorry. I tried, honest I did.”

I wanted to tell him not to give up, that there was still hope, but a demon lifted me, pushing me into the former master’s box before carrying me from the room and out into the fresh air. I let my dreaming mind take over as the stars twinkled above.

When next I came into wakefulness, I was on a farm not unlike my home, but the smells of the ground and the forest were alien to me. I was chewing on honey-grass, that much was the same, but even so, its taste was now but a dim reminder of the wonderful elixir I’d savoured.

Around me were others of my kind, but not my kin. I was the hunt-master now, in spite of how unworthy I felt about claiming that title at the expense of other lives. My injured side still pained if I twisted myself, reminding me of that horrific night in the demons’ den, but in a way I hoped that pain would never leave, lest I forget what I’d done.

It was night time under a full moon when I heard someone approaching our enclosure. The others backed away in fear, but I recognised the scent of one of the intruders.

From out of the darkness came the angel, calling my name as he leaned over the fence to rub my fur.

“We’re going to put an end to this, I promise,” he whispered, now climbing into the pen.

“No, Clem!” the other one with him said, but at the same moment demon-light vanquished the darkness. The angel lifted me, holding me against his chest as he started climbing back over the fence, but the demon-king and his henchmen came running towards us, stopping him.

“Mr Edwinson I believe,” the king said. “Come to steal my bunyip, have you? I think it’s time we had a little talk.”

He took hold of me while the other demons led the angel into the building behind the pen. I sat quietly on his lap, trying to make sense of the conversation they were having. I recoiled when one of the

demons struck the angel across the face, but relaxed again when the king reprimanded him. I was sure the angel and the king would reach an amicable agreement.

“Perhaps I can offer you a share in this bunyip,” *the king said.* “How does five thousand sound for a fifty-fifty split of the winnings?”

The angel scratched his chin. “You want me to give you five thousand for half that bunyip’s winnings?”

“Chopper earned me fifty thousand before this little beauty made minced meat of him. He has a great future ahead of him, a great future.”

“You people are just so sick.”

The angry demon struck the angel again, cutting him on the cheek. The angel raised his fists, now smelling of strong anger.

“Clem! No!” *the older one with him said.*

“Clem?” *the king said.* “Mr Edwinson, of course, I thought you looked familiar the first time I saw you. You’re Clem son of Edwin from Huntress, aren’t you; young Ingle’s lackey? So Ingle’s trying to stop the bunyip-baiting, is he? It’s a bit rich, don’t you think, the Black Delphinidae going after us given what you do to dolphins. Grilled or battered, hey Clem, with a squeeze of lemon?”

“That’s a lie!” *the angel yelled, his anger now reaching flashpoint.*

“It’s time young Ingle learnt not to interfere in matters that are none of his concern. Take our guests outside and show them the full extent of our hospitality.”

“With pleasure,” *the violent demon said.* “Now move it!”

“No wait!” *the angel’s friend said as they were both ushered towards the door.* “I have nothing to do with Ingle!”

The king shrugged while shaking his head. “That’s life, or should I say death, old friend.”

The angel’s smell of anger turned into fear and resignation. In it, I sensed he expected to be killed, but I couldn’t allow that to happen. I jumped from the king’s lap and bounded out the door, taking quick stock of my surroundings before leaping onto the violent demon and locking my jaws around his nose.

As he pointed the metal object he held at me, I sensed danger and let go, dropping to the ground just as a loud bang rang out. The

demon bellowed in pain as blood exploded from his face. I ran towards the angel, but something sliced through my wounded side, knocking me over. I tried to stand but all my strength had gone, and the last thing I remembered was seeing the demon king dropping to the ground.

I woke lying on a soft bed in a place of peace and tranquillity. Watching over me were the angel and another of his kin, an archangel bursting with an aura of kindness and love.

“Pip, I think he’s waking up,” the angel said.

The one called Pip crouched down, scratching me behind the ears. “You’re in safe hands now.”

Another entered the room, bending down and placing his bony hand on my head. “You hold the key to your people’s future, little one, but you must remain true to yourself. Here you may rest for a while, but soon you’ll face your ultimate test.”

“Grandfather, what are you on about?” the angel asked.

“Me? Just a flash of foresight, that’s all. It’s probably meaningless.”

I tried to comprehend, but my eyelids became too heavy as I slipped into my dreaming mind, sensing a disturbance in its realm as one of the guardians confronted five human children. Other humans came, seeking to rescue them, but before they could do so, invading demons captured them, taking some away while imprisoning the others. Intriguingly, one of the children slipped aside while the demons weren’t looking, hiding until they’d gone before rescuing the others and leading them to safety. In that child’s selfless act, my dreaming mind foresaw the fulfilment of endless possibilities.

The peace and serenity didn’t last for long. Demons came, taking Pip and his helpers away and leaving just the angel and his ailing grandfather with me.

“Clem, your bunyip,” the grandfather said as the angel gave him his breakfast. “There’s little time and you must find the answer soon.”

My ears pricked up as I realised he was talking about me.

“I still don’t know what the question is.”

“Go to Cornipus, Clem.”

“Cornipus? I will if those goons ever set us free.”

“You must go to Longville, for there it hides in plain sight. The honey’s not a poison, Clem, it’s – oh my, can you see that?”

“What? See what?”

“The Black Dolphin, Clem, he’s nothing like we imagined, he’s –”

Tears came to my eyes as I sensed the grandfather’s death. I lay my head on the angel’s feet, expressing our shared grief in the only way I knew.

Others came, including the angel’s parents, helping him deal with the practicalities of his grandfather’s passing. Even the demons guarding the gate chipped in, much to my surprise.

The next morning, though, the angel came into his grandfather’s room, greatly disturbed by something.

“How could he do this? How? Why?”

He sat in front of the thing they called a terminal, before his face turned pale and he toppled onto the floor in shock, narrowly missing me as he fell. Something outside caught my attention, though, and I leapt onto the window sill to see a demon flying machine landing outside on the grass.

The angel roused to my calling, following me out to investigate. Apprehension turned to joy, though, as I realised these newcomers were friends who’d come to help, while my dreaming mind recognised them as the ones the demons had earlier captured inside the realm of possibilities. The angel lifted me up, carrying me on board their vessel, and as I watched from the window, we took to the air like a bird and headed for the sky.

After a wild ride through a storm to escape the demons, we landed outside a large house on a hill. As I followed the angel and his friends inside, I smelt strong fear coming from the human child standing in a corner of the front room. My dreaming mind snapped wide awake as I stared at him, recognising him as the heroic child who’d earlier rescued his friends in that realm of possibilities.

“It’s a Cornipean bunyip,” one of the other children said to him. “They’re not like our bunyip.”

“Huh – what – yeah, I know. It’s like beagles and wolves.”

“Sometimes I wonder about you, Joel.”

Joel – the boy’s name struck an unexpected resonance in me. He was the key, the nexus upon which all those possibilities hung, but how could that be?

I followed as everyone moved into another room where they began feeding. The boy looked at me warily as he sat down next to the female child.

“Bunyips are like butterflies. I thought of it before but couldn’t remember what the word was.”

“Metamorphosis.”

“That’s it. They change from caterpillars into butterflies, the same as bunyips change from those like the one over there to the monster we saw in the nexus.”

I stood and trotted over to him, giving him an inquisitive look.

“Scratch him behind the ears,” *the angel said.*

In spite of his fear, the boy reached down, hesitantly scratching me. His touch sent a tingling shiver through me, a foreboding perhaps of what lay ahead. I placed my head across his feet, sensing in his smells what my dreaming mind had seen.

