

Rise of the Gomera

A young boy is running on a sandy beach, away from the viewer, towards the ocean. The scene is set at sunset, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow across the sky and water. The water's surface is shimmering with reflected light. In the distance, two dolphins are visible: one is leaping out of the water, and the other is swimming near the surface. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

Jeff Pages

Rise of the Gomeral

by

Jeff Pages



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the Mudie family (Peter, Sue and Ross) for their unwavering enthusiasm and support throughout the series.

Acknowledgements

As always, my blind friend Ray Foret Jr has been a literal sounding board for me throughout the writing of this book, providing valuable feedback on my strengths and weaknesses and helping me see the light at the end of the Deadfall Ridge tunnel.

I'm indebted to my friend and fellow author Tim Mills, a Cheyenne Native American, for his enthusiastic support over many years and our long chats on how stories like this evolve.

Inspiration sometimes comes from strange places. Stephen Fry's documentary *Out There* gave me the nudge I needed to pin down the relationship between my characters David and Cam, adding what I hope is an interesting twist to this story.

To my friends who braved a cold July evening in Woy Woy for the launch of *Plight of the Tivinel*, many thanks for making it such a memorable event. I look forward to seeing you all again for the launch of this book.

Thank you, dear readers, for following this story from its humble beginnings in Barefoot Times. I hope you find this conclusion to the tale as satisfying as I did in writing it.

Last but not least, many thanks to the wonderful staff at Zeus Publications for their great work and support over what is now almost a decade and a half since this series began.

Author Biography

Jeff Pages was born in Sydney, Australia in 1954 and from a very early age was fascinated by science and technology. After finishing high school he attended the University of Sydney from where he ultimately obtained a doctorate in Electrical Engineering.

In 1989, his work took him to Tamworth in north-western New South Wales, where he joined the Tamworth Bushwalking and Canoe Club and spent many weekends bushwalking in the nearby parks and forests.

In 1995 he moved back to the Sydney region and now lives at Umina Beach on the northern shore of Broken Bay where he has recently retired from full-time work.

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

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

His other retirement adventures include walking barefoot along the entire 250 km Great North Walk from Sydney to Newcastle, as documented in his blog at barefootingthegnw.wordpress.com.

His first novel, *Barefoot Times*, was published in 2004, followed by *Call of the Delphinidae* in 2006, *The Mind of the Dolphins* in 2008, *Cry of the Bunyips* in 2011 and *Plight of the Tivinel* in 2015.

Rise of the Gomerai is the sixth and final book in the series.

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

Contents

Reprise	3
Part One <i>Thread of the Pasha</i>	9
Mutation.....	10
Soulmates.....	26
Drago's Legacy.....	42
Roly's Tomb	53
Desecration	64
Us Against the Planet.....	73
Insurance Policy.....	86
Part Two <i>The Star Dimmer</i>	93
Inundation	94
Collaboration	104
Deployment.....	116
The Beginning of the End.....	134
Far More than Anyone Wants.....	147
Uprising	162
The Apocalypse	178
Part Three <i>The Boy in the Window</i>	189
Bundle of Joy	190
Adversaries	201
The Pasha's Island	215
The Price of Allegiance	233
Awakenings	245
Confrontation	258
Ambush.....	270
Part Four <i>Destiny's Path</i>	283
Needle in a Haystack	284
Prince Charming's Shorts	297
Too Good to Refuse.....	310
Ships Passing in the Night	321
Friendly Fire	334
The Sum of its Parts.....	348

Enough Rope.....	361
Sunshine, Warm Seas and Love	374
Epilogue	388

Reprise

Roly looked up, smiling, as Joel led the others across in front of the dais.

“My time as Pasha is drawing to a close; I have foreseen it. Do not despair at my passing, for I’ve had a fulfilling life far beyond all expectations. A time of upheaval approaches, but don’t lose hope, for from this will spring a far greater good. Thank you, my subjects, and I wish you well.”

He closed his eyes before suddenly going limp and falling to the floor, a dart protruding from his back.

“What happened?”

“He’s dead!”

“Who killed him?”

“I did,” Drago said, bounding down the rocks and climbing onto the dais. “The rule of Roly is ended and I, Drago, am now your Pasha.”

“That’s preposterous!” Jarred yelled. “The challenge of the Pasha is a rite of passage, a test of skills both physical and psychic. You cheated, you little bastard!”

“Enough! The old ways have ended, old man Barungi. Return to your village while you still live.”

Jarred shook his fist. “This means war!”

“No, Dad,” Hamati said, but Jarred was already marching back up the aisle. He shook his head before following along behind.

“To hell with the Barungi!” Drago said. “Where are my Tivinel?”

“Right here, my lord,” Mayor Sandford said, emerging from the wings.

Drago settled himself in front of the lectern. “You heard Roly speak of global warming and the need to limit our use of fossil fuels until something better comes along. I say no, there are other ways;

the Tivinel scientists have created a star-dimming machine, a device to control our climate while allowing us to exploit our coal and oil reserves to their full extent. No-one need suffer deprivation while the Barungi tinker with their subspace transducers!"

"Hear, hear!" Sandford shouted.

"Praise the Pasha!" chanted the crowd, this time with much more enthusiasm. "Praise him with great praise!"

"I think we'd better leave them to it," Joel said, ushering the others down the stairs to the portal room. He turned to Charon. "Someone on this side will need to permanently shut down the portal after we've passed through; we can't risk another Tristan."

"I'm not sure if I know how."

"I can do it," Pedro said.

"But, but you're coming with us, aren't you?"

"No, on the whole I think not. I've found my true purpose here, as well as my flesh and blood." He pinched himself, confirming he was real. "While you were dealing with Tristan, Roly touched my mind, telling me the Gomeral will need someone with my skills in the years ahead, should I wish to remain. I told him I would."

"Gosh!"

Elsa grasped Pedro's hand while kissing him on the cheek.

"I think having a pretty girl by his side also swayed his decision," David whispered to Cam. Cam grinned, putting his arm around David's shoulder.

Joel turned to Willy. "What about you?"

"I'd like to come with you, Joel, if you don't mind."

"No, of course not."

"Right," Charon said, "I guess it's settled."

Pedro scanned the readouts. "Roly also gave me a flash course on how to drive this thing. Now that Tristan's cusp has ended, the portal is locked back onto your own time. All I have to do is flick this switch —"

Joel half expected a temporal implosion, but instead the portal ring became transparent.

"Off you go and good luck, all of you."

"You too, Pedro."

Joel ushered David, Cam and Willy into the portal before following them through.

** * **

Hamati dropped a handful of soil onto the coffin, before Pedro and Elsa did the same. Other Barungi and Gomeral from the nearby village formed an orderly queue, quietly paying their respects to clan leader, Jarred.

"I can never replace him," Hamati said to Pedro as they stepped aside.

"And nor should you; you have different qualities, Hamati, qualities that'll be sorely needed in the years ahead."

"Careful, Pedro, you don't want to say anything that might mess with the future."

"Don't worry, I have only the vaguest notion of what's coming and even that's third hand and most likely inaccurate."

Another of the Barungi stepped over to them. "Excuse me, Hamati, the Pasha, curse his name, has called for parley and wants both you and the Tivinel leader to meet with him on the island."

"Tell him I'll be there."

"Yes, my liege."

Hamati grimaced as soon as he'd left. "I hate it when they call me that."

"So what are you going to do?" Elsa asked.

"I have little choice but to accept whatever terms he dictates. Our army is spent; those still alive have barely the energy to stand and if the Tivinel destroy our crops we're finished."

Pedro grinned. "I know the Pasha's supposed to be an all-seeing telepath but Drago's still a boy and from all accounts didn't see Tristan sneaking up on him until he had a knife at his throat. Do you think you can shield your innermost thoughts from him without it looking like you're doing it?"

"Of course, that's easy."

"Excellent. Body language is everything, so what you should do is talk and act as if you hold the upper hand; make it sound like agreeing to his peace is a concession on your part."

"I see, yes, but the Tivinel will know I'm bluffing."

"They might think you're bluffing, but they can't know for certain. You must keep them guessing."

Hamati nodded. "I want you both to accompany me, but you'll have to be disguised as slaves."

"Why?"

"Free Gomeral are no longer permitted on the Pasha's island."

Elsa spat on the ground before blushing as she remembered where she was. "Sorry, Uncle, but that's disgusting."

"It's something we'll all have to get used to, I'm afraid."

On his previous visit to the island, Pedro had thought the household staff looked like actors and actresses performing in some great dramatic work, but now they were more like prison guards. In place of the Count, it was The Screw who led them through into the Pasha's hall.

Hamati gasped, staring at the walls, for where there had once been beautiful frescos of corals and sea grasses, amongst which a Black Dolphin reputedly hid, there were now only fanged creatures like winged lizards or dragons on a sooty grey background.

"The ashes of hell," Elsa whispered to Pedro.

"Hush," Hamati said, walking forward to bow before Drago who was seated on Roly's throne atop the dais. Behind him hung a huge portrait of himself, a black-skinned boy with bright red hair and pupils like frozen pitch.

More prison guards ushered Hamati to a seat on one side of a large table set before the dais, with the Tivinel mayor, Sandford, sitting opposite. Hamati grinned at him, showing as many teeth as possible, and Pedro was pleased to see Sandford look away.

"Hamati, what are these Gomeral doing here?" Drago said.

"They're my personal slaves, sire."

"I don't recall Jarred ever needing slaves, but then you're not your father."

"No, I'm not."

Drago cleared his throat. "This war you two are fighting serves no purpose other than to destroy valuable resources, my resources,

and will henceforth cease. You'll both withdraw your forces to your respective bases immediately."

"But, sire, the Barungi started it," Sandford said.

"No," Hamati said, "you started it by conspiring to kill our rightful Pasha. I wouldn't trust a Tivinel as far as I could throw one!"

"I didn't come here to listen to Barungi insults!"

"Enough!" Drago said. "There'll be no more bickering; my word is final and my word is law. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sire."

"Sandford?"

"Yes."

"Good. I need you both working productively, not fighting each other, for I have great plans for this world, yes, great plans. So, since you're unwilling to cooperate with one another, I hereby decree that from this day hence, the Barungi will be confined to the coastal lowlands. Any Barungi found standing on ground more than 50 metres above the Geodetic Height Datum will be immediately executed."

Hamati leapt to his feet. "That's an outrage, sire!"

Drago grinned. "Yes, it is, but you have only yourselves to blame. Now, Sandford, I'm granting the Tivinel free rein over the rest of the planet, but in return you'll build a network of fine cities and roads for me, filled with factories and industry like never before seen. For too long my predecessor stifled development of this world; now things will be different."

Sandford grinned. "Thank you, my liege."

Drago turned back to Hamati. "Such development will require much greater food resources, which the Barungi will supply. Your farm production must increase tenfold or you will starve."

"That's impossible; we don't have the workforce, particularly now the Tivinel have killed so many."

"Indeed, which brings me to the third element of my master plan. We all know that the Gomeral, while lacking any of our telepathic ability, have great manual dexterity, therefore, from this day forward, any Gomeral over 12 years of age and not otherwise indentured will

be enslaved into my service, from where they'll be sent to work with the Tivinel industrialists or the Barungi farmers as I may see fit."

Elsa looked about to protest, but Pedro restrained her.

"Not now, not here," he whispered.

Drago looked firstly at Sandford and then Hamati.

"Are there any questions?"

Hamati shook his head while quietly fuming.

"You are most kind, sire," Sandford said.

"Kindness has nothing to do with it. I want results, Sandford, and that's all that matters."

"Yes, sire."

"Excellent, you're both dismissed."

The Screw led Hamati and his entourage back to the portal room, standing guard until they'd all passed through.

"So what do we do?" Elsa asked once they were back in Hamati's house.

Hamati sighed. "We have no choice but to obey the Pasha."

"What about us?" Pedro asked.

"I'll have you both indentured to me; Drago's already seen you with me so to do otherwise would look suspicious."

"Very well, but I take it we're to be more than mere slaves."

Hamati stared into space for a moment. "Those three Gomeral who came with you from the future, Joel, David and Cam, appeared intelligent, resourceful and compassionate, am I right?"

"Yes indeed."

"The future's perhaps not as bleak as it seems and Gomeral have a part to play in it, an important part. No, you and Elsa won't be mere slaves, as you put it. I want you to form a secret Gomeral society, one that to all outward appearances is only concerned with the well-being of Drago's slaves, but there'll be another agenda known only to us."

"What's that?"

Hamati drew them close. "The Rise of the Gomeral."

Part One

Thread of the Pasha



Mutation

Joel looked up, rubbing his eyes. “Chemistry? Why do I have to do chemistry?”

“What’s wrong?” Loraine asked.

“It says here that I have to take chemistry, but surely that can’t be right. Why would an environmental scientist need to be a chemist?”

“Well, um, there are things like soil and water acidity, I guess, and fertiliser residue, even chemical spills, I suppose. Anyway, I have to do chemistry too and you don’t hear me complaining.”

“Yeah, but you’re majoring in biochemistry so of course you’ll be doing it.”

Loraine sighed. “It’s only for one year, Joel; after that you can start to specialise. Anyway, you did okay in chemistry at school, didn’t you?”

“I guess, but back then I didn’t know what I wanted to be.”

“I don’t see why that should change anything.”

“It seems such a waste of time now, that’s all. I could be doing interesting stuff instead.”

“No knowledge is ever wasted, Joel. You of all people should know that.”

“Huh?”

“Wasn’t there some critical thing you did that involved pi?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, but, um, okay, I suppose you’re right; you always are, aren’t you?”

“Of course; that’s what I’m here for. Now finish off that form before they kick us out and lock the doors.”

Joel stared back at the page, rubbing his eyes again as he tried to find his place.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but why do they have to make this damn printing so small?”

“Show me.”

Loraine glanced at the form. “It looks okay to me. Maybe you should see an optometrist.”

“What? No way! I can see fine, really.”

“Joel, it wouldn’t hurt just to have your eyes checked.”

“No, I don’t want to.”

“What’s wrong with you? You’re behaving like a five-year-old.”

Joel looked up at her, tears starting to form in the corners of his eyes. “What – what if he says I’m going blind?”

Loraine shook her head. “You’re not going blind; you probably just need glasses, that’s all.”

“Yeah, but, but what if it’s something more serious, something they can’t fix?”

“Then it’ll happen whether you see someone about it or not.”

Joel ran his hands through his hair, pulling it down over his eyes before brushing it aside. “It’s just, well, it’s only started happening since I fell into that fissure back when, you know. Hundreds of years passed before my body was reconstituted and I think some genetic *ones* might have turned into *zeros* or something.”

“You mean there might have been a mutation?”

“Well, yeah. When I had to inject Cam with the antidote I couldn’t see well enough to find a vein and had to get David to help me. That’s never happened before.”

“Oh, Joel, I’m sure everything’s just fine, but, but hang on, that French policeman got a sample of your genetic makeup from some of your stuff I’d been carrying prior to your kidnapping, so it ought to be possible to do a direct comparison between then and now.”

“Really?”

“It might be expensive, though.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s see what the optometrist says first, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess.”

* * *

“Come on through, Joel,” the optometrist said, leading him into the examination room. “Take a seat and tell me what’s troubling you.”

“Thanks. I, um, I’m having trouble with close-up stuff and fine print, particularly if the light’s not too good.”

“Has this only just started or has it been going on for some time?”

“It’s been only in the last six months; ever since, um, I went through a rather traumatic time.”

“Oh, you’re the one who was kidnapped, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Well let’s begin by doing a quick check of your distance vision.” He dimmed the room lights while turning on an illuminated eye chart on the far wall. “How far down the chart can you read?”

“Um, the bottom line is D E F P O T E C, isn’t it?”

“Very good.” He handed Joel a card while turning the lights back on. “Now try this.”

Joel stared at it, moving it back and forth in a vain attempt to find a distance at which he could read it. “Sorry, it’s just a blur to me.”

The optometrist nodded. “It seems you have hyperopia, but let’s make some actual measurements to be sure.”

Joel grimaced. “What’s hyperopia? Am I going blind?”

“No, not at all; it just means you’re long-sighted, your cornea is too flat to be able to focus light properly on the retina. In childhood the lens is flexible enough to be able to compensate, but as you get older it starts to stiffen, so eventually you can’t focus on close objects.”

“I see.”

“Come over to the machine and we’ll put some numbers to it. We used to do this manually but these days it’s all automated and extremely accurate, or so the manufacturers say.”

He sat Joel in front of what looked like an overly large set of binoculars.

“Just relax your eyes and don’t try to focus on anything.”

A series of rapidly flashing circles appeared, firstly fuzzy but becoming increasingly sharp as the machine adjusted to match Joel’s vision. Within a few seconds it was done.

“All straight-forward, Joel; there’s no astigmatism or other aberrations to worry about. I’ll just do a glaucoma test and take some retina photos to finish up.”

“So, um, what causes it? Is it genetic?”

“Actually yes, and they’ve even isolated the genes responsible. It’s a bit of a strange one, as the same gene can cause both hyperopia and myopia, which is short-sightedness. Some people can even be long-sighted in one eye but short-sighted in the other, although it’s quite rare.”

“Gosh! That’d be confusing.”

“It is, and it can be difficult to correct without making things appear bigger in one eye than the other. In your case, though, both eyes are the same so it’s easy-peasy with either spectacles or contact lenses.”

“I think I’ll go for the spectacles; I’d feel too queasy trying to put anything into my eyes.”

“There’s also the option of laser surgery, but we prefer to leave that until our patients are a little older, say around twenty-five.”

“The spectacles will be fine, I’m sure. Will I need to wear them all the time?”

“You can if you want, and ultimately you’ll have to, but for now you can just use them for reading as your distance vision is quite good.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Come on out and you can choose a frame you like.”

Joel stared at the bewildering array of styles racked before him, ranging from the finest wire frames to bulky black plastic ones.

“How about these?” the optometrist asked, slipping a gold-coloured wire-framed pair over Joel’s nose and ears.

Joel stared at his reflection in the mirror, thinking it could be a whole lot worse. “Yeah, they’re good; I’ll take them.”

“Don’t you want to try any others?”

“No, I don’t handle choices very well. These are fine, really.”

“Okay then; I wish all my customers were as easily pleased. Now just look straight at me.” He pulled out a marker pen, placing dots on the plastic lenses.

“What are they for?”

“It’s to align the lenses with the position of your pupils.”

“Oh, right.”

“That’s it then. We should have them ready for you to pick up in about a week.”

A week; just seven more days of youthful bliss before the first stage of aging ensnared him. Soon he’d be having his hips replaced and be riding a mobility scooter.

“Thanks.”

* * *

“So what did he say?” Loraine asked.

“I have hyperopia.”

“Ah, long-sighted, just as I thought. So you’re not going blind then?”

“Apparently not.”

“See, there was nothing to worry about.” She wrapped Joel in a hug while kissing him on the nose. “Are you getting glasses or contact lenses?”

“Glasses; he said they’d be ready in a week.”

“I hope you chose nice ones.”

“So do I.”

“While you were out, I called Claude le Grange, that French policeman who was in charge of your kidnapping case.”

“Yes, I remember him.”

“He said he’s happy to do a DNA comparison and all you have to do is go to the police station here and give them a sample.”

“A sample of what? Not blood I hope!”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of needles too; poor Joel. No, I think they just take a saliva swab from your mouth.”

“That’s all right then.”

“Good, because I arranged for them to do it this afternoon.”

Joel sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know; I feel like I’m caught in a rip and being swept out to sea.”

“We all are when you think about it, but you just have to stay afloat and go with the flow.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Whatever happens, Joel, I’ll be right beside you, always.”

Joel couldn’t help thinking back to his kidnapping when he’d been all alone against Tristan and his cohorts, but pushed it out of his mind.

Best not to dwell on such things, and anyway, it wasn’t Loraine’s fault so don’t go playing a guilt trip on her.

“Thanks.”

* * *

Joel froze as he entered the police station, surprised to see a bright modern office suite before him instead of the gloomy ramshackle of mismatched cubicles, dilapidated furniture and sweaty policemen he’d imagined.

“What’s wrong?”

He blushed while stepping forward to the reception counter. “Nothing.”

A smiling policewoman turned to greet them. “You must be Joel.”

Joel gulped. “How’d you know?”

She touched her nose with her finger. “Police intuition. No, actually Inspector le Grange told us to expect you and your case was quite famous so I recognised you straight away.”

Loraine poked him in the ribs. “Gosh, Joel! I never expected to be married to one of those people described as being *well-known to the police*.”

He poked his tongue out at her while the policewoman opened a door to the side of the counter. “Follow me; it’ll only take a few moments to get a sample.”

Joel gulped again as they entered *Interview Room 1*, expecting intense lights and thumbscrews, but, apart from the video cameras and microphones, it looked like any other modern office.

“Please take a seat, and don’t worry, we’re not recording this.”

Joel knew he was being childishly stupid, but he couldn’t suppress the butterflies gathering momentum in his stomach. There was

something in the back of his memory, he was sure, *something from the alternative time line in the deep past of Huntress.*

“Joel, what’s wrong?” Loraine asked.

“I don’t know; something happened, something bad, I’m sure, but I must have been very young because I can’t really remember.”

“What are you talking about?”

Joel ran his hands through his hair, pulling it down over his face then pushing it aside as if that’d make things clearer. It didn’t.

The policewoman donned a pair of latex gloves before picking up the cotton bud. “Just open your mouth, Joel, and this’ll only take a moment.”

Joel did, but as the bud touched the inside of his cheek, the world began to spin before disappearing in a black fog. In the distance he could hear a chair falling over, as the last thing he remembered was a big sweaty policeman forcing a stick into the mouth of a terrified little Gomerall boy.

“Joel, drink this.”

Joel opened his eyes, having no idea where he was. “Huh?”

“You fainted.”

“I did?”

“The policewoman was trying to take a DNA swab from your mouth and you keeled over.”

Joel felt his head starting to spin again. “I need to go home.”

Loraine looked at the policewoman.

“Yes, that’s fine. I’m sure I have enough saliva to do the test.”

“Thank you.”

Joel finished the rest of the water before trying to stand, his legs feeling like rubber. “You might need to help me.”

“Gosh! If you’re like this at eighteen, how will you manage when you’re eighty?”

“Artificial joints and a mobility scooter, I suppose.”

“Be careful what you wish for.”

“I know.”

Joel pulled himself upright and, with a few tentative steps, made it through the door.

* * *

Joel jumped as his telephone rang. "H-hello?"

"It's Claude le Grange here, Joel; I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time."

"No, not at all."

"Excellent. The results of your DNA comparison are now available, but our consultant has asked if you'd be able to come to Montpellier so she can explain them to you in person."

"Montpellier? In France, you mean?"

"There is another Montpellier elsewhere?"

"No, well I don't think so, except maybe in Canada or the USA, I suppose."

"It is the one in France, then. So will you come?"

"I'll have to ask Loraine, but her grandparents have a shuttle we could borrow so it should be okay."

"Excellent; just let me know once you have your arrangements in order."

"Is it, is it something b-bad?"

"No, it's nothing that'll hurt you, Joel, but best you let the expert explain."

"Oh, okay then, I guess."

"Don't worry yourself needlessly, okay? I will see you soon."

"Yeah, thanks."

Loraine gave him an inquisitive look as he closed the call. "Who was it?"

"That French detective; he wants us to go to Montpellier to talk to their DNA consultant."

"In France? How do you feel about that?"

"Okay, I guess. Do you think we could use your grandparents' shuttle?"

She shrugged. "How about you ask them?"

"Yeah, I could do that, I suppose." He picked up his phone again.

"Hello, Jason speaking."

"Oh, hi, Jase, it's Joel here."

"Hi, Joel. What's up?"

"Um, Loraine and I need to go to France to see that detective about my DNA comparison and I was wondering if we could borrow your shuttle."

“Hang on a tick.”

Joel could hear him talking to Jenny but couldn't make out what he was saying.

“If you like we'll go one better and take you there ourselves.”

“Really? That'd be great!”

“Jenny reckons we need to get out more, so it'll be a change of scenery and a chance to visit somewhere we've never been.”

“When can we go?”

“As soon as you like, but there's no point arriving there in the middle of the night. How about you and Loraine come around for dinner and we can organise everything then?”

“Yes, of course. Thanks so much, Jase.”

“It's our pleasure, you know that.”

Loraine put down her knife and fork. “That was delicious, Gran.”

“Thanks, sweetheart. Now come and help me with the dessert, would you?”

She followed Jenny out to the kitchen where a huge pavlova awaited its final dressing of fruit salad and cream.

“I don't mean to pry, but is everything okay with Joel?”

Loraine sighed. “No, and I don't know what I can do. I thought he'd worked all the demons out of himself during our walk through France and Spain, but since we've been back it's all catching up with him again. It's almost like he's afraid of his own shadow.”