The next morning, the angel took them all away to a place he called Cornipus, leaving me behind with the older human. I spent the time exploring my surroundings, following smells through the vines and nearby bushland. I came upon a nest of small animals, smelling great fear in them. Without realising what I was doing, I found myself tearing at their flesh and eating them as a wild frenzy ran through me. I had discovered my taste for meat, leading me to wonder whether I might be turning into the monster Joel had alluded to.

My desire for food overcame such thoughts, though, and I continued exercising my skills as hunt-master.

Eventually the angel returned, having successfully rescued the archangel Pip from the demons. They all gathered behind the house while one of the helpers prepared food for them. My stomach rumbling, I focused my attention on the large piece of meat hanging precariously off the edge of a plate, while the humans chattered away about matters philosophical.

“Dad said people turn into monsters,” *Joel suddenly cried out, snapping my attention back*, “but it’s really the other way around!”

“Are you saying –” *the angel began, but Joel cut him off.*

“The monster bunyips turn into those wolf people like the man in the statue!”

“That’s impossible, surely,” *the older human said.*

“No, I don’t think so.” *The angel reached down, putting his fingers around my shoulders and lifting me up.* “Look, his front paws are almost like tiny hands and if his thigh bones were to lengthen and his feet flatten out –”

“And the face too,” *another of his friends said.* “His neck would have to grow a little and tilt his head forward, but I can see how it might work.”

The angel released me while they pondered what Joel had said. Seizing my opportunity when no-one was looking, I leapt over to the food table and grabbed the piece of meat, chewing and swallowing as fast as I could. I felt guilty, knowing I’d done the wrong thing, but the meat was inside me now and nothing could be done about it.

“He sure wolfed that down,” *Joel said.*

“I thought bunyips were supposed to be herbivores.”

“They do eat small lizards and frogs occasionally, but I guess they go for bigger game once they start metamorphosing.”

“Including people?”

I stared at Joel, licking my lips as my dreaming mind pondered how his flesh might taste. Was it my destiny to devour all who had befriended me? More and more I felt my waking and dreaming minds were at odds with each other, my own angel and demon perhaps. I turned, going deep into the tangles of vines and away from humans to ponder my dichotomy.

A few days later more visitors arrived. As well as the humans were three of my kind; one younger than me and two older ones smelling strongly of violence, the monsters that had frightened Joel perhaps. With them were two other beings my dreaming mind recognised as guardians of the realm of possibilities, creatures similar to me but larger and walking upright like humans. They smelt to me of anger

and disdain, though, and I kept well clear of them, preferring to hunt alone amongst the vines.

I heard a vehicle depart, followed shortly thereafter by the sound of the human children playing around the back of the house. Earlier in the week I'd joined them, retrieving the ball for them when they hit it into the bushes, but I no longer trusted myself to distinguish between friends and prey. What would happen if my dreaming mind took control of my body? Could I stop myself from hurting them, or worse?

"Another duck for Morison as Collins and Collins strike again!" cried the voice of the one called David. Perhaps, if Joel were to give me one of his ducks, that would satisfy my hunger, so I ambled up to the edge of the cleared area to take a look.

But there were no water fowl in sight, only the female child throwing the ball at her brother while he tried to fend it off with a lump of wood. Joel was crouched behind three sticks that had been hammered into the ground, ready to fetch the ball afterwards.

'Eat him,' my dreaming mind said, and before I knew it, I found myself creeping towards him. I forced myself to stop as David deflected the ball away to the right where it banged into the side of the shed. I watched Joel run off to fetch it as saliva began dripping from my lips.

'Now's your chance,' that voice inside me said, but before I could do anything, the older visitors came out of the shed, one sizing up Joel while the other prevented David from intervening.

'No, he's mine!' my dreaming mind cried, and for once I was in total agreement with it. I ran, leaping out of the bushes to tackle the one pouncing on Joel. Once again that primal instinct took hold as my waking and dreaming minds merged, with every element of my being focused on the battle, every tooth and claw intent only on inflicting damage to my opponent.

I sensed the other visitor joining the fight, but that only increased my will to win. I was the hunt-master and this was my territory. How dare these blow-ins try to take what's mine!

Pain exploded in my side as one of the opponents tore open my old scars. 'It's only a flesh wound,' my dreaming mind said, taking

control once more. I lashed out, twisting and biting like never before, feeling the satisfying crunch of my teeth grinding into bone.

Suddenly it was over, my two opponents offering their surrender smell before slinking back to the shed in defeat. Ignoring the pain in my side, I turned to my prize, the sweet-smelling human flesh standing before me. I smelt his fear, I smelt the urine that had trickled down his leg, but I also smelt his stoic acceptance of his fate, his refusal to flee or fight.

'NO!' my waking mind shouted. This was Joel, the angel's friend, my friend, my hero. I'd fought off the others to save him, not eat him. He was the true hunt-master and I his servant. Fighting the pain in my side, I crept over to him, laying my head on his feet in surrender.

I closed my eyes as the pain enveloped me, carrying me into the dreaming realm, but it was my waking mind taking control, enclosing my dreaming mind and making us one.

I wandered through that realm of possibilities as the dreaming minds of my kin bowed before me, acknowledging me as their hunt-master. Deep inside my soul, I knew with absolute certainty that my surrender to Joel had unlocked those possibilities, opening the door to salvation for my people. This was the message I preached to my disciples – there is hope, there is fulfilment, there is release from this prison of minds!

I opened my eyes to find myself lying on a bed. The pain in my side had gone, but I felt weak and drained. I tried to stand, but my body was strangely heavy and awkward.

"Ugh!"

Who said that? I looked around the room, but I was alone. Could that sound have come from me? I opened my mouth, giving voice to my thoughts.

"Aaah!"

This was interesting.

"Ay! Ee! I! Oh! You!"

Gosh.

"G-gosh!"

Hmm, I wonder...

“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. She sells sea shells by the sea shore. Yes she does, oh yes!”

Suddenly the door burst open as the angel and his lady friend ran into the room.

* * *

Clem stared across the room at the creature sitting on the edge of the bed, having heard strange voices coming from inside. It was Number Five, and yet it wasn't. Although nowhere near as big as the Eridanian yowies or the indigenous man in the *Night Terrors* statue, the similarity was unmistakable.

“Hi, Clem,” it said. “What's new?”

“Number Five?”

“That's my name, isn't it? Why'd you call me that?”

“Um, it was the number on your collar at that baiting meet where I first saw you.”

“Yes, I remember now. You saved me.”

“This is amazing!” Mog said. “You can speak!”

Number Five looked around the room. “Where's Joel?”

The Pied Piper of Cornipus

“You don’t like us, do you?” the yowie stroking Joel’s hair asked. “I can smell your disgust. Why is that?”

“I’ve seen the statue on Cornipus showing what your people did to the women and children there.”

The yowie looked deep into his eyes. “Tell us about that place you call Cornipus.”

“I was only there for one day and didn’t see much, but there were mountains and farms, and cities with lots of people. They have an amazing library, too, but the librarians are a bit weird.”

“It’s supposed to be our home and we’d like to see it for ourselves. You must take us to that statue.”

“Me? Um, I guess I could ask someone.”

“No, don’t ask. You must tell them to take us there.”

The yowie tightened its grip on Joel’s hair, leading him over to where Mark and Lorina were standing with the others.

“We must go to Cornipus,” Joel said. “They want to see the statue in Longville.”

“That’s out of the question,” Colonel Gallagher said.

Joel looked pleadingly at Mark as the yowie tugged on his roots.

“Do it,” Mark said. “Get Captain Harrison to bring his shuttle here.”

“As you wish, my liege,” General Piper said, signalling to Gallagher to make it happen. Gallagher frowned before lowering his gaze and pulling out his field telephone.

“Thank you,” the yowie said, releasing Joel’s hair before jabbing its claws into his bare shoulder and leading him back to its mate. Joel, unsure which was more painful, turned back to see Gallagher and Piper arguing with each other as they stepped out of sight.

“Get Harrison to eject as soon as they’re airborne then blow them to kingdom come,” Gallagher said to Piper.

“What about the boy?”

“To hell with the Earthling! His parents can make another one if they’re that desperate.”

“No, I won’t do it, not while there’s a chance of resolving this peacefully.”

“With all due respect, *sir*, Walker made a terrible mistake promoting you.”

“On that I’m inclined to agree. Even if we can deal with these two, we’ll soon have millions of them gallivanting all over Cornipus.”

“If that divot course proposal catches on, it might be a good opportunity to do something.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know; something in the water, perhaps, or a weed toxic to bunyips that just happens to start growing on the fairways.”

Piper stroked his beard. “It’d create a public outcry once word got out.”

“Nothing like the outcry there’ll be when those bunyips start eating people.”

“You’re right, of course. Since we’re going to Cornipus anyway, I might as well call in at Veterinary Biology and see what they can suggest.”

* * *

“That was Mark,” Pip said as he hung up the phone. “The yowies have taken Joel to Longville to see the *Night Terrors* statue. He wants us to meet him there.”

Clem looked at Number Five who was munching his way through a bowl of potato salad. “Are you feeling up to travelling?”

“Of course. I need to speak with both Joel and the yowies.”

“Damon and I will come too,” Damien said. “There might be something we can do to help.”

Pip nodded. “The more the merrier.”

“I’ll get Anton to organise a shuttle for us,” Frank said.

“As long as we don’t have to fly through any storms,” Number Five said. “That was really scary last time.”

Clem chuckled. “I think I liked you better as a dumb animal.”

Mog put her hand on Number Five’s shoulder. “I’m sure he doesn’t mean it.”

Number Five sniffed Clem’s breath. “A joke, yes; you have a funny smell.”

Clem shook his head. “Speaking of funny smells, what about the Eridanian bunyips out in the shed? Will they be okay while we’re gone?”

“I’ll look after them,” Rangy said, “and make sure they come to no harm.”

“I’m more concerned with them inflicting harm on others.”

“I’ll speak to them before we go,” Number Five said. “They’ve acknowledged me as their hunt-master and will do what I say.”

“Hunt-master?”

Rangy grinned. “It’s bunyip pecking order. Hunt-master is their highest rank.”

“I’m surprised something like that is recognised by both Eridanian and Cornipean bunyips.”

“It’s in our blood,” Number Five said, “and comes from the elder days when we were one people.”

“Come with me and you can speak to them now,” Rangy said, standing and ushering Number Five out to the shed.

“Can he be trusted?” Frank asked once they were out of earshot.

Clem bristled. “Number Five? Of course he can. We’ve been through thick and thin together.”

“I’m not disputing that, but blood is thicker than water and if push comes to shove over ownership of Cornipus, which way will he go? With that talk of *one people*, it sounds very much like he’s on the side of the yowies.”

“I think he sees himself as a mediator, one who has a paw in both camps, so to speak. He has a curious relationship with Joel, too, which I don’t quite understand, but it has something to do with what he calls their dreaming realm.”

“Could that be the nexus on Eridani?” Norrie asked.

“I believe it is.”

The yowies stared out the window of Captain Harrison's shuttle as it descended over Longville. "Your human technology has defaced everything here."

"This world's been populated for over a million years," Harrison said, "and even in the arctic, alpine and desert regions there's scarcely anything you'd consider pristine."

"I can understand that," Joel said. "On Earth we've only had heavy technology for a few hundred years but the planet came close to ruin from fossil fuels and pollution last century. Even with all the help we've had from the Eridanians, we're only just starting to restore many of the ecosystems."

"You sound very knowledgeable for someone your age."

"I, um, I had to do a school project on it last year."

One of the yowies wrinkled its nose. "What is *school*?"

"It's where children go to learn about, well, everything."

"Our children learn from the hunt-master."

"I guess our society is a bit more complicated than yours."

"You complicate things to beyond stupidity. This world is a perfect example of that."

"I thought it looked rather nice."

Harrison spiralled down over the headland at the entrance to Longville Bay. "This is the location of the first human settlement on the planet. You can still see remnants of the wall they built around it."

"Why did they come here?"

"Partly curiosity, I suppose, but also at the time, Meridian was becoming overcrowded and suffering the same sorts of pollution problems Joel described. They'd only just discovered subspace and before that had been burning fossil fuels for energy. At least Cornipus never suffered from any of that."

"From what we can see, they just chopped down all the forests instead and covered the land with buildings, farms and roads."

The shuttle touched down in the middle of the car park next to the lookout, but the yowies weren't interested in the view. "Where is the statue you spoke of?"

“Over this way,” Joel said, leading them into the maze of overgrown tracks where he’d been playing hide-and-seek just a couple of weeks earlier. He paused, running his hands through his tangled hair while trying to get his bearings.

“Are you sure this is the right track?” Harrison asked.

“Yeah, I, um, I think it’s just up here on the right.”

He pulled aside the bushes, once more coming face to face with the giant bunyip frozen in stone. He tried not to look at the woman and child as Harrison pulled back more of the undergrowth, but couldn’t help himself. Whoever the sculptor had been, he or she had expertly captured every nuance of fear and doom on their faces, leaving him in no doubt as to its authenticity. As much as he wanted to, having looked he just couldn’t turn away.

“What do those words say?” the female yowie asked.

“Um, *remember the night terrors*, I think.”

“Are you saying these humans were terrified of us?”

Joel felt his blood starting to boil. “Are you nuts? Just look at them! They’re about to be killed and eaten!”

“Of course, and so they should be; they were invading our home.”

“But they were just children!”

The yowie took hold of his hair again. “All I see here is a frightened child, not a dead one. Perhaps some did die, I won’t deny it as I wasn’t here, but most lived to grow into adults, infesting every nook and cranny of this world while denying *our* children that right. Instead we were poisoned to stop us growing, making us pets for an alien species, just like you are now our pet.”

She tugged hard on Joel’s hair, almost pulling him over backwards.

“Ouch! That hurts!”

“Be grateful you can still speak, *pet*, because even that most basic of rights was taken from us by your invaders.”

The yowie dragged Joel over to the side of the track, bending down to look at some tufts of grass. “Is this the poison, the thing you call honey-grass?”

“Yes, I think so.”

She pulled off a blade, sniffing it before placing a small piece in her mouth. “I can see why our children were attracted to this. We

must find a way to destroy it; otherwise this world can never truly be home.”

“Then let us find you somewhere else,” Harrison said, “somewhere far away from honey-grass.”

“Perhaps he’s right,” the male yowie said.

“No! Our home is here!”

Joel screamed as she almost ripped out his hair.

“Stop hurting that child!” Harrison yelled. “He had nothing to do with what happened here; he’s not even from this galaxy!”

“All the more reason to hurt him, for our children were just as innocent.”

Joel braced himself for more pain, but instead the yowie released him.

“Eat this, my pet,” she said, handing him the tuft of honey-grass. He hesitated a moment before remembering what the botanist had said about it being just a mild sedative to humans, the stuff sleeping pills were made from.

“Joel, don’t,” Harrison said.

“No, it’s okay, really. It won’t hurt me.”

It wasn’t okay, though; its taste was revolting, like sugar-coated aluminium mixed with spoiled oyster and paper mache. Joel gagged, almost throwing up as he tried to swallow.

“Spit it out, Joel, please. I won’t let them force you to eat it.”

Before the stand-off could escalate, the rumbling of an approaching vehicle distracted the yowies. Joel turned towards the bushes, spitting out the grass in what became a series of dry retches. More than anything, he wished for a large glass of water to wash away its horrible taste, but as he looked back down the track, all he saw was another yowie running towards him.