Jenny nodded. “I'd wager he's suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. It's very common for anyone who's been through, err, a traumatic stress, I suppose.”

“It could be, but I can't help thinking there might be something more. What happened to him on Huntress made changes to his DNA, which is why we're going to Montpellier, and he's worried sick about what the consequences of that might be. It's already affecting his eyesight and, well, who knows what else?”

“Let's hope you get some answers from the police consultant.”

Loraine covered her face. “I'm scared of what might happen if those answers are bad news. It might – it might push him right over the edge.”

Jenny wrapped her in a hug. “Deep down I’m sure Joel’s a lot stronger than we give him credit for, but he’ll need time to come to terms with whatever’s happening. Whatever you do, don’t push him; give him room to find a new comfort zone.”

“Thanks, Gran, I hope you’re right.”

“Come on, we’d better finish this pavlova before those hungry men out there starve to death.”

“Oh my!” Jason said, patting his stomach as Jenny placed the pavlova on the table. Even Joel managed an unforced grin.

“You don’t have to eat it all at once,” Jenny said.

“Try to stop us,” Joel said, cutting out two large slices and handing one to Loraine.

“So are you excited about starting university, Joel?”

“I suppose, although just enrolling has been traumatic enough. I’m still not entirely sure if it’s what I want to do.”

“My first days at university were pretty frightening too,” Jason said. “I’d lived all my life with my family in Narrabri, then had to go off on my own to Brisbane. Luckily Aaron was only a few days behind and almost immediately after that I met Jenny.”

Jenny smiled. “Just take it one day at a time, Joel, and try not to worry about what might or mightn’t happen. Things have a way of working themselves out.”

Joel nodded. “Go with the flow.”

“Exactly.”

“So, um, speaking of going, when are we going to Montpellier?”

“They’re nine hours behind us,” Jason said, “so if we leave mid-afternoon tomorrow we should be on the ground there a bit after sunrise.”

“Um, yeah, okay.”

“Don’t forget it’s mid-winter over there,” Jenny said, “so you’ll both need something warm to wear.”

Joel grimaced. “I don’t have any warm clothes.”

“You’ll be okay, Joel,” Jason said. “I expect we’ll be indoors most of the time anyway.”

Loraine squeezed Joel’s hand. “Just go with the flow, remember.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s freezing here!” Loraine said, stepping from the shuttle onto the frost-covered tarmac and pulling her hooded parker tightly around her face.

“The ship’s thermometer says it’s minus four degrees,” Jason said. “Sounds lovely!”

“You’ll keep, you autothermic caveman,” Jenny said, poking Jason’s bare ribs as he stepped down.

“You’re autothermic too, you know.”

“Yeah, but not that much. Brr; you’ll be wanting that sweater I found for you, Joel.”

Joel climbed out, still in just a tee-shirt and shorts as he took a deep breath and stretched. “Nah, it’s quite nice, really.”

Loraine stared at him. “Let’s get inside before my feet stick to the ground.”

She led them through the double doors into the terminal building where Inspector le Grange stood waiting.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “Can I buy you breakfast?”

“Just some coffee would be nice,” Jason said.

“Follow me; I know the perfect place.”

Around the corner, amidst a huddle of stores that hadn’t yet opened for the day, was an assortment of tables and chairs calling itself *Bean There Dunn That*.

“It’s a popular chain of cafés from the other galaxy that’s just starting to make inroads here,” le Grange said. “Their coffee’s expensive but good.”

“Strange that the name’s in English rather than French,” Jenny said.

“The play on words doesn’t translate well.”

“Oh.”

A waitress dashed out with a bundle of menus as soon as they were seated. “*Madames, Messieurs, bonjour.*”

“*Veuillez attendre juste un moment,*” le Grange said, glancing around the table.

“A short black, thanks,” Loraine said, “and a mocha for Joel.”

“Long blacks for us,” Jenny said.

“You are English?” the waitress asked.

“Australian.”

“Of course, I should’ve guessed from the way you’re dressed. Can I get you anything to eat? Our muesli is highly recommended.”

Jason and Jenny both shook their heads, but Joel’s face lit up. “Yes please!”

“Make that two,” Loraine said.

“*Juste café pour moi*,” le Grange said.

“Thank you, they won’t be long.”

Loraine glared at Joel in response to his outburst of chuckling. “Yes, I know, the short black won’t be long.”

“And I suppose our long blacks won’t be short,” Jason said, earning himself another poke in the ribs from Jenny.

Joel covered his mouth, his face turning red as he tried to prevent another outburst.

“At least you haven’t lost your sense of humour, Joel,” Jenny said.

“That part of his genome hasn’t changed,” le Grange said.

Loraine looked at him. “So what has?”

“Best if I let our geneticist explain, but it’s nothing to worry about, I assure you. It’s just, well, curious, I suppose you’d say.”

Jenny turned to Jason. “If your mother was here, there’d be smoke coming out her ears.”

“Mum hates it when people talk in riddles,” Jason said in response to the puzzled looks, “but her outbursts are mostly directed at Eridanians.”

The waitress returned with a tray of mugs and cups. “The muesli won’t be long.”

Joel covered his face again as more chuckles forced their way out.

Loraine shook her head in mock despair. “I should know by now not to take him out in public.”

“I often feel the same about Jason,” Jenny said, taking a sip of coffee. “This is really good.”

le Grange nodded. “They say the family on Hazler behind it are one of the wealthiest in their galaxy.”

Joel took a sip, nodding. “Deservedly so, I reckon. You don’t think —”

Before he could say any more, the waitress placed a bowl of muesli in front of him, banishing the thought.

“Thuh sus prutty gud tuh.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Joel,” Loraine said. “Honestly!”

Inspector le Grange pulled up in front of a modern glass building in central Montpellier. “Doctor Wilson is one of our country’s top geneticists with decades of experience both here and abroad, but your case has her quite baffled, Joel.”

“Joel is baffling to most people he meets,” Loraine said, trying to inject as much levity as she could.

“You said *Wilson*,” Jenny said. “She’s not French then.”

“She’s originally from New Zealand, but has worked in France since the late Forties.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Come on in and don’t be nervous, Joel. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Telling me that only makes me worry.”

A middle-aged woman, dressed in a tee-shirt and jeans, stepped forward to greet them as they entered the building. “Come on through; I’m Janet Wilson.”

They followed her down a short corridor to a laboratory filled with test tubes, flasks and a myriad of electronic instruments and displays. Loraine drew in a sharp breath as she took it all in.

“This must be Joel,” Janet said. “Male Caucasian, brown hair, hazel eyes; I recognised you immediately from your genome.”

“You can do that?” Loraine asked.

“We have software that’ll make an educated guess of a person’s appearance, but there are things it can’t predict, like beards, moles, scars, hair length or degree of nutrition. In Joel’s case, it came pretty close except for his long hair.”

“If you want to fix that, there’s a good barber just down the road,” le Grange said.

Joel shook his head while running his fingers through his locks.

“If it’s any consolation, Joel,” Janet said, “there are no baldness traits in your genome.”

“See?” Loraine said. “I told you there was nothing to worry about.”

Joel grinned half-heartedly.

“Just relax, Joel, and I’ll show you what I found.” Janet led them to the end of the workbench where two display screens sat side by side. “On the left is the genome we had on record from your kidnapping, while on the right is your latest analysis.”

“Gosh!” Loraine said, staring at the coloured tree-like structures on the displays. “I was expecting just those blurry barcode things they show in movies.”

“No, our technology’s advanced far beyond that now.” She zoomed in on one of the leaves. “This allele here controls the shape of the cornea; you can see how it’s fully expressed in Joel’s original sample but repressed in the new one.”

“I’ve discovered that already,” Joel said, tapping the frame of his glasses.

“Yes, of course, Claude mentioned that when he contacted me.”

“What other changes are there?” Loraine asked.

“In terms of what we’d call his functional genome, those genes that control the day-to-day running of his body, there are none.”

“So why are we here? We already know about his long-sightedness.”

“There’s a part of the human genome that’s commonly called *junk DNA*, residue from evolutionary dead-ends, although the more we learn, the less of it turns out to be really junk.”

“So?”

Janet scrolled to another branch of Joel’s genetic tree. “In his original genome, and in that of everyone we’ve ever tested, this region is essentially random sequences, just white noise filling in a stem that’s no longer functional. But in the new Joel it has structure, as if something has been encoded there.”

“Encoded? But by whom?”

“Are you religious?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you follow any creeds, or believe in a higher deity?”

“Joel and I were Black Delphinidae acolytes at school.”

Janet scratched her chin. “Now that really is fascinating, for we see similar structure in this location in the genome of dolphins.”

“What?”

Joel grimaced. “Are you saying I’m now part dolphin?”

“No, not in that sense, for this region is junk DNA in dolphins too, but in any case it’s just a small fragment, too small to actually do anything. My best guess is that someone’s left you a message.”

“A message? From whom? What does it say?”

She shrugged while handing him a printout.

ACTGACTGACTGACTGG
ATCAAGGGCTTACACGA
ATTTGGCTTGTTTCGGAT
CGTCAGTCAGTCAGTCA

Joel scratched his head. “What do those letters stand for?”

Loraine’s eyes lit up. “They’re the four DNA base molecules, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Janet said. “Thymine, adenine, cytosine and guanine; each symbol in a DNA sequence is one of those four.”

Joel nodded. “So the message is spelt out with that molecule alphabet.”

“That’s right, and the same sequence is repeated over and over *ad infinitum*. As to whom it’s from or what it means, I’m afraid you’ll have to figure that out for yourself.”

“Whatever it is, Joel,” Loraine said, “it’s not a very long message. I’m sure we’ll be able to decode it.”

“But what if we can’t?”

“If it’s that important, I’m sure whoever sent it will have made contingencies.”

“What you need is a primer,” Janet said, “something that will give meaning to each of the symbols. Look for things that have four possible states.”

Joel ran his fingers through his hair again, pulling it down over his face in an attempt to shut the world out for a while.

“Are you okay, Joel?”

“Yeah, sorry, just overwhelmed, I suppose.”

“There’s just one more thing and then I can leave you in peace, I promise.”

“Thanks.”

“The DNA we’ve looked at so far has been in the nucleus of your cells, but surrounding that are mitochondria.”

“Mighty what?”

“Mitochondria; the powerhouses of your cells, if you like. They process nutrients from your bloodstream to feed the nucleus.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“My initial analysis showed nothing unusual, but given your history, I ran a subspace absorption spectrograph.”

Loraine’s eyes lit up again. “You can do that?”

“Oh yes, it’s our latest toy and is already yielding some fascinating results.”

“Gosh!”

“Unfortunately, Joel, we don’t have any living mitochondria from your original sample to do a comparison, but in your new one there’s strong absorption of subspace photonic meta-particles.”

“Now you’ve lost me.”

“I know what that is!” Loraine said. “Joel, you’re autothermic. Hah!”

“But, but how can I be? I’m always hungry.”

“There are different levels of autothermia,” Janet said, “and different absorption mechanisms as well, we presume. Our technology’s not yet advanced enough to say for sure, but I suspect, seeing how you’re dressed on this cold day, that yours operates as a thermal supplement rather than a metabolic one.”

“Gosh!”

“But what if –” Loraine started to say, but her beeping phone interrupted her. “Excuse me; it’s an urgent message from Cam.”

She stepped away while Janet explained the absorption lines to Joel and the others, but moments later turned back, her face ashen.

“S-sorry, but we have to leave.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Something – something terrible’s happened to David.”

Soulmates

Cam walked into the living room, giving David a distracted nod.

“What’s wrong?”

“I, um, I have some awkward news.”

“Awkward?”

“My father turns fifty next week and the rest of the family are planning a surprise party for him. They want me to come.”

David sighed. “It’s just for one night and it’s a special occasion for him, so you really should go, you know.”

“No, you don’t understand. They want me to bring you along.”

“Yeah, okay I guess.”

Cam groaned. “You still don’t understand. They think you’re a woman.”

“They think I’m a – what?”

“You know, a woman, like your sister. I let slip to Mother once that I was living with someone special to me, so she just assumed you were, um –”

“You mean they don’t know.”

“I guess not, and I’ve had no desire to tell them.”

David grinned. “This should be fun to watch, I’m sure.”

“Can’t you, like, get sick or break a leg or something so I’ll have an excuse for not bringing you?”

“You want me to break my own leg just to get you off the hook? I might have sworn my love for you when you were dying from Drago’s dart, Cam, but even so, that’s going a bit too far, don’t you think?”