The newcomer, little more than half the height of the Eridanian yowies, stopped in front of them, staring up at their faces. Joel almost sneezed as the wind carried its pungent pheromones to him, yet it was a smell he recognised.

“Number Five?”

The former bunyip reached out, gently taking hold of Joel’s hand and easing him away from the yowies. “This child is the key to our salvation.”

The two yowies stood watching as Number Five crouched down, laying his muzzle across the top of Joel's feet. Not knowing what else to do, Joel scratched him behind the ears.

"Forgive us, hunt-master," the male yowie said, but the female one hissed, turning her eyes away.

Number Five stood as Mark, Lorina and Chris came running up behind him, closely followed by Clem, Russell and Pip. Damien and Damon brought up the rear.

"There can be no salvation while our home is infested with humans, *hunt-master*," the female said.

Joel wiped his mouth. "Then let them find you a new home, somewhere away from humans."

"This planet is our home, no other."

Chris stepped forward, grinning. "There is one other, perhaps; one that's much more like your home used to be than this world is now."

Everyone stared at him.

"Pip, when we went to rescue Damon and Damien, you said the Barefooters had made their planet appear like Cornipus had been at the time they went into exile."

"That's right," Damien said. "When we first went there a million years ago, some of the Barefooters established a portal to Cornipus, surreptitiously bringing back plants and animals from home. That continued for many centuries until we finally realised the risk we posed to everyone else and shut it down."

"Can you take us there?" Number Five asked.

"We'll have to go to Huntress and ask the Barungi to guide us through Sheol," Pip said.

"We can take my shuttle," Harrison said, "but it'll be a tight squeeze."

"Mark and I will stay here," Lorina said. "Joel too."

Joel shook his head. "I have to go with Number Five."

Lorina sighed before turning to Chris. "Don't let him out of your sight."

"I won't, I promise."

* * *

Number Five stood on the edge of the track, breathing deeply as he surveyed the valley on the Barefooters' former planet of exile. Stretching out before him on either side of a broad river were green fields of grass, interspersed with trees and bushes, while in the distance he caught glimpses of the ocean through the hazy air. He grabbed a handful of grass, chewing on it for a few moments before swallowing. "That's good; very tasty."

The male yowie did likewise, nodding in agreement, while the female scowled.

"Are you saying the whole planet is like this?"

"Not all of it, obviously," Damien said. "There are mountainous parts, deserts and rainforests, as you'd find on any world, but there are plenty of valleys just like this one."

"Are you sure there's no honey-grass?"

"Absolutely. That was one of the things we were careful not to bring here, as some of the Cornipean Barefooters knew it had been genetically engineered."

"What about the climate?"

"It's very similar to Cornipus. The planet's axis has a tilt of about twenty degrees so there are seasons, but in most places it's never too extreme."

"Our adolescents require meat to build up their reserves prior to changing."

"There's plenty of that, both in native species and ones we brought from Cornipus. Down around the remains of our village you'll find cattle and sheep, if you have a taste for those."

Number Five licked his lips, nodding.

The female yowie put her paws on her hips. "You say there are no humans living here now?"

"No, the last of the Barefooters died a few weeks ago."

Number Five nodded. "Thank you for bringing us here; I believe this planet will satisfy our needs."

The female snorted. "You've been poisoned by humans, hunt-master. Their words are worthless!"

Number Five turned to Pip. "Archangel, can you persuade her?"

Pip closed his eyes. Above him, the air shimmered as his yowie apparition began to take form. Although it didn't speak, an aroma

filled the air, a sweet smell promising freedom and hope. Woven into that complexity of scents were words saying, *“I am many things; the spirit of enlightenment, the essence of growth, the seed of sentience. But in truth all things are the same and Pip is as much my emissary to you as he is to his own kind. Accept his gift of this world, for it’s also my gift.”*

The female stared at him as the apparition faded, her arms folded across her chest. “You have a strong connection to our people, I’ll grant you that. I’m far from happy, for this will never be our true home, but I’ll concur with the hunt-master’s wishes.”

“Thank you,” Joel said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“You’re still my pet, boy, and will remain here with me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Chris said.

“I have a pet bunyip in my home on Huntress,” Pip said, “for at the time I didn’t know your true nature, but I’ll release him into your care if you release Joel into mine.”

“Do as he says,” Number Five said.

“Very well, take him; the boy talks too much anyway.”

“It’s a deal, then?” Clem asked, supporting Pip as he started tottering from exhaustion.

The female snorted again. “Yes.”

* * *

“That’s fantastic news!” Mark said to Clem. “I’m sure the bunyips and yowies will be happy there.”

“That’s all well and good,” General Piper said, “but just how are you proposing to transport them to that planet? From my understanding, it’s way beyond the range of even our fastest intergalactic ships.”

“They can get there through Sheol.”

“And just how many can the Barungi guide through there at a time? Ten? Twenty?”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“Obviously not, but you’d better start thinking now. That grass created by the rogue botanist has started sprouting and the divot

courses on Cornipus are reporting a steady influx of growing bunyips.”

“How long do we have?”

“At the present rate, we’ll reach holding capacity within a month. Look, Gallagher and I rarely agree on anything, but we’ve spoken to the people in Veterinary Biology who’ve suggested a way of humanely culling the bunyips if their numbers become too great.”

“I’m sorry, Piper, but I can’t allow that to happen.”

“Would you rather those bunyips start eating people?”

“No, but –”

“When push comes to shove, Mark, it’ll have to be one or the other, I’m afraid.”

Damon stepped forward. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’ve just had an idea that might solve the transport problem.”

“What is it?”

“Is your father still here, Mark?”

“Yes, he and Mum are helping Lorina keep the twins out of mischief.”

“Remember years ago we tried to create a direct portal between Bluehaven and Earth?”

“Yes, and I remember how it turned out too.”

“That was Pedro’s doing, but up until he intercepted us, it seemed to be working. I think we could do the same thing between Cornipus and the planet of exile.”

“We really should come up with a better name for that place. *Planet of Exile* sounds dreadful.”

“Call it *Fairyland* for all I care, but we should at least give it a try.”

“Okay, I’ll ask Dad what he thinks.”

* * *

“Last time we had a radio link to coordinate this,” Jason said, “but the minimum subspace delay between here and that planet is about six hours, and even then it’s not consistent.”

“Just do your best, Dad,” Mark said.

They were standing in front of the large portal that had been erected in the maintenance shed of Benzania's Professional Divot Association course, now home to four hundred growing bunyips.

Jason looked at his watch again. "I think it's time to start. Peter, could you open the portal please?"

He closed his eyes as the metal plate in front of him became enveloped in a dull shimmering glow, focusing on projecting his spirit through the opening into Sheol. Feeling the nothingness of that realm wrap around him, he began calling out to Damon who, by rights, should have been doing the same thing on the planet of exile.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Joel asked Loraine.

"Granddad reckons it is, but the last time they tried, it almost ended in tragedy."

"That was my fault," Pedro said. "I intercepted them as they were about to make contact, using them as bait to lure Peter into my realm."

"Why?"

"Let's just say I thought I had a score to settle with him, but young Jim here saved the day for all of us."

"Look, something's happening!" David said, saving Jim from embarrassment.

As they watched, the shimmering light moved inwards, forming a glowing passageway. With a sound like tearing paper, the light vanished, replaced by the market square of the Barefooters' village on that distant world. In the centre of the opening stood Damon, now face to face with Jason.

"Everything appears stable," Peter said, poring over his instruments.

"Catch!" Mark said, throwing a divot ball through to Damon, who in turn threw it back to Jason.

"I think we can call it a success. Bring forth the bunyips."

Loraine took Joel by the hand, pulling him back out of the way as the two Eridanian yowies opened the shed doors. A moment later, hundreds of bunyips, led by Number Five, came marching in, passing through the portal to their new home.

"That's one down," Jason said. "How many more of these do we have to make?"

* * *

“It’s not enough,” General Piper said, examining the printouts in front of him. “According to government records, there are upwards of ten million registered pet bunyips on Cornipus, with at least that many again unregistered ones. Although demand so far is light, even if you run your portals twenty-four hours a day, they’re going to start clogging up very soon.”

Mark sighed. “Can we make more of them?”

“If these predictions are right, even if you made ten times as many as you currently have, it still wouldn’t be enough.”

“Do you have any suggestions, Clem?”

“No.”

“Pip?”

Pip shook his head.

“I suppose culling is the only option, then.”

“I’m afraid so,” Piper said. “Gallagher has a hand-picked squadron ready to undertake that task.”

“It’ll have to be done quietly, and for God’s sake don’t let the Eridanians or Number Five find out about it.”

“We’ll do our best.”

“I’ll just be glad when this is over.”

“You’re not the only one saying that.”

“Don’t go blaming yourself, Mark,” Lorina said, wrapping her arms around him as they settled into bed. “You’ve done everything humanly possible.”

“You may be right, but I’ll still be signing the death warrants for millions of bunyips.”

“Better that than having them start eating people.”

“But is it really? Aren’t they just as sentient as we are?”

“Every species is supposed to look after its own best interests; it’s a fundamental law of nature.”

“I thought sentient beings were supposed to rise above that.”

“Now you’re becoming too philosophical for me.”

“Well I do have a degree in philosophy.”

“Smarty-pants.”

Mark squirmed. “Elko once said that sometimes there are hard choices and people will die no matter what we do.”

“He was a very wise man.”

“Yes, far wiser than any of us will really know, I’m sure.”

No Matter What We Do

Pip picked up Snooky, placing him on the scales, but knew without looking that his bunyip had gained more weight. He sighed, knowing he couldn't forestall the inevitable any longer.

"You know what's happening to you, don't you?"

Snooky looked at him, slowly nodding his head.

"Your friend Number Five is ready to take you to your new home."

The bunyip jumped down onto the floor, laying his muzzle on Pip's feet before standing and trotting over to the door.

Pip wiped the tear from his cheek. "You're taking this better than I am, you know." Sighing again, he opened the door, following the bunyip out to the car.

"This must be hard for you, Pip," Number Five said as he scratched Snooky behind the ears, "but we'll take good care of him, I promise."

Pip was surprised to see there weren't more bunyips waiting to pass through the portal, but assumed that was because there were others closer to the residential districts. "Goodbye, Snooky. I'll miss you so much."

"You poor thing," a familiar voice said behind him. He turned as Cloe Enderling wrapped him in a hug. "I couldn't let you go through this ordeal by yourself."

"Thanks, I'm glad you're here."

He took hold of her hand as Number Five led Snooky into the portal, never to be seen by human eyes again.

"Come and I'll buy you a drink," Cloe said.

"Thanks."

“To Snooky,” she said, raising her glass.

“Yes, to Snooky.”

“Damon told me a strange thing last night.”

“Really?”

“Yes, he said the number of bunyips they’re processing is way down on expectations, and seems to be diminishing rather than increasing.”

“That’s odd. General Piper was expecting the portals to start choking by about now.”

“It’s the same everywhere. Clem thinks people might be holding onto their pets, which could have dire consequences once they start craving for meat.”

“The local councils have been doing letterbox drops to stop that sort of thing.”

“Yes, but you know how people are. Damon suggested putting Number Five on television to broadcast an appeal directly to the bunyips.”

“I suppose that might work. I’m pretty sure Snooky could understand everything I said.”

“Number Five’s linguistic abilities confirm that too. Let’s hope it does the trick.”

* * *

Number Five and the television presenter looked nervously at each other as the producer signalled them to be ready to roll.

“Good evening and welcome to *Behind the News*. Tonight my special guest is a former bunyip-baiting champion now fully grown into the being they call a yowie. Number Five, welcome to the studio. I believe you have a special message for all the pet bunyips that may be listening, is that right?”

“Yes, but firstly I’d like to recap on what’s been happening these past few weeks if that’s okay.”

“Of course.”

“When Cornipus was first colonised, those settlers genetically engineered honey-grass, a form of spinifex designed to stop bunyips from growing into beings like me. An antidote to that is in Frizian

honey, which led to the outlawed sport of bunyip-baiting, but recently another engineered grass containing that antidote has been released into the environment.

“As a result, buniyps eating it can now mature into the beings they were meant to be, but along the way, as they pass through our adolescent phase, they become carnivorous. Sad to say, our biological need for meat can override our conscious mind, making us a danger to humans and especially children during that time.

“A new home for our people is being established on a distant planet, with portals set up on divot courses throughout Cornipus and on other worlds with bunyip populations. To protect both species, it’s imperative that any buniyps beginning to grow into our adolescent phase be taken to the nearest transfer station.

“We are people, not pets, and have the right to self-determination. Please help us to achieve this peacefully and without injury or death to either species. I know such partings can be painful, as I too will shortly have to leave behind the friend who rescued me from the bunyip-baiters, but at a fundamental biological level, our species are simply incompatible.

“I also call upon any buniyps hearing this broadcast to make your own way to the transfer stations. We have junior hunt-masters out and about, so if you smell their pheromones, simply follow them and all will be well.”

“There you have it, folks, straight from the bunyip’s mouth, if you’ll pardon the expression. Please, for your own safety and especially that of your children, take heed of what Number Five has said and make sure any growing buniyps are taken to the transfer stations.”

* * *

Clem scratched his head. “We’re being inundated with calls from people saying their buniyps aren’t growing even though they’ve eaten Allan’s grass.”

“Do you think it might be losing its potency?” Mark asked.

“Perhaps, but there’ve been cases where two buniyps have eaten the same grass but only one has grown.”

“How odd. Perhaps it just takes a little longer to affect some of them.”

“That shouldn’t be possible, given the way it destroys the bunyips’ receptors to honey-grass. The effect should be almost instantaneous.”

“The same thing’s happening with my bunyip,” Russell said, “the one I brought back from Frizian. It was eating the same grass as Pip’s Snooky but hasn’t changed a bit.”

Clem flicked his fingers. “When you first found it, it had been sniffing around that spilt honey from the broken pot, but you called it away. I remember thinking at the time that it shouldn’t have been possible to do that, and meant to ask Pip about it but never got the chance. Do you think it’s possible some bunyips might simply be immune to the antidote?”

Mog grimaced. “That’d only be possible if they didn’t have the honey-grass receptors to begin with, but in that case—”

“They should grow into yowies of their own accord,” Clem interrupted. “But they’re not.”

“Unless, well, unless they’ve simply lost the ability to grow. Is that possible?”

“Genetic drift,” Chris said.

“What?”

“I took a strand of biology at university and there was something about it there, but I don’t remember the specifics. The essence, though, is that an isolated population can change over time from the parent species.”

“There’s certainly been plenty of time for that to happen,” Mark said. “It’s been over a million years since honey-grass was introduced on Cornipus.”

“We should talk to someone in Veterinary Biology,” Lorina said.

“Come in,” Jodie Ellicott said, ushering them into the Bunyip House consultation room. “I really must apologise for calling the library police last time you were here, but we were under strict instructions—”

“No harm done,” Mark said. “Perhaps we’ve all been guilty of making assumptions and jumping to conclusions. So what can you tell us about our little dilemma?”

She picked up the wad of printout in front of her. “Our DNA analysis has confirmed what you suspected about genetic drift, and to be honest I’m surprised no-one had spotted it earlier, but without a swab from a reference population I suppose that’s understandable.”