Cam sighed. “You’re probably right, Davo, and I suppose a broken arm wouldn’t incapacitate you enough.”

“Sooner or later you’re going to have to tell them, you know, and better they hear it from you than some tawdry ultranet gossip site.”

“I suppose they can’t have a much lower opinion of me than they already do.”

“You never know, they might be pleased. After all, my parents were very accepting and supportive when we told them.”

“Yeah, but your parents are proper civilised people.”

David shook his head. “What’s the worst that can happen? They shout horrible words at you, making you storm out and never speak to them again. Is that so bad?”

“I guess not, unless, no, I don’t think even she’d do that.”

“Do what?”

“Kill me.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t.”

“How? I mean, seriously, if Mother pulls out a handgun and shoots me, how would you stop her?”

“Does she own a handgun?”

“No, but –”

“You think she’ll go out and steal one from Hazler’s criminal underworld just in case your girlfriend turns out to be me?”

“Um, I guess not. The worst I’ve seen her do is throw a rolling pin at me.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why’d she do that?”

Cam blushed. “I came into the pantry with muddy feet just after the floor had been cleaned.”

“My dad did that once and Gran swore at him so badly he ran away from home.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Aaron had to go out in the pouring rain and bring him back.”

“If I’d run away, no-one would’ve come looking for me.”

“Surely not.”

“I once got lost going home from a school excursion and spent two days roaming the city before finally spotting a familiar landmark. No-one at home even realised I’d been gone.”

“But surely they’d know when you didn’t show up for dinner.”

“We always ate with the staff who were constantly coming and going and minding their own business. Honestly, nobody noticed or cared.”

“Couldn’t you have just asked someone for directions?”

“Don’t be daft, Davo. This is Hazler we’re talking about; survival of the fittest is what it’s all about and kids who can’t find their way home don’t deserve to contribute to the gene pool.”

“Gosh!”

“So will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Break your leg.”

“No, Cam, I’m going with you, come hell or high water.”

“Helen who?”

“Never mind.”

* * *

After landing at the Oswald spaceport on Hazler and collecting the rental car he’d booked, Cam turned onto the Echelon Hills motorway, soon leaving the metropolitan sprawl behind.

David couldn’t help noticing that most of the other traffic consisted of black or silver chauffeur-driven limousines, while ahead of them and set amongst the forested hills overlooking the city, were many luxurious mansions. “You’ve never told me much about your family, Cam, but judging by where we’re going, I guess they’re richer than I’d thought.”

“You could say that. Grandfather Dunn ran *Bean There Dunn That*, a simple café in a quiet neighbourhood that suddenly became the centre of a new technology park. The influx of workers liked his coffee so much that he started opening cafés elsewhere, and before he knew it he was rolling in the big bucks. Ultimately *Bean There Dunn That* turned into a planet-wide megachain of high-end coffee houses and we became one of the richest families in the galaxy.”

“Gosh!”

“That’s what everyone says when they hear the story.”

“I suppose they wanted you to carry the business on into the next generation.”

“I have a younger sister who’ll probably do that, but yes, Mother had insisted I be the heir apparent until I turned my back on them and went to study astrophysics on Cornipus. The rest you know.”

In spite of what he'd just been told, David's jaw couldn't help dropping as Cam drove in along the tree-lined driveway to the parking area in front of his family home. Six storeys tall and at least two hundred metres across, even in this neighbourhood the hilltop mansion dominated its surroundings.

"I know you said they were mega-rich, but, but gosh!"

"Do you see now why I didn't want to bring you?"

"No."

"Don't worry, you soon will." Cam turned to look at him. "Um, couldn't you have worn something more formal than that loin cloth and body paint? We still have time to go into town and buy you a suit."

"Cam, you know this is the height of formality for my people, well almost. To be completely formal I'd have to ditch the loin cloth."

"No, please don't, just don't, okay?"

David grinned.

A lavishly dressed butler opened the door as Cam and David mounted the steps. "Master Cameron, the Mistress said you were coming but I scarcely believed it."

"I'm not sure I believe it myself, Alfred, but it's good to see you again. You haven't changed a bit."

"Come on through to the drawing room."

Alfred gave David an odd look as he followed, but said nothing as he led them down a long gloomy corridor. In spite of such a grand display of wealth, David couldn't help noticing the worn carpet under his soles and the flaking paint in the cornices, making him wonder whether the family riches mightn't be quite as great as they were making out.

"Cameron, look at you!" a tall heavily-bosomed woman said as Alfred pushed open a huge oak door on the left. "You're so thin and pathetic-looking; just because you're now a famous scientist doesn't make you a man. Quite the opposite, from what I can see; you're still just a selfish inconsiderate spoilt little child."

"Hello, Mother, it's nice to see you too."

She turned to David, a scowl of disapproval crossing her face. "Alfred, take Cameron's servant to the pantry and make sure it's looked after."

“Mother, this is Davo.”

“I don’t care what its name is, just get rid of it.”

“He’s the special friend I told you about, the one you asked me to bring along.”

For a moment, David thought she was going to faint as the blood drained from her face before rushing back up to turn it purple. “This is your girl- ... b-boy-friend?” She turned to David, her face now crimson. “What have you done to my son, you perverted evil creature?”

“Mother –”

“It’s all right, Cam,” David said. “I’ll handle this.”

“Cameron, go to your room; I’ll deal with you later.”

“Mother, please –”

“GO TO YOUR ROOM, NOW!”

A plump middle-aged man stepped towards them. “Aphelia, what’s all the shouting about?”

“Rupert, it’s terrible, this horrid beast has corrupted our son. What will the neighbours think?”

Rupert turned to David, a puzzled look on his face.

“It’s true, sir, Cam and I are soulmates, but –”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s perfectly obvious what he means,” Aphelia said. “Albert, take this thing and lock it away while I call the police.”

“Mother, wait,” Cam said. “It’s like Davo said, we’re just –”

“WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE? GO TO YOUR ROOM RIGHT NOW!”

Cam looked to his father, who grimaced. “Do what your mother says before she bursts a blood vessel.”

“Come on Davo, I think we’d better leave.”

“Neither of you are going anywhere,” Alfred said, now brandishing a rolling pin. “Cameron, do as your mother says while I secure the prisoner.”

“Alfred, what are you doing? I thought you were my friend.”

“I’m first and foremost your mother’s employee, Cameron. It was you who turned your back on this family and now look at what you’ve become. I can’t imagine a more despicable act than bringing this vile creature into our home. Now go to your room before I’m

forced to use this on you.” He slapped the rolling pin into his palm to drive home his point.

Cam backed away, his hand over his mouth, as Alfred wrenched David’s arm behind his back.

“No, wait,” David said. “You’re making a –” In a shower of sparks, darkness enveloped him as the rolling pin struck the back of his skull.

Letting David slump unconscious to the floor, Alfred grabbed Cam’s wrist, dragging him screaming up five flights of stairs before throwing him into his room and locking the door.

“Rest in peace or rot in hell, Master Cameron,” he said, pushing the key deep into his pocket. “I don’t care which.”

* * *

David woke to find himself lying on the floor of a prison cell with an enormous uniformed thug leaning over him. “Oh, you’re awake. Do you have any identification?”

He went to reach into his pocket before discovering he was still wearing only a loin cloth. “Um, no, it’s in the car with my other stuff.”

“Likely story. Now open your mouth.”

David complied as the thug poked a plastic spatula into it, jabbing his cheek before handing it to the young officer standing behind him.

“See what this brings up on the database.”

The apprentice pushed the sample into the handheld scanner. “Sorry sir, but his DNA isn’t registered.”

“Very well, give me that thing and I’ll create a new record. What’s your name?”

“David Collins.”

“Uh huh. Where were you born?”

“Bluehaven.”

“Don’t fool with me,” the thug said, raising his boot. “No-one from Bluehaven has skin like yours. Now who are you and where were you born?”

“I’m David Col –”

Before he could say any more, the thug kicked him just below the ribcage, winding him. “I’ll give you one more chance, but I promise you the next kick will do some real damage. Who are you and where were you born?”

“I’m David Collins, son of High Priestess Lorina and Mark the Bewildered. I inherited my skin colour from my father’s family on Earth.”

“Wrong answer.”

“But it’s true! I’m now studying on Cornipus, just ask –”

The thug raised his boot, taking a big backswing. “Wrong – bloody – answer.”

“Wait, sir,” the apprentice said. “I remember something on the news about a new subspace invention he and another student made.”

The thug turned back to the scanner. “All right, if you say so. What’s your address on Cornipus?”

“Room 317 Hollingsworth Hall, Apogee University.”

“I see, well that’s brought up a link to your passport and driver’s licence, so I guess it really is you.”

“Couldn’t you have done that in the first place instead of kicking me?”

“No. So what are you doing on Hazler?”

“I came with a friend who was attending his father’s birthday celebration.”

“A friend, huh?”

“Yes, a friend. Is that such a hard concept for you to comprehend?”

The thug raised his boot again. “Don’t mess with me, David bloody high-and-mighty Collins.”

“Sorry. Cam reckons I don’t handle authority very well.”

“Would that be Cameron Dunn?”

David nodded.

“Your kind are despicable, you know that?”

“My *what*? You don’t under–”

The thug’s boot found its mark, bringing the interview to an abrupt end.

* * *

Cam had watched from his bedroom window as the four armed policemen escorted David at gunpoint into their van, covering his face as it sped off down the driveway and into the night.

He'd known all along that coming here had been a mistake; his gut had been telling him that ever since he'd received the email from his mother.

Your father turns fifty next month and we're throwing a surprise party; bring that special friend you're living with, we're all dying to meet her.

Her mind was no doubt fixed on the prospect of grandchildren and securing the family line. Whether the imagined girlfriend had wanted to or not, such would have been the forced outcome; it was the way the system worked amongst the upper echelon of Echelon Hills.

Now waking a day later, Cam stepped over to the door again only to find it still locked. He wouldn't be the least bit surprised if it stayed that way, his parents leaving him to perish rather than face any possibility of a family scandal. Over the years, several of his school friends had suddenly disappeared, the prodigal son or daughter imprisoned and left to die following some real or imagined indiscretion, with his parents' response always being *serves the ungrateful wretch right*. It was the Hazler way: survival of the fittest, death for the misfit.

His window at least was open, giving him fresh air, and when it rained he might be able to catch some water to sustain him for a little while longer, but simply climbing out from the sixth floor wasn't really an option, unless...

He leaned out, inspecting the masonry on either side. To the left was nothing but a sheer drop, but half a metre on the right was a narrow ledge, an anchor for a balcony that had either never been built or fallen off. From there it would only be a short leap into the oak tree, Mother's favourite even though it had been planted far too close to the house. *Serves her right*, he thought as he climbed onto the sill.

It was a long way down and the ground below was rock hard. If he fell he'd die, no ifs or buts, but since he was going to die anyway it didn't really matter. *Better a quick drop than slow dehydration and desiccation*, he decided.

Holding onto the frame with white knuckles, he stretched his leg across, trying to secure his toes into the keyway on the end of the ledge. That achieved, he reached out with his left hand, feeling for a crevice in the stonework he could grip securely enough.

Pausing to take a few more deep breaths and to say a quick prayer to whatever deities might exist in the universe, he pulled himself across, anchoring the toes of his right foot into the hollow edge of the ledge before bringing his hand over and finding another crevice for his fingers. Now it was *do or die*, for he doubted he could get himself back into the window even if he wanted to.

Trying not to look down, he moved his left foot across, feeling with his toes for something to hook onto, then doing the same with his fingers. The tree still looked a long way off; if anything, it seemed to have retreated from the house.

Feeling something flapping against the back of his head, he turned to see a bird circling around for another swoop. *Damn, of all the stupid places for it to have its nest.* Making sure he had a good grip with one hand, he waved the other as the bird approached, hoping to scare it off. For the moment it did, but he doubted he'd have much of a reprieve.

Gripping the wall again, he inched his way left, now convinced the tree was indeed running away. He tried pulling his head down into his shoulders as the bird swooped again, but only succeeded in scraping his forehead on the stone. This was fast turning into a *really bad idea*.

Just to his left, a little gargoyle thing had been built into the stone, why he had no idea as it wouldn't have been visible from the ground, but there it was just the same, its demonic eye glaring at him. Thinking it'd make a good hand-hold, he grabbed it, only to find to his horror that it slid straight out of the wall. For a moment he held himself with his right hand and toes, but in the shock he over-balanced, gravity's pull now swinging him out away from the wall. In panic he grasped for the hole the gargoyle had vacated, his fingertips just touching it before sliding away.