“So what you’re saying is there are bunyips out there that have lost the ability to grow.”

“More than that, Mark, it would appear the vast majority of bunyips have lost that ability. All the genetic material needed for their metamorphosis and developing mind has simply disappeared over time.”

“What caused it?” Lorina asked.

“Disuse. The bunyip population has been under the influence of honey-grass for so long that those parts of their makeup that never developed have been lost. Just as reptiles that didn’t use their legs became snakes, bunyips that never got to grow became just plain dumb animals.”

“There’s nothing that can be done to reverse it?”

“No matter what we do, we can’t reactivate genetic material that’s no longer there.”

Mark scratched his chin. “So what are the percentages?”

“Our results are still to be considered preliminary, but our best estimate is that only one in fifty bunyips is capable of metamorphosis.”

“No wonder so few have been turning up at the portals.”

“You wanted to see me?” General Piper asked as he and Gallagher stepped into Mark’s office.

“Yes indeed. Please take a seat.”

“You sound very cheerful today, I must say.”

“I have good news, General. We won’t be needing Gallagher’s culling team after all.”

“What? Why?”

He passed them each a copy of the biologist’s report. “Only two percent of bunyips are metamorphosing, so our portals can easily cope with the numbers.”

“Has this been confirmed?”

“Yes.”

“Well I’ll be damned.”

Gallagher flicked his fingers as an uncharacteristic smile spread across his face. “That explains why the bunyip-baiters always bred their own bunyips. They used to say it was to make them more competitive, but if this is right, giving Frizian honey to your average pet-shop bunyip would’ve had no effect.”

Mark nodded. “They knew all along.”

“Bastards,” Piper said. “I hope Davies can find enough evidence to put the lot of them behind bars.”

“In a way we should be thankful, as without them the yowie people may well have become extinct by now.”

“You’re too sentimental for your own good, Collins,” Gallagher said.

“I know, which is why I’m about to hand in my resignation.”

* * *

“What are you looking at, Pedro?” Jim asked.

“Maps.”

“I can see they’re maps. What are they of?”

“It’s the area in the Blue Mountains where Peter said he’d been abducted by the yowie back when he was fourteen. Rangy gave me the coordinates of the portal the yowie would’ve used to get there from the nexus.”

“So why the interest?”

“I still have no recollection of being there, and I was hoping looking at maps and satellite photos might have jogged some hidden memories.”

“It hasn’t, I presume.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure this creek here is the place Peter bedded himself down, and the track I apparently led him to is up there.”

Jim shrugged. “One of life’s mysteries, I suppose.”

“It would be if I’d ever been alive.”

“You are now, aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure any more. Are you?”

Jim shrugged again.

“You’ll wear out your shoulders if you keep doing that.”

Jim sighed. "I came to tell you everyone's ready to head back to Eridani. The yowies need to go back to escort their people to their new home, and all the Collins family are coming too before heading back to Earth."

"Are you planning on staying there?"

"I haven't really thought about it, but I guess I wouldn't mind helping Norrie and Ben with their work for a while."

"That could be fun if you'd like company."

"Sure."

Pedro smiled before turning off the ultranet terminal and following Jim out to the shuttle.

* * *

"Are we there yet?" David asked.

"We're not even half way," Joel said.

"Well I'm bored. There's nothing on this stupid ship for kids to do."

"Let's go find Clem and Number Five. Maybe they can think of something."

"We should ask Number Five about the nexus. He said it had something to do with his dreaming mind, but I still don't get it."

Joel chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"When Jim first called it that, I thought he'd said *Frank's necklace*."

"Yeah, that is pretty funny."

"I can't imagine Mr Halliday ever wearing a necklace."

"What's all this?" Frank asked, stepping out into the corridor and nearly bowling them over.

"Nothing; we're, um, we're trying to find Clem and Number Five."

"Good, because that's where I'm going too. I think they're down in the hold."

"David and I want to ask Number Five about the nexus."

"So do I."

"Really? But I thought you knew everything."

Frank laughed. "If only you knew how little I know."

"Sorry."

"Don't ever apologise for asking questions."

David ran ahead, holding open the door for them. Inside, Clem, Number Five and Loraine were playing French cricket with Jim and Pedro.

"I thought you were with Mum," David said to his sister.

"I got bored so I came down here."

Number Five walked over to Joel. "You have a puzzled smell."

"Yeah, I, um, I was wondering why you told the Eridanian yowies I was the key to their salvation, because it's practically all over and I haven't done anything."

"Sometimes it's not what you do, but who you are that matters."

"Huh?"

"Let's just say you were the right person in the right place at the right time. If any of those things had changed, the outcome would've been disastrous for my people."

"Does this have anything to do with the nexus?" David asked.

"In a way, yes. The nexus is a place where everything's possible. For us, it was a place of potential futures, a vessel for the souls we would've had if not for the honey-grass poison."

"Is that what you call your dreaming mind?"

"Yes. After first tasting honey-grass, my mind split, the wakeful part remaining child-like while the dreaming part matured as it would have done had I not been poisoned."

"So what happened when you drank the Frizian honey?"

"My minds started reconnecting, especially when I was fighting, but it wasn't until my metamorphosis that they became as one."

David scratched his head. "So who made the nexus?"

"The southern Eridanians," Frank said, "with help from Elko and other descendants of the Barefooters. They'd recognised the bunyips' plight and built it as a way of preserving their people."

Number Five nodded. "Very soon now its purpose will be fulfilled."

"That's what I was wondering about. What will happen to it then?"

"I imagine it will cease to exist."

* * *

Ben and Suzie greeted everyone in the ruined village outside the cave to the nexus. Jason noted the metal plate of a recently constructed portal into Sheol, checking his watch to make sure he'd be ready for when Damon opened its mate on the other side.

"We've been monitoring the nexus with Norrie's instruments," Suzie said, "and the number of diverging temporal lines has been steadily diminishing until now only a handful remains."

"What's that mean in layman's terms?" Clem asked.

"Most of the sentient bunyips have passed over," Frank said.

Number Five entered the cave, his arms raised as if feeling around invisible walls. "The remaining bunyips are either waiting to pass through portals or on their way to the transfer stations. It will soon have fulfilled its purpose, as will have I."

Clem gulped.

"We'll go and round up the rest of our people here," the female Eridanian yowie said, taking her mate and offspring with her.

"I'll be glad to see the back of them," Joel whispered to Loraine.

"The last of the dreaming minds is departing," Number Five said. Everyone gathered around him in the mouth of the cave, looking through into the nexus.

The walls, previously a chaotic assortment of coral-like protuberances and gnarled columns, were now perfectly smooth, with the entire chamber little more than an empty sphere. The last remaining artefact was the barbed spine hanging from the ceiling, but as they watched, its surface began to crack and pulverise, filling the surrounding air with dust.

In a muffled explosion the spine disintegrated, while at the same time the walls of the chamber collapsed in around it, growing brighter as they shrank. Within moments the nexus became just a tiny bright star floating in the back of the cave, until with a final flash and a pop it disappeared.

"What's that on the ground in there?" David asked.

"It's the tee shirt I left tied in the nexus!" Joel shouted, dashing in to retrieve it.

Loraine screamed, pointing to where Jim and Pedro had been standing off to one side. There they still stood, motionless like statues, the colour fading from their skin and clothing as tiny cracks spread across them. Just as the spine had done, their bodies imploded in a cloud of dust, dancing in the light as the sun emerged from behind a cloud. In a puff of breeze, the dust scattered and disappeared.

“Oh my God,” Billy said, placing a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

Away in the distance two birds sang, not of mourning but of joy and fulfilment, warming everyone’s heart with a soothing peace.