In the end gravity always wins. With a last gasp, Cam fell, the wind tussling his hair as he sped towards the ground far below. Something whacked him across the shoulders, accompanied by a

snapping sound, and, with a sudden deceleration, he dropped face-first onto the grass.

Why was he still alive? With his shoulders and neck aching, he rolled over, seeing the snapped branch hanging down next to him. The oak tree had come back to save him, bless its sap, and had even sacrificed one of its limbs in the process. Painfully he stood, wrapping his arms around its trunk and hugging it for all it was worth.

At length he stepped away. While now free of his bedroom prison, he was by no means safe, for at any moment someone could come out of the mansion or up the driveway and see him. Moving into the cover of the garden, he weaved towards the gate, hoping no-one would notice his absence until he was well down the road.

Arriving at the Echelon Village market, Cam noticed from his reflection in the shopfront windows that his clothes hadn't survived the fall very well, so seeing a menswear store, he ducked inside.

"Cameron, how are you? I haven't seen you in ages!" the shop assistant said, causing Cam to wish he'd picked a different shop.

"Not having a good day, Tommy," he said truthfully, brushing down his scuffed shirt.

"Oh my, you look like you've come off second best in a fight with a lawnmower!"

"Yes, something like that; I fell out of a tree."

Tommy put his hand over his mouth. "I won't ask how that happened."

"Good. I need a change of clothes, something casual but not too scruffy."

Tommy looked him up and down. "Come with me, I have just the thing."

Picking out a pair of knee-length shorts and a lightweight lace shirt, he returned with Tommy to the counter.

"Shall I put these on the family account?"

A grin of satisfaction crossed Cam's face. "Yes please." He grabbed a pair of dark sunglasses from the rack on the counter. "And these too."

Leaving the store and dumping his old clothes in the nearest rubbish bin, he sought out a café not owned by his family and entered.

“A cappuccino please and, um, do you have a public ultranet terminal I could use?”

“Certainly, sir; in the corner down the back. I’ll bring your coffee over when it’s ready.”

“Thanks.”

He sat down, scratching his head. If he was to have any hope of rescuing Davo, he’d need as much help as he could find, and right now Pip Ingle’s Black Delphinidae seemed his best bet so he set about booking a taxi to the spaceport and a flight to Huntress.

Sipping his coffee, he composed an email to Loraine, explaining what had happened and begging her forgiveness. Struggling to hold back his tears, he ordered another coffee while waiting for his taxi to arrive.

Just when he was starting to think it might have been quicker walking to the spaceport, the taxi pulled up. Putting on the dark glasses, he boarded the vehicle, taking one last look at Echelon Hills as they descended to the coast.

After paying the driver, Cam entered the terminal building, only to see several policemen milling around the check-in counters. Ducking back out of sight, he watched with dismay as they inspected everyone’s boarding pass before allowing them through to the gates. He cursed himself a million times for using his credit card to book the flight. *How could he have been so stupid?*

Unable to think of any other option, he spied an ultranet telephone booth and, dashing across when he thought none of the police were looking his way, placed a call to Huntress.

“Seminary, Damon speaking.”

“Damon, thank goodness! You’re just the person I need.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Cam, Cam Dunn, Davo’s friend.”

“I’m so glad you called, Cam. Pip’s just been speaking to Loraine and is worried sick. Where are you?”

"I'm at the Oswald spaceport and was about to jump on a flight to Huntress, but the police are here checking all the boarding passes."

"*Can you get to the General Aviation terminal?*"

"Yes, I think so."

"*Good. I'll meet you there in an hour, but stay out of sight if you can.*"

"Thanks so much, Damon."

"*It's the least I can do, Cam. Just don't let them see you, okay?*"

"I'll do my best, I promise."

Turning after closing the call, Cam saw that one of the policemen was walking straight towards him. Without looking back, he ran for the exit, darting in amongst a crowd of tourists milling around the bus stand.

"Excuse me – sorry – if I can just squeeze past – thanks – sorry –"

"Well I never, how rude!" a woman with blue hair said, but Cam had already dashed inside a clothing store in the terminal's concession area.

"Can I help you, sir?" a skeletally thin salesman asked, making him jump as he was examining a rack of black jeans and sleeveless hooded tops.

"Um, one of each of these, I guess."

The salesman sized him up before handing him the garments and ushering him to the fitting room. Cam pulled them on, surprised to find them a perfect fit.

"They do suit you well if I may say so, sir," the salesman said, pulling the hood over Cam's head to check its size. "They call this style the *Confusion of Seasons*, with the hood denoting winter and the open sides summer. It's very popular right now."

"Uh huh."

"If you'd like to step this way I have some shoes that'll go perfectly with it."

"Shoes? No, I don't wear them; I'm a student on Cornipus and rarely wear anything at all."

The salesman stared off into space for a moment, a wistful look in his eye. "I wanted to study dentistry but my parents wouldn't hear of it, so here I am instead, trying to sell shoes to people who never wear them."

Cam followed him back to the counter while transferring his wallet and loose change from his recently-acquired shorts.

“Would you like a bag for those?”

“Yes please.” Cam pulled out the required cash. “Look; if you want my advice, go and become a dentist if that’s where your heart is, but if you do, never ever come back to Hazler.”

The salesman handed Cam his receipt. “Thank you, I might just do that.”

Once again dumping his previous clothes in the nearest rubbish bin, Cam worked his way around the spaceport perimeter, staying close to busy pedestrian thoroughfares as much as possible. A few hundred metres ahead stood the General Aviation terminal but a narrow bridge over a weed-infested creek separated him from it.

Taking a good look around and not seeing any police, he waited until the next surge of traffic before stepping briskly onto the walkway, his hood pulled tightly around his face. Like the oak tree, the terminal building seemed to have sprouted legs and was running away, but he quickened his stride and eventually caught up with it.

The entrance to the building was a mirrored glass door which slid open as he stepped up to it. Instead of the squad of heavily armed police he’d expected, he found himself in front of a reception counter where a young lady looked at him expectantly.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she said in response to Cam’s dazed expression.

“Um, I’m supposed to be meeting someone here.”

“What’s the name of their ship?”

“The *Renewal*.”

“Ah, your friend must be Damon Enderling then; let me just check.”

Cam gulped as she tapped away on her terminal.

“He’s just entered the transfer orbit and is awaiting clearance to land. If you’d like to go through to the waiting room I’ll call you when he’s here.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s your name?”

“Ca – um, Kim.”

She gave him a puzzled look before making another entry on her terminal. “Just take a seat, Kim.”

Cam stepped through the door to find himself in a large waiting room furnished with comfortable lounge chairs and coffee tables. Against the far wall stood a vending machine so, after making sure it wasn't one of his family's, he bought a coffee and sat down in the corner, looking out through the mirrored glass towards the entrance to the building. *Still no police*, he thought, taking a sip, *but it won't be for long. Hurry up, Damon.*

A moment later the door opened, admitting a large red-faced man speaking loudly into his phone. “You wait to see the look on Fitzwig's face when I come back with a full order book. He –”

He almost sat on top of Cam before realising he was there. “Sorry, I didn't see you. Trent Carmichael.”

“Cam Dunn,” Cam said, shaking his enormous hand while immediately regretting giving his real name.

“I'm supposed to be on Bluehaven but my goddamned ship got delayed yet again.”

“Bluehaven?”

“Yes, selling refrigerators. Say, can I interest you in a –”

“Nah, sorry, I'm just a student.”

“Student, huh? I never did see the point in those university things; just a bunch of layabouts if you ask me. Not you, of course, but –”

“That's okay.”

“You off on some taxpayer-funded field trip or something?”

“No, I'm waiting for a friend.”

“Friend, huh? When you're a salesman you don't have time for friends. All they ever want is some cheap mates-rates deal, I tell you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“My grandfather, now he was the best salesman ever; according to legend, he even sold a full quota on Frizian. Can you believe that, refrigerators on Frizian?”

“Huh? Yeah, I guess that'd be tough, unless it was summer, I suppose.”

“What are you saying? You think he went there in summer, why let me tell you –”

Cam raised his hands as the man's face became even redder. "Sorry, I didn't mean to cast aspersions. I'm sure your grandfather was a terrific salesman."

"Too right he was, and don't you forget it! Bloody know-it-all students."

Just as Cam was beginning to think he'd be lucky to come away from this with only a bloody nose, the receptionist entered. "Mr Carmichael, your ship's here now."

"About friggin' time."

She gave Cam an exasperated look. "Your friend has landed and should be with you shortly, Kim."

Salesman Trent turned back to look at Cam just before passing through the door, mouthing *Kim?* Cam covered his face, wishing again he'd never returned to this accursed planet.

When he lowered his hands, he saw a police car driving slowly past the building's entrance. Moaning, he almost jumped through the ceiling as someone tapped him on the shoulder, the remains of his coffee splashing over the front of his shirt.

"Sorry, Cam, I didn't mean to startle you," Damon said, grinning. "Ready to go?"

Cam leapt to his feet. "The police are just outside."

"Follow me."

Damon led him past the reception counter and down a hall to a room marked *Customs and Immigration*.

"Let me do all the talking," he said as they approached the desk next to the door leading out onto the tarmac.

Cam's bladder felt suddenly full.

"Here's the patient now," Damon said to the customs official. "I'm sure his condition isn't contagious, but best not to take any chances, don't you agree?"

The official took three steps back while covering his mouth and waving them both through. Damon ushered Cam across the tarmac and into the *Renewal*.

"That was clever!" Cam said, breathing an enormous sigh of relief as Damon closed the hatch.

"It's a stunt Pip's father once used when we were kids. Strap yourself in and we'll be on our way."

“Renewal, this is Oswald Control, what’s your destination?”

“Back home to Huntress.”

“Have a safe trip, Damon, and give my regards to Pip and the crew.”

“Will do, Reg, and say hi to Sue for me.”

“Thanks, Damon. Oswald out.”

“You know them on a first-name basis?” Cam asked as Damon engaged the real-space drive, sending them skywards.

“I do a lot of travelling.”

“Gosh!” Cam watched as Oswald disappeared beneath a blanket of cloud, his thoughts immediately turning to David who was still down there somewhere. Above, the sky turned from dark blue to black as they passed out of the stratosphere. “We have to –”

“Renewal, this is Hazler orbital control.”

“I don’t recognise that voice,” Damon said, picking up the microphone with a worried look on his face. *“Renewal, go ahead.”*

“Please hold your position at the transfer orbit and await further instructions from Customs.”

Cam gulped.

“Hazler, this is *Renewal*, I’m not receiving you clearly. Did you say I’m clear to jump to subspace?”

“Negative, Renewal, negative. Please hold your position.”

“Roger, your transmissions are still garbled but I acknowledge clearance and am jumping to subspace now.”

“Negative, Renewal, hold your –” The transmission cut off in a crackle of static and a flash of blue light as Damon initiated the jump.

Cam stared at him. “You, you disobeyed Orbital Control!”

“Who, me? I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

“Gosh!”

“So what’s this all about, Cam?”

Drago's Legacy

Cloe dashed from the seminary common room, wrapping Cam in a hug as soon as he stepped from Damon's ship. "Thank heavens you're okay."

"Damon arrived just in time, otherwise I'd be in prison too."

"Pip said Loraine and Joel are on their way here to help. Thanks to your invention, they'll arrive tomorrow."

Cam breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived as a young policeman dashed towards him from the seminary. He covered his face and moaned.

"Excuse me, but the superintendent wants Damon and Cam to go straight to Pip's office."

Cam looked bewildered. "Huh?"

"Sorry, Cam," Damon said as they followed the constable inside. "I should've told you Scott Davies is here trying to help locate David and secure his release."

Scott waved them in while gesticulating at Pip's phone. "What do you mean you can't tell me where he is? He's your prisoner, isn't he? Yes, I'll wait."

"Not having much luck?" Damon asked.

"It's like pulling teeth from a stone. Apparently David's under police guard in a hospital bed, but no-one knows which hospital, let alone which bed."

Cam turned pale. "Hospital? What's happened to him?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on it."

"Me? No, only Alfred hit him on the back of the head with a rolling pin, but I didn't think it was hard enough to do any real damage."

"Who's Alfred?"

“My mother’s butler.”

Scott shook his head as a voice appeared on the other end of the line. “Yes, I’m still here. To whom am I speaking?”

“Detective Sergeant Hastings, sir. I’ve ascertained that the prisoner sustained a bruised spleen and is currently being kept under medical observation.”

“A bruised spleen? How the hell did that happen?”

“I believe he tripped on his shoelaces and fell against a table, sir.”

“Shoelaces? We are talking about the same David Collins, aren’t we? The one I know never wears anything on his feet, or any other part of his body if he has half the chance.”

“I’m just going by what it says here.”

“Send me the goddamned video.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but the video of his interview has been mislaid.”

“Along with the prisoner himself, it seems. Have you been able to find out what hospital he’s in?”

“Yes, but that information is quarantined.”

“Quarantined? On what grounds?”

“Security regulation 257f.”

“Oh, I see. Well thank you for your time, sergeant.”

“Always a pleasure, sir.”

“What’s happening?” Cam asked as Scott put down the phone.

“His whereabouts are a classified secret under an idiotic regulation some head-office pen-pusher dreamt up.”

“Do you know who it was?”

“Yes, it was me.”

Cam covered his face, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

“Pip, could you ask Hamati to join us if he’s available?”

“Certainly, Scott.”

Scott turned to Cam while Pip called the Barungi chieftain. “I need to hear your side of the story when we have a moment. Tell me everything, no matter how inconsequential it might seem.”

“Yes, of course, but I don’t understand any of this. Why have they arrested him?”

“The *why* is easy, it’s undoing it that’s going to be difficult. How could I have been so damned stupid?”

Pip turned back to them before Cam could think of a response. “Hamati will be here in half an hour, so why don’t we all adjourn to the cafeteria while we wait? I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m in dire need of some coffee.”

* * *

David opened his eyes, but the dull ache in his abdomen made him wish he’d stayed asleep.

“Feeling better?” the policeman beside his bed asked.

“No.”

“Don’t worry; the doctor said your spleen is only bruised, not ruptured, so you should be back on your feet in a day or two.”

“Why doesn’t that make me feel like jumping for joy?”

The policeman shrugged. “I’ve been reading up on your history, Mr Collins; you made quite a name for yourself eight years ago, didn’t you? Except you had bright red hair back then, if I recall; is that why you’re dyeing it, so no-one will recognise you?”

“Dye? No, this is my natural hair colour now.”

“Please, enough of the balderdash.”

“No, honestly, when Drago died I lost everything associated with him, including his hair colour.”

“I’m warning you, Collins –”

“It’s the truth, I swear. Pull out a strand if you like; it’s black all the way down to the root.”

The policeman did just that, turning the strand over in his fingers before flicking it away. “Nice trick, Collins.”

“Look, whatever, okay? Just don’t kick me again, that’s all.”

“Kick you? Don’t you remember? You tripped over your shoelaces and fell against the table.”

“Shoe – I don’t wear shoes, never have, never will. Everyone knows that.”

The policeman shrugged again. “It’s your word against mine and I know who the judge will believe, but don’t worry, it won’t come to that, not now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re a very dangerous person, David Collins, some might even say *public enemy number one*. A lot of people have put a lot of effort into hunting you down.”

“What? Because of my relationship with Cam? I don’t see how that’s anyone’s business but our own.”

“I’m not interested in whatever lewd acts you got up to in your bedroom.”

“No, you don’t understand; none of you understand!”

The policeman folded his arms. “Well why don’t you tell me then?”

“Sheeze. It’s like you said; I was Drago’s vessel, made in his image so he could take over my body on my tenth birthday.”

“So you admit it then?”

“Admit what? Everyone knows that’s what happened. You don’t understand; Drago was a Pasha, the all-seeing prodigy of certain Barungi and Tivinel families. They were always male and could never become a race of their own. Do you know why?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me.”

“They were impotent.”

“Impotent?”

“Utterly. I don’t just mean infertile sperm; I mean no sperm, no semen, no sex drive, nothing. Zilch.”

“So?”

“I have Drago’s body, so that’s how I am too. I love Cam with all my heart, truly I do, but that’s as far as it goes, as far as it can ever go. Our relationship can never be a physical one.”

“But didn’t you just say you reverted to normal when Drago died?”

“A whole lot of stuff got turned off, but you can’t turn things on that were never there. Sometimes I wish it were different, especially when I see how happy Loraine and Joel are, but this is me, it’s how I was made and I’m stuck with it.”

“I see. Would you be willing to sign a statement confirming what you’ve just told me?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t go away; I’ll be right back.”

David pulled against the straps holding him to the bed, wondering how the hell he was supposed to *go away*.

The policeman returned a few minutes later, handing him a pen and a typewritten transcript of their conversation. "Is this all correct?"

"Yes, right down to the punctuation marks. Where do I sign?"

"Just a moment while I grab a witness." He stuck his head out the door, commandeering a passing nurse. "Sign and date it on the bottom left and let the witness sign below that."

David gave it a second reading before signing his name and passing the statement to the nurse.

"Thank you so much, Mr Collins," the policeman said, folding and sealing it in an envelope. "I believe you've just signed your own death warrant."

* * *

The door to the seminary cafeteria swung open, admitting a small man with greyish pink hair. "Hamati here now; sorry took so long."

"Not at all, Hamati," Pip said, "and thanks for coming at such short notice. We have a problem with your genetic screening programme."

"You know already? Hamati was going to speak to you later."

"Huh? How can you know about David? It's only just happened."

"Sorry, Hamati confused. What this about David?"

"Someone on Hazler took a DNA swab from him and it came back positive, which of course we should've anticipated, but we didn't have him on the exclusion list and now he's under quarantine."

"Could someone tell me what's going on?" Cam asked. "I'm still in the dark."

Scott put his hands behind his head. "When Joel returned from that portal to the past, he brought with him hair samples from Drago and Roly, allowing us to use their DNA to identify any Tivinel and Barungi families who, if they crossbred, could produce another Pasha. The test isn't infallible, though, so we created an exclusion list of people who might trigger a false positive, such as descendants of the Barefooters, but, um —"

“No-one thought to put David on that list,” Pip said, “even though, having been created as Drago’s vessel, he’s the most obvious candidate.”

“As well as you,” Hamati said.

“What?”

“Your swab came back positive, Pip, but no-one else knows yet.”

“Me? How’s that possible?”

Cam felt something touch his mind, stirring up a memory of a blond-headed man in a simple black robe. He turned to see Hamati grinning at him. “You tell him, Cam, is much more recent memory for you.”

“It was the guy we met back in that island palace, the Old Pasha named Roly, the one Drago killed with his dart; he said he was the Black Dolphin’s emissary and looked just like you, Pip.”

“You think *I’m* a Pasha? That’s not possible, is it?”

“You half-caste, Pip,” Hamati said, “product of Tivinel and Gomeral, so in mix of genes you have ingredients to make Pasha. You what we called proto-Pasha; they quite rare but not as rare as real Pasha.”

“What’s a proto-Pasha?”

“You have some Pasha DNA but it switched off. Takes more than DNA to make Pasha.”

Pip flicked his fingers. “That explains why Drago couldn’t sense me when I confronted him! Clem’s parents knew that, of course, but didn’t bother telling me.”

“Knowing may have changed outcome.”

“You knew too, didn’t you, Hamati?”

“Hamati guessed, but didn’t know for sure, not until see test result. If it not personal question, Pip, do you and Cloe have physical relationship?”

Cloe bristled. “Hamati! How is that *not* a personal question?”

“It’s all right,” Pip said. “Under the circumstances he needs to know. Yes, we do have a physical relationship.”

“And a damn good one too, on both sides.”

Hamati raised his hands. “Sorry, Cloe, Hamati not mean to offend. That good, means Pip not fully Pasha.”

“Of course he’s not a Pasha. Do you think we’d be having this conversation if he was?”

“So what about Davo?” Cam asked. “Is he a Pasha?”

“He was while Drago’s spirit possessed him,” Pip said, “but afterwards he reverted to normal.”

“Not quite.”

“What do you mean?”

“Davo’s infertile, well asexual would be a better description.”

“That right,” Hamati said. “Full Pasha DNA lack rumpy-pumpy part.”

Cloe covered her mouth. “Rumpy-pumpy?”

Hamati shrugged.

Pip turned to Cam. “If you don’t mind me asking, how does that affect your relationship with him?”

“It’s perfect, really, I mean I wouldn’t have it any other way. We’re soulmates, just soulmates.”

“There’s no *just* about it, Cam,” Cloe said. “Your relationship with David is just as valid and true as that between Pip and me, or any other for that matter.”

“So, so why is he quarantined under police guard?”

Scott rubbed his hands over his face. “When Hamati’s people developed their screening test for potential parents of a future Pasha, the police on each planet created a protocol which was to isolate anyone who returned a positive swab.”

Cam turned pale. “The judiciary on Hazler doesn’t take prisoners; those arrested are either found innocent, fined or executed.”

Cloe again covered her mouth. “What? Why?”

“It’s the way the whole planet works; survival of the fittest, death for the misfit.”

Pip turned to Scott. “He’s at least entitled to legal representation, isn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s enshrined in the galactic constitution.”

“Damon, could you arrange to get Owen to Hazler as soon as possible?”

“Consider it done.”

“Scott, do you think you can keep David alive until Owen gets there?”

“Yes, it usually takes several weeks for the Hazler bureaucracy to process execution requests.”

Cam ran his fingers through his hair. “But, but what if the legal processes fail?”

Pip sighed. “We’ll have to break him out.”

“That won’t be easy, Pip.”

“Maybe so, but we’ll save him nonetheless. I give you my word.”

“Don’t let them find out you’re a proto-Pasha,” Scott said, “or you’ll end up standing next to him in front of the firing squad.”

“It won’t be the first time that’s happened.”

* * *

“Any news?” Loraine asked as she stepped from the intergalactic cruiser.

Cloe shook her head. “The last we heard was that he’s under police guard in a hospital on Hazler. Owen’s about to go there to try to see him.”

Joel followed, lugging two huge suitcases. “I don’t understand any of this. What’s he done?”

“He hasn’t *done* anything, as far as we can tell, aside from incurring a bruised spleen while being questioned. It’s all about his DNA.”

“Huh?”

“He was created as Drago’s vessel and has tested positive to the screening that was supposed to detect possible parents of a new Pasha.”

“I’m sure David’s Pasha genes are now inactive,” Loraine said, “but that geneticist in France could do a quick check if we can send her the swab results.”

“I’m afraid that’s now classified,” Scott said, stepping outside to join them. “The Hazler police have quarantined him and it’s probably going to take a court order just to assert his right to legal representation.”

Loraine started to fume. “This is ridiculous! Who knows what they might do to him while he’s in that prison. We have to go there.”

Scott shook his head. "And do what? Owen's best placed to prod the legal system and at the moment that's about all we can do."

She grabbed Joel's hand. "We're going with him."

"I suppose that won't do any harm, but be super careful; Hazler's a dangerous place for anyone rocking the *status quo*."

Scott led them into Owen's office, a good-sized room lined floor to ceiling with shelves, all crammed to capacity with law books. Joel wondered what would happen when someone passed a new law, but supposed lawyers had ways of coping with that eventuality. Something stirred uneasily in his subconscious, though, like a half-remembered childhood nightmare.

"The Hazler legal framework is a minefield of inconsistency," Owen said, sighing. "Half the time it's unclear whether the penalty for an offence is a small fine or execution by firing squad; or most likely both."

Firing squad, a loud voice said inside Joel's mind, sending him flying deep into the nightmare.

"I tell you we don't know where he is, if he's even still alive," Luke said from behind the closed door into the adjoining room. Joel put his arm around Willy's shoulder, trying to steady his friend's trembling.

"Perhaps standing in front of the firing squad will improve your memory. Take them away!"

"No, no wait, if you let Carla go I'll tell you what I know, okay?"

The loud man chuckled; in his mind's eye Joel could see the scar on his face wriggling around like a live snake. "And in return I'll execute you regardless of what you tell me, okay?"

"No, Luke!" Carla said.

"Think of Willy, sweetheart; someone will need to look after him."

"Take the woman outside," Loud Voice said. A moment later one of the Tivinel soldiers dragged Carla from the room. As she passed she turned to Willy and wailed. Joel shivered, knowing with prophetic certainty that neither boy would ever see her again.

“Joel, what’s wrong?” Loraine asked from what sounded like the end of a long drainpipe. “You’re shivering.”

Joel ran his hands over his face and through his hair. “Something, something happened in this room, or at least a room just like it, a long time ago, when I, when I was ...”

“Come on into the kitchen and I’ll get you a glass of water, Joel,” Owen said, standing and opening the door to the adjoining room.