“What happened to them?” Lorina asked.

Peter steadied himself, trying to collect his thoughts as his physicist’s mind kicked in. “They were products of the nexus, living inside a time cusp it had overlaid onto our reality. In a very real sense they were still in 1989, back when Jim and I were fourteen years old.”

“In the graveyard in August,” Anton said, “Pedro was wondering whether the universe had just become heavier by the weight of two fourteen-year-olds. If I understand what you’re saying, the answer to that would be no.”

Peter nodded.

“But they seemed so real,” Loraine said.

“In a sense they were just as real as you or me, and perhaps somewhere in space or time they still are.”

Billy nodded. “I’m sure, wherever they might be, Pedro will be getting himself into mischief.”

“And Jim will be trying to stop him.”

Ben sniffled, wiping a tear from his eye. “From now on, I’ll always remember my father, not as the sickly old man we buried, but as that fourteen-year-old boy who turned up on my doorstep just a few weeks ago; his face, his face just bursting with wonder and awe. If it’s not too much to hope, perhaps, perhaps wherever he is, he and Mum are together again.”

Suzie wrapped her arms around him, hugging as tight as she could as he rested his head on her shoulder.

Jason moaned, staring at his watch in disbelief. “Is that the time? Damon will be wondering where I’ve got to.”

As Rangy activated the controls, he stood in front of the portal into Sheol, once again projecting his spirit into that realm. In what had now become a practised art, he joined hands with Damon's spirit, opening one final passageway between galaxies.

"Where the hell have you been?" Damon asked, before taking in the looks on all the faces he could see through the portal. "Is something wrong over there?"

Jason ran his hands over his face. "We've lost Jim and Pedro. They, um, they dissolved away when the nexus dissipated."

Damon stood gaping, totally lost for words.

Jason steadied himself. "According to Number Five, all the sentient bunyips from his galaxy have passed through, so you can close down the other portals. He'll be the last one through from here, so when he gets there, show him how to close this one."

"Understood."

"Make sure you come through to this side before he does."

"I will, don't worry."

"He never stops worrying," Jenny said, wrapping an arm around Jason.

Behind them, the undergrowth parted as the female yowie led her clan into the clearing.

"I'll come through last once I make sure no-one's left behind," Number Five said.

"Thank you, hunt-master."

She looked around the crowd before spotting Joel and waving him over.

"Come here, Joel," Number Five said. "It's okay."

Joel glanced at Loraine and David before hesitantly walking across.

"Thank you, Earth child," the female said, "for teaching me humility and respect." She knelt, laying her muzzle across his feet, while the air around them filled with joyful pheromones.

"Live long and prosper," Joel said, immediately feeling like an idiot for quoting *Star Trek*, but they were the only words that seemed fitting for such an occasion.

The female stood, leading the others into the portal. When the last had passed through, Number Five cried out, his voice reverberating

around the mountains. He raised his muzzle, smelling the air as he turned his head back and forth.

“There are no others here,” he said as Clem stepped over to him.

The two embraced, scratching each other behind the ears.

“I knew, from the first time I saw you, that you were my guardian angel,” Number Five said. “You saved not only me but all our people from the demons.”

“I’ll never forget your eyes looking out at me from inside the cage on that terrible night in Longville, and the way you winked at me after Blunt bought you in the auction.”

“I always knew you’d come back to rescue me.”

“I’ll never forget you,” Clem said as they separated. “I hope your new world is everything you’ve dreamed for, and that your people flourish there forever.”

“And I hope that you and your people can find true peace and contentment.”

“Goodbye, my friend.”

Number Five stepped forward, passing through the portal before turning to the side and disappearing.

“Shall I close it down now?” Rangy asked.

Clem nodded.

“No, wait!” Jason shouted, pulling Rangy away from the controls. “Damon hasn’t come through yet!”

A moment later Damon appeared, waving to someone out of sight before stepping through onto Eridani.

Jason wrapped his arms around him. “Now you can shut it down.”

Aftermath

Mark stepped up to the counter of Police Headquarters in Melbourne.

“Inspector O’Reilly, please.”

“Just a moment, sir.”

He drummed his fingers on the counter until the inspector appeared.

“I remember you. You’re the father of bunyip-boy, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. You’ll be receiving a full report from the Eridanian government, but I thought I’d come here personally with David, just to make sure there are no loose ends.”

David stepped forward, grinning.

“For your records, the bunyip that attacked him has been relocated to another galaxy, along with the rest of its kin.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I believe, sir, you owe my grandfather and Dr Thorpe an apology.”

Billy and Peter came forward. “There’s no need, really.”

“Next time,” Lorina said, “before jumping to conclusions, remember there are strange things in the universe not even experienced policemen fully understand.”

“You’re right, Mrs Collins, and I’m sorry for what I said. I trust your boy was unharmed.”

“Yes, but no thanks to you.”

“That’s enough, honey,” Mark said. “I think we’ve made our point.”

“Thank you, sir. You are indeed a gentleman of the highest standing, as are all your family.”

Mark led them back out onto the street.

* * *

Mog took hold of Clem's hand as they sat sipping coffee outside a restaurant in Bringal Vale. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Clem breathed deeply, letting the warm salty air invigorate his soul. "Yes, I'm sure. I've always loved cooking, and in spite of my reservations, no-one's ever complained too loudly about what I've dished up, so yes, this is what I truly want. The place has a good clientele and the price is reasonable, so it's a dream come true, really."

She kissed him.

"Marry me, Mog."

"What?"

"I'm sure you heard me."

"Gosh, you're full of surprises today."

"Now it's your turn to surprise me."

"I hope this isn't too much of a surprise, but yes, I'd be delighted to become your wife. I do have one question, though."

"Yes?"

"Does that mean I'll become Mrs Son of Edwin?"

Clem laughed. "No, our archaic system of names doesn't quite work that way. Our married women just keep their maiden names."

"I suppose I could always be Mrs Edwinson."

"No, too many bad memories."

"All right."

"So, um, is your name really Mog?"

"Actually my birth certificate says I'm Katrina, but my friends called me Kat, which became Moggy until that was shortened to Mog. Satisfied now?"

Clem shook his head, smiling. "I'm sorry; I just can't picture you as a Katrina, so you'll have to stick with Mog."

"That's fine by me."

She lifted her left foot, frowning while inspecting its dusty sole.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't have itchy feet any more, so I guess that means I'll be staying here."

Clem laughed, reaching over the table to kiss her again.

* * *

Pip joined Damien, Damon and Cloe at the table, having gladly accepted Clem's invitation to his restaurant's opening night. "So what are your plans now?"

"Who? Me?" Damon asked. "I was hoping to join your Order, if that's okay with you."

"Of course. Now that I've lost Clem, I'm going to need a new right-hand man and you'd be perfect for the job."

Damon smiled, looking just like the boy Pip had befriended at school all those years ago.

"What about you, Damien?"

"Is there any good fishing on Huntress?"

"The Barungi fishermen seem happy enough."

"In that case I might join you as well."

"It'd be an honour, I'm sure."

Damien blushed, shaking his head in mock despair.

Pip turned lastly to Cloe. "I, um, my house is rather lonely now Snooky's gone, and I was wondering, well, I mean we've known each other for yonks and I like you very much, now more than ever, really, so, um, so Cloe, would you, um, would you consider marrying me?"

"Sorry, Pip, but you lost me somewhere after the eighth or ninth *um*."

Pip gulped, looking like all his hopes had just been dashed.

"Honestly, Pip, I thought I'd be old and wrinkly by the time you got around to proposing. Of course I'll marry you."

"What's going on here?" Clem asked as Pip and Cloe embraced.

"I think I've just acquired a brother-in-law," Damon said.

"Congratulations, I think. I honestly didn't expect Pip would ever work up the courage to ask her."

"Neither did I," Pip said.

"I'll fetch Mog and then we can really celebrate."

"Have you heard the news?" Mog asked as she sat down to join them.

"What's happened?"

"The Galactic Council has just announced who the new Supreme Councillor will be."

"Is it anyone we know?"

She nodded.

“Not Frank?”

“Guess again.”

“Well it couldn’t be Piper or Gallagher unless they’ve resigned their commissions.”

“Which they haven’t.”

Pip scratched his head, looking at Damon and Damien who both shrugged. “I give up.”

“Michael Chandler.”

“What?”

“It’s a bit of a turn-up, isn’t it? They couldn’t convict him of killing the old Supreme Councillor, so they just made him the new one.”

“Gosh.”

“He was a very successful businessman here and his heart’s always been in the right place, so he’s a good choice for the job.”

Pip smiled. “I’m sure you’re right.”

* * *

“Come in,” General Walker said.

Piper and Gallagher looked at each other before squeezing side by side through the door.

“Have you read my report?” Piper asked.

Walker scowled. “I wouldn’t have summoned you here if I hadn’t.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“I must firstly congratulate you both on a job well done. I still don’t know how you pulled it off, but all’s well that ends well.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“That was good work too getting Chandler to stand as Supreme Councillor. His father was a fine officer, and by all accounts he’d have been too if we’d snared him early enough.”

“He didn’t need too much persuasion, sir. I just had to keep Gallagher out of sight.”

“Why’s that?”

“I once killed his uncle,” Gallagher said.

Walker sighed. "You always were too trigger-happy for your own good. Please come to me before you decide to go killing anyone else, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Walker opened the report on his desk. "I see here you've both requested a review of rank."

"That's correct, sir," Piper said. "I'd like to be returned to brigadier, or even colonel if that's possible."

"Now Gallagher, you want to be restored to the rank of general, is that right?"

"Yes, sir. I believe I've done my penance."

"I'm afraid both your applications are denied."

"What?"

"Sir?"

"You two have proved to be a fine team, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Gallagher and Piper looked at each other.

"It's settled then; excellent. Once again congratulations on a job well done and keep up the good work."

Piper and Gallagher returned Walker's salute before walking out the door.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Piper asked.

"No, it's my shout."

* * *

Lorina pulled up in front of the Morison house, escorting Joel and the twins up the weathered concrete path to the front door.

"Joel, you're back!" Jill cried as she opened it. "Jack, Joel's back!"

A short freckled man with a crew-cut came out to join her. "You're just in time for your birthday, son."

"Am I? I'd completely forgotten."

"I hadn't," Loraine said, pulling a card out from under her shirt and kissing him on the nose. "Happy birthday!"

After she'd finished, Jill repeated the ritual. "My thirteen-year-old baby; who'd believe it? Look at you; I'm sure you've grown since you went away."

"His hair's certainly grown," Jack said, "but that's nothing a number two comb won't fix."

For a moment Joel considered having a crew-cut but quickly shook his head; his ordeal with the female yowie hadn't been *that* bad.

"Well at least brush it away from your eyes, son; you look like that old cricketer they called mop-head."

"You mean Aaron Smith?" Lorina asked. "He now works for my mother-in-law's research company."

"What as, the cleaner?"

"That's not funny, Dad," Joel said as both his parents roared with laughter. He turned to Loraine, sighing. "See what I have to put up with?"

"Joel," Jill said once she'd recovered her composure. "Your father and I know how lonely it can be for you sometimes and we were going to get you a pet for your birthday, but couldn't decide between a dog and a cat."

Joel covered his mouth, his face turning white.

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

"It's a long story," Lorina said, "but I don't think pets are his flavour of the month right now."

"I know!" David said. "My grandfather put a possum box in the big Banksia tree he has out the back and they now have a family of friendly possums living there."

Joel nodded. "Could, could we do that?"

Jack ruffled his hair. "Sure, son."

Jill dashed back inside, returning a moment later with a wrapped parcel. "I was going to buy you some shoes –"

She grinned, seeing the shocked expression on his face.

"– but since you never wear them I got you this instead."

Joel tore open the paper, revealing a book called *A Parallel Path*.

"It's about a girl and boy walking barefoot along the old pilgrims' road through France and Spain, only they're seven centuries apart. It's a bit dated now, but was a best-seller back in its day."

“Maybe when you’re older you could do it yourself,” Jack said.

Joel nodded as he skimmed through the back cover blurb. “Yeah, thanks, it’s great! I’m going to enjoy it, I’m sure.”

“Did they make a movie?” David asked.

Epilogue

Jim blinked, but the darkness was as complete as it was sudden.

“Pedro?”

“Right here.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m not sure, but judging by what I can’t feel underfoot, I’d say we’re back in Sheol.”

“But how’d that happen?”

“No idea.”

“You two are making enough noise to wake the dead,” said a distant voice.

“Who’s that?”

“An old friend.”

“Charon?”

“You’ve had quite an adventure, I believe. Make a little light for us, Pedro, there’s a good chap.”

“I thought you were plying your trade on Earth now,” Jim said as an orange glow filled the space around them.

Charon led them into a narrow descending passageway. “No, there were people to see and places to go, but mostly it was just a holiday for me, a bit of long service leave if you must know.”

“But what about your boat?” Pedro asked.

“It’s right here where I left it, of course. I don’t think anyone would want to steal it, do you?”

Through the misty haze now enveloping them, Jim could just make out the River Styx ferry bobbing up and down in front of him.

“Hurry on board and we can be on our way.”

“I thought the City of Towers had disappeared,” Jim said.

“It has, but it’s not the only destination for this old tub.”

The boat pulled away from the shore, still enshrouded by fog although the light had grown a little brighter.

“Jim!”

“What?”

“You look older!”

“Do I?”

“Mid twenties, I’d say.”

“You haven’t changed, though, Pedro.”

“I doubt I’ll ever change.”

Through the mist, Jim could just make out the end of a pier. As they approached, Charon threw out a rope, expertly lassoing one of the pilings.

“This is your stop, Jim.”

“What?”

“I believe an old friend of yours is waiting on the dock.”

Jim climbed over the railing, stepping out onto the damp pier. Fog still enveloped them, limiting visibility to just a few metres.

“I don’t like this,” Pedro said, looking as if he was about to follow, but Charon was already untying the boat.

“Jimmy, you’re here at last,” a voice said out of the mist.

Jim turned, seeing a tall dark-skinned man walking towards him with two ice-cream cones. “Elko?”

“At your service.”

“Where are we? What are you doing here?”

Elko smiled. “I’m your escort, but only till you get your bearings. Do you recognise this place yet?”

As Jim looked around, the fog began lifting, revealing a white sandy beach extending either side of the pier. Brightly-painted holiday homes lined the shore, while beyond them, green forested hills faded into view.

“It does look familiar, but –”

“You’d better take these, then, before they start melting.”

Jim stared at the two ice creams he was now holding. There was something in the back of his mind, a memory of a time long ago, just after he’d finished his studies and had married his sweetheart, Dornie.

“Gosh!” he said, remembering now the exact moment he was in. “Is this for real?”

“It’s just as real as the place you call reality, perhaps even more so.”

“Will I be staying here forever?”

“Only as long as you want, for there’s more beyond this, a lot more. Now hurry along before your ice cream melts.”

Jim turned towards the shore, his memories flooding back of the holiday resort on Eridani’s northern ocean where he and Dornie had spent their honeymoon.

“There you are,” said a familiar voice in front of him. “I thought you’d gotten lost.”

He handed Dornie her ice cream, smiling like he’d never smiled before.

* * *

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

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

“What must I do?”

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

Pedro grinned as the pieces started falling into place.

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

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

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

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