A cold clamminess spread outwards through Joel’s skin, turning his flesh to ice. “No! He, he’s in there!”

“There’s no-one in there, Joel,” Loraine said. “See, it’s just Owen’s office kitchen. You know: taps, a sink and a coffee machine.”

Joel hesitantly stood, feeling all his blood drain down to his feet before rushing back to his head in a hot flush. It was just as Loraine had said: a sink, taps and a coffee machine. “Sorry.”

“What is it, Joel? You’re scaring me.”

“I, I don’t know. It was the books on the walls and then when Owen mentioned a firing squad –”

“A what?”

“I think it was something that happened in my other life on Huntress, back in that time line Tristan created. Willy was an orphan then and I’m sure I’m remembering the day his parents were – I need to call him.”

Loraine shook her head. “All right then, go on.”

“Hello, Carla speaking.”

“Oh hi, it’s Joel here, Joel Morison.”

“Joel! How are you? Are you keeping well?”

“Um, I don’t know. Right now I seem to be unravelling at the seams.”

“You’re not the only one. Willy woke in a right state this morning, saying he needed to go to Huntress and dashing out the door before I could even say good morning.”

“Huntress?”

“Yes, there’s something at the Black Delphinidae seminary he needed to check out, apparently.”

“That’s where I am now.”

“I guess you’ll see him soon then.”

“Thanks, oh, I think he’s here now. Bye.”

“Goodbye Joel and good luck in whatever it is you two are up to.”

Joel put his phone away as Willy ran towards him.

“Joel, what are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Something’s been niggling me for weeks now, but it all came to a head in a crazy dream I had last night.”

“What was it?”

Willy looked around at the others in the room. “There’s something hidden here on Huntress, something important. We need to find Roly’s tomb.”

Roly's Tomb

“Roly's tomb?”

“Yes, Joel,” Willy said. “There's something there, something we need to find, I'm sure.”

“Roly died millions of years ago,” Loraine said. “Even if you knew where he was buried, there'd be nothing left now, surely.”

Joel turned to Hamati. “You were there when Roly was killed. Do you know what became of his body?”

“Yes, Hamati there. Days following killing were chaotic for Barungi. My father, clan leader Jarred, declared open war on Tivinel, who retaliated by burning our crops. But Charon, who of mixed race but mostly Tivinel, go to mountain and bring Roly back on his ferry.”

Pip chuckled. “I guess he's been ferrying the dead ever since.”

Cloe poked him in the ribs.

“Sorry, that was in poor taste.”

“Perhaps,” Hamati said, “but true enough. With war, he ferry lots of dead.”

“So what happened to Roly?”

“Charon bring him here to Black Delphinidae seminary where Barungi and Gomerl entomb him deep underground in catacombs. Tivinel attack, though, destroying buildings and killing many people. Some thought Charon was spy.”

Joel grimaced. “Was he?”

“No, troubles with Charon start later but Hamati say no more on that.”

“Is Roly's tomb still here?”

“Yes, Clem find it when exploring catacombs six years ago, now sacred place for Barungi.”

“Are you saying it's off limits?”

“For Barungi, yes.” He glanced nervously at Willy. “And Tivinel too.”

“It’s okay, Hamati,” Pip said. “As emissary I authorise you to take them down there.”

Hamati squirmed but nodded to Pip. “Must not take anything though.”

“Of course not,” Joel said. “We just need to look, don’t we Willy?”

“I think so, yes, but I don’t want to cause any friction so I’ll stay behind.”

“No, Willy,” Pip said. “You’re just as much a part of this as Joel.”

Willy glanced at Hamati, who nodded. “Emissary’s word good enough for Hamati. Follow me.”

“What about David?” Loraine asked. “Aren’t we supposed to be rescuing him?”

Pip placed a hand on her shoulder. “There’s nothing more we can do until Scott and Owen reach Hazler and can assess the legal situation there. As soon as we hear back from them, we’ll do whatever we have to, okay?”

“I, I guess so. Thanks.”

Hamati led them down the hill behind the seminary to a rocky outcrop in the far corner of the grounds. Here a wind-eroded cave had partially collapsed, leaving a jumble of boulders at the back.

“Entrance is through gap in rocks then down ladder.”

“They’re not likely to fall in on top of us, are they?” Cam asked.

“No, rocks stable now, Clem made sure of that.”

Taking a deep breath, Cam followed the others through the tight gap and down into the Black Delphinidae’s subterranean depths.

“This is amazing,” Joel said, taking in the side rooms filled with shelves of books, artworks and sculptures.

“Basement originally used for archives,” Hamati said, “but extended for safe storage when war started with Tivinel. Lots of history in here.”

“Clem started cataloguing it,” Pip said, “and Damon’s been keen to continue the project when time permits.”

“Free time is becoming something of a precious commodity,” Damon said, glancing at Joel.

“I, but –”

“Ignore him, Joel,” Cloe said. “No-one’s blaming you for what’s been happening.”

“If anyone to blame it’s me,” Hamati said. “So many ends left loose when Barungi flee into Sheol.”

“You were fighting a war, Hamati.”

“That true; wars leave many ends loose.”

Loraine stepped into one of the side rooms where a book lay open on a desk. “Do these really date back millions of years to the days of Roly? I’d have thought they’d have rotted to dust long before now.”

“Basement sealed when Tivinel bomb seminary,” Hamati said. “Then when planet stop rotating, this place in twilight zone and underground temperature drop below freezing.”

“That’s why it’s important now to photograph and catalogue everything,” Pip said.

Hamati turned to Willy. “There is much here that may interest Tivinel. Your scholars are most welcome to come and share in it.”

“Thank you so much, Hamati. I’m sure they’ll appreciate your offer.”

Hamati smiled before turning back to the passageway. “We go along here.”

Joel suddenly realised the path they were following was spiralling downwards. He wondered if there was a second one entwined with it, forming a double helix like the DNA molecule that had drawn him here. It was all connected, he was sure – *in truth, all things are the same* – but its meaning remained out of reach. A secret message encoded into every cell of his body; if only his billions of neurons were able to turn inwards and collectively decode what was written within them, but no, the mind didn’t work that way.

That thought made him feel disconnected from his body, as if he was just a passenger in an automobile of flesh and bone. In a sense it was literally true, for after his fall into the volcano he’d taken over the body and life of a Gomeral child on war-ravaged Huntress, stealing memories, experiences and passions that were not his own. Yet that Gomeral child *was* him – the same personality, the same nuances,

even the same name – just with different memories. *He was a singleton; across all time lines there could only ever be one of him. It had to be, it was the only way it could work. That's why –*

“What are these rooms for?” Loraine asked, snapping Joel out of his introspection. The flash of understanding he'd just had about his singleton nature popped like a burst bubble, leaving him floundering in confusion once more.

“They used for accommodation during war,” Hamati said, answering Loraine's question.

Joel glanced inside, seeing a multitude of hammocks strung one above the other which reminded him of the dormitory at the Lake Placid mine. *Turn away, don't go there*, said a voice inside his head. It was a familiar voice but one he couldn't quite place.

“On next level down is kitchen and dining,” Hamati said.

“How long were people living in here?” Loraine asked.

“War last only a few months before Drago stopped it, but Tivinel insurgents keep attacking for years and he do nothing.”

“I'm so sorry,” Willy said.

“Not your fault. Hamati know many good Tivinel but Unity League hunt them down and kill them.”

“Unity League?”

“Call themselves that but their idea of unity only for pureblood Tivinel.”

Joel tottered. *The scar-faced man interrogating Willy's parents had been Unity League, he was sure.*

“Are you okay, Joel?” Loraine asked, staring at him.

“Um, yeah, just one of my nightmares is starting to make sense. I think the Unity League killed Willy's parents in Tristan's alternative reality here.”

“Yes, they did,” Willy said. “It's how I became an orphan back then.”

Pip scratched his head. “Where have I heard that name before?”

“It was in the report Scott Davies gave you about the arrested Ignus overlords,” Cloe said. “They referred to themselves by that name.”

“Very bad if Unity League still loose in galaxy,” Hamati said. “Is this why you need find Roly's tomb?”

“I don’t know,” Willy said, “but it’s possible I guess.”

Joel wanted to say something but couldn’t think what it was, so instead he just looked worried.

“We go then,” Hamati said, leading them further on. “Down this way.”

Roughly hewn steps led deeper into the hillside, with the subspace-powered lights becoming fewer and further between. At the bottom of the steps the passageway ended in a huge pile of fallen rocks.

“Oh no, it’s caved in,” Joel said.

Loraine held him as he tried to stop himself crying, but Hamati continued on, clambering over the rocks and disappearing around behind one of them.

“Joel, I think there’s a way through,” Loraine said.

“Huh?”

Hamati poked his head back around. “Are you coming or not?”

Joel followed as they climbed up, over and between the rocks, squeezing around through a narrow gap before crawling under a low ledge.

“Where to now?” he asked as they reached what appeared to be another dead end.

“Turn around and climb back over rock you crawled under.”

“But won’t that take us back to where we just were?”

“Trust him, Joel,” Loraine said. “It won’t, I’m sure.”

“But –”

“Don’t think, just climb.”

“Okay – ouch!”

“Mind head when coming through.”

“Now he tells us.”

With knees and elbows scraped raw and his head bumped more times than he could remember, Joel breathed a sigh of relief when, around the final twist, they emerged into an open passageway again. More lights came on as Hamati stepped forward, revealing a heavy wooden door at the far end.

Pulling a large brass key from his pocket, Hamati opened it and led them into a chamber filled with pottery, engravings, sculptures and, in the very centre of the room, a stone sarcophagus.

“Roly’s tomb,” he said with a wave of his hand. “What is it you looking for?”

“I, um, I’m not sure,” Joel said. “Willy?”

“I don’t know either. I just had a recurring need to find this place.”

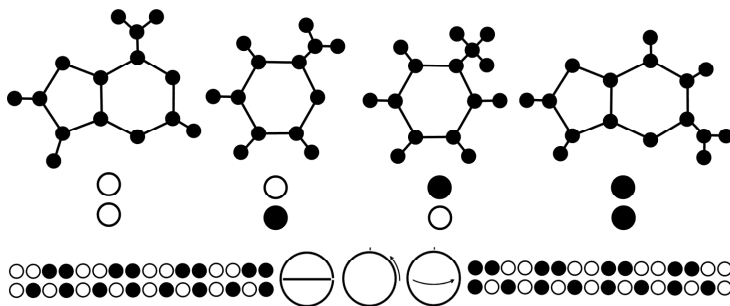
Joel gazed around the room, looking for anything that might provide a clue to why he was here, but nothing jumped out at him. “I think we need to find something that might be a message.”

“Take your time,” Hamati said.

The others joined Joel in scouring all the artefacts in the room. The statues were completely unadorned, save one of Roly with a stylised dolphin on it, while the engravings looked to be a mixture of dolphins and coats of arms. Perhaps surprisingly, nothing appeared to have any form of writing on it, ancient or modern.

Clear your mind, that familiar yet anonymous voice inside Joel’s head said. *Look with your eyes, not your preconceptions*. He ran his hands over his face and through his hair, pulling it down over his eyes then brushing it aside. Something flashed in the corner of his vision, light from a torch reflecting off metal. He turned, looking down at the side of the sarcophagus where a small brass plaque was affixed in the corner. “What’s this?”

He squatted to look at it, using the torch in his phone to illuminate it from the best angle, but there were no words, just what looked like incoherent lines, dots and circles.



Loraine crouched beside him. “Joel, those four things along the top, I’m sure I’ve seen them before, but, but I can’t remember where it was.”

“Perhaps I can help jog those memories,” Willy said.

Loraine looked at Joel, who nodded. “He can do it; it worked for me when I was trying to remember what pi was.”

“Uh huh. Okay then, I guess.”

Willy placed a hand on Loraine’s forehead. “Just look at the engravings and let your mind go blank.”

“*It’s a book, a big book, a textbook for university,*” Loraine whispered. “*An Introductory Guide to Biochemistry, The Building Blocks of Life, Nucleobases* – that’s it!”

“What?”

“Give me something to write on.”

Joel reached into his pocket, finding the DNA printout Janet Wilson had given him.

“They’re the four DNA base molecules: the one on the left is adenine, then cytosine, thymine and on the right is guanine. They form –”

She stared at the sheet of paper she was writing on, her jaw dropping.

“What is it?”

“Joel, I think, well, I’m pretty sure this engraving is the key to decoding that message in your DNA, but, um, I don’t have the foggiest how it works. What are these circle things under each molecule?”

Cam crouched down beside them. “In computer systems, a set of four symbols is a *dibit*, meaning it encodes two bits.”

“Two bits of what?”

“No, just two bits: two binary digits which I guess would be those circles, one open and one closed. We’d write them as 00, 01, 10 and 11.”

“Look at each end of the bottom line,” Joel said. “It goes 00-01-10-11 four times on the left and 11-10-01-00 four times on the right.”

“That’s the same pattern as your DNA, Joel,” Loraine said, holding up the printout. “Look, four lots of ACTG at the start and four lots of GTCA at the end.”

“They must be the beginning and end markers,” Cam said. “So what about the three circle things between them?”

Loraine ran her finger across the sequence in the printout. “There are thirty-six of your dibits between the start and end markers, so if you divide that by three, that gives twelve dibits per circle thing.”

“Which would be twenty-four bits. Let me write them out in binary.”

Cam took the printout and pen from her.

```
110010010000111111011010
000100011100001010101111
011010111010011111001001
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“Look at that first symbol, the circle with the line across it. Around the outside is the circumference and across the middle is the diameter.”

“Pi!” Joel said.

Cam pulled out his phone and activated the calculator app. “In decimal, pi is 3.141592653 and so on, but if I convert that to binary it’s 11.0010010000111111011010.”

“Bingo! That’s the same as the first number in Joel’s DNA!”

“So what are the other two numbers?” Joel asked. “Those symbols look like they’re distance up and distance across the circle.”

“Not distance, degrees. They’re latitude and longitude.”

“Degrees are an Earth invention,” Loraine said. “On Eridani they divide a circle into 256 segments while in this galaxy they use –”

“Radians,” Cam said. “At one time each planet had its own system but radians are the universal measurement of angle.”

“What’s a radian?” Willy asked.

“A full circle is two pi radians.”

“That’s pi again!” Joel said.

“Latitude goes a half-pi north or south, while longitude goes pi east or west.”

“The way the symbols are drawn, it’d be north and east.”

“*North* would be north of the equator, that’s logical enough,” Cloe said, “but what is *east* east of?”

“Could it be the Pasha’s island?”

“No,” Hamati said. “Island only Pasha’s home when Roly start rule; before then, palace on other side of ocean and it became prime meridian. Come back to seminary and Hamati find map.”

* * *

“Does anyone know what this is all about?” Loraine asked as they returned to the seminary common room.

“Roly, the Pasha who preceded Drago, must have foreseen something in our time and left a message for Joel,” Pip said after no-one else responded. “Whatever it is, I suspect we’ll find out when we check those coordinates.”

“But why all the subterfuge with the DNA sequence and that plaque? Couldn’t he have just told him?”

“Roly not want anyone else to know,” Hamati said.

“Does that mean we’re all in danger now?”

“Hamati not know.”

Loraine covered her face. “It’s not fair. We just want to go to university and get on with our lives, don’t we, Joel?”

“Of course, but, um, if Roly wants —”

“I don’t care what Roly wants and neither should you! He’s been dead for millions of years so what right does he have to be interfering with our lives?”

“None at all,” Pip said, “but I’m guessing he was trying to warn us about something and Joel’s DNA was the only way he could pass the message across that expanse of time.”

“Couldn’t he have left a time capsule or, um, or even just told Hamati or Charon? They’re both still around. Why involve Joel?”

“Maybe it’s because I’m a singlet,” Joel said.

“Oh no you don’t! Your singleton days are over, Joel Morison, and that’s final; no ifs, no buts.”

Joel turned away, covering his face with his hands and trying not to cry. Cloe stared at Loraine, shaking her head, while Cam and Willy exchanged nervous glances.

“May know more when see map,” Hamati said, stepping over to one of the ultranet terminals. “What are coordinates?”

Joel handed him the printout on which Cam had written the decoded numbers.

Hamati opened the Huntress mapping database. “Is on land, so that good, won’t need submarine. Is old Barungi village on west coast – now this interesting.”

“What is it, Hamati?”

“Remember Roly telling you his life story when we were on island?”

Joel nodded. “He said he lived in a village by the sea – is that where it is?”

“Yes, is same village. Let me zoom in on satellite image.”

“Gosh! That looks like, could it be?”

“Yes, is cemetery.”

“A cemetery?” Loraine said. “What’s he want us to do, dig someone up and bring them back to life?”

“No, I think just look at headstones.”

“How accurate are those coordinates?” Joel asked. “Could we identify a particular grave?”

Cam scratched his head. “The binary numbers have twenty-four bit resolution, so on the ground that would be, um, a few metres, I think. If it was an isolated grave then yes, but if they’re close together, the best we could do would be to identify a group.”

“Oh.”

“Hard to tell from satellite picture,” Hamati said. “Too many trees; will need to go there and see.”

“We can’t go anywhere until we know what’s happening with David,” Loraine said.

Pip looked about to say something when his phone rang. “Speak of the devil. Hello, Owen, what’s happening there?”

“Hi Pip. Everything’s cloaked in secrecy but Scott and I have an appointment to see the Attorney General in a couple of hours so we should know something then.”

“Great work, give me a call as soon as you have any news.”

“Of course. Tell Loraine not to worry, I’m sure everything will work out fine.”

“Thanks, she heard that. Bye.”

Lorraine grimaced. “How long would it take to get to that cemetery?”

“In my shuttle, about fifteen minutes.”

“Okay, I suppose we could go and take a look while we’re waiting for Owen to call back. It’ll at least be something to keep my mind off things.”

“Thanks,” Joel said, hugging her.

“Once we’ve looked we have to come straight back.”

“Of course.”

Desecration

With heavy cloud veiling much of the west coast, it wasn't until Pip circled his shuttle for the final descent that they caught their first glimpse of the ancient village.

"Does anyone live here now?" Joel asked, staring out the window.

"No," Hamati said. "Was late afternoon here when star dimmer caused solar flash, killing everyone on this side of continent. All survivors who fled into Sheol came from east and have resettled there."

Joel scanned the remains of the village spread out on the hillside below. Although more substantial than the Kurramurra ruins on the east coast, none of the buildings looked anything like habitable. He'd half expected a long-forgotten or implanted memory to rise from his subconscious, but no, this was a place he was sure he'd never seen before, not even in his dreams.

Yet in spite of that he felt a growing unease, the hint of an icy shiver running up and down his spine, a sense that he was trespassing perhaps. *Everyone here had died when Drago's star dimmer malfunctioned. Were there skeletons, or worse, in those houses?*

"Is that ghost looking at you again?" Loraine asked, staring at him.

You look like you've just seen a ghost. No, a ghost has just seen me.

"I don't know. This place looks creepy, that's all."

Loraine followed his gaze out the window, nodding. "Yeah, you're right."

Pip circled lower, seeking out some level ground on which to land and eventually picking out what might have once been a sporting oval between the village and the beach.

"Do you think this used to be a cricket pitch?" Joel asked, staring at the strip of hard-packed ground in the centre of the field.

Willy looked at him in confusion. “What’s cricket?”

“You don’t want to know,” Loraine said.

“Maybe,” Joel said, a faraway look on his face, “maybe there used to be test matches with the *Tivinel Tyrants* up against the *Barungi Bruisers* or something.”

“Nah. No offence to Hamati and Willy, but they wouldn’t have been able to go that long without bloodshed.”

“Loraine right,” Hamati said. “Even before war, many games end in death.”

Willy looked at Joel. “We called it something different then, but those were the teams that used to play in our village when we were kids in that other time line. Do you, do you think there could be any chance of a lasting peace between our peoples?”

“You and Hamati are our best hope of that,” Pip said as the shuttle touched down.

Once outside, Joel thought it was a lot darker than it had looked from the air. To his left, the sea, a greyish-green colour, was smooth but for an occasional tiny wave lapping on the sand. *The calm before the storm*, he thought just as faint thunder from a distant lightning strike rolled across the land.

“Let’s find whatever we came for before that storm hits,” Loraine said. “Which way do we go?”

Joel pulled out his phone. “I’ll just put the coordinates into this app.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called geocaching; something my grandfather used to use a lot. People hide containers and others use the navigation satellites to find them.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he used to take me out with him when we came to visit. He called himself *barefootcory* and when I was a bit older I signed up as *barefootjoel*, which is how I came to have the app.”

“Barefoot Joel; I never would’ve guessed.”

“Ha ha.”

“Which way do we go, Joel?” Willy asked.

“Up the hill along what’s left of that road, I think.”

With Joel in the lead, they headed away from the beach, the road surface beneath their feet a mixture of broken bitumen, gravel and clay. On either side were stone houses, some roughly hewn while others had once been the work of skilled masons. Many of the roofs had cracked or fallen in but the walls were mostly intact, some even still sporting unbroken glass windows.

Joel suddenly stopped walking.

“What’s wrong?” Loraine asked.

“I, I thought I saw a flicker of light in that window over there.”

Thunder, sounding much closer now, rolled across the village.

“I’m sure it was just reflected lightning, Joel. We need to keep moving before the storm arrives.”

“There can’t be anyone living here,” Pip said. “There are no farms or anything. What would they eat?”

“Inquisitive visitors like us, I suppose,” Cam said.

Loraine glared at him while Joel started walking again. “Only another four hundred metres to go.”

The light dimmed further as they neared the top of the hill, but there was still no wind or rain. While there’d been no more nearby lightning, the low rumbling of thunder became almost continuous. Joel kept his eyes on the app’s compass display, not wanting to look at any more windows.

Across the next street the houses changed, those still standing being taller and made of brick rather than stone.

“This was Tivinel part of village,” Hamati said. “Too high up for Barungi.”

“There definitely won’t be anyone living here then,” Pip said. “There are no Tivinel on the planet.”

Loraine shrieked as lightning flashed close by again.

“It’s only a storm,” Joel said. “I know you don’t like them, but –”

“I’m NOT afraid of storms, Joel! I don’t know what gives you that idea.”

“But –”

“It was a face; in the lightning flash I saw, I thought I saw a face in that window over there.”

Everyone turned to look where she pointed, but in the gloom the glass was as good as opaque.

"It was a young face, a boy's face, I think."

"Barungi?" Pip asked.

"I, no, I don't know, but I thought he had brown hair."

"What colour were his eyes?" Cam asked.

Loraine glared at him again. "If I was close enough to see that we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Sorry, I didn't think."

"You seem to be making a habit of that."

"That's enough," Pip said. "I'm sensing something odd here."

"What is it?" Cloe asked, taking hold of his hand.

"It feels like an emptiness in my telepathic empathy."

"Hamati sense that too, but no, couldn't be."

"What do you think it is?"

"Best not say, not until sure. Many things possible."

"Another seventy metres just over there," Joel said, pointing across the next road to a cluster of trees.

"This'll be the cemetery we saw on the satellite image," Pip said as lightning flashed again, followed by a much closer clap of thunder. Joel glanced nervously at Loraine, opening his mouth to say something before deciding it was best not to.

A low stone fence surrounded the cemetery, its top broken in places making it easy to climb. The gloom deepened under the trees, slowing them as Joel's app counted down the metres.

"What the hell has happened here?" Cam asked, moving slightly ahead of Joel. At his feet was an open grave with excavated dirt piled up on the far side.

"Look, all the graves have been dug up," Willy said, moving alongside him.

"This outrage!" Hamati said. "Desecration of worst kind! Someone pay dearly for this!"

"These are not just Barungi graves," Willy said, studying the headstones in the fading light. "There are Tivinel and Gomeral names here I recognise from my life in that other time line."

"That's right," Joel said. "Roly told us that everyone lived together peacefully in the village where he was born."

Pip nodded. “A Pasha is produced from the union of Tivinel and Barungi parents, so yes, at least some of them must have been living together.”

Joel walked forward, following his app past more excavated graves as the metres counted down to zero.

“Not all the graves have been dug up,” he said. “Whoever it was stopped here.”

He stood in front of the last opened grave. Beside the pile of dirt sat a small backhoe, its tread partly buried with long grass growing through it.

“What have we here?” Pip asked.

“It looks like they found what they were looking for,” Willy said.

Cam peered into the hole. “The coffin’s been broken but, I think there are still remains in there.”

“Same in others,” Hamati said. “Nothing taken, just broken.”

Loraine scratched her chin. “Nothing except perhaps a DNA sample. That’s what this whole thing’s about, isn’t it?”

Joel gulped. “Tristan once told me that he’d traced his family line back to its origins, origins that could have made him Pasha but for a chance of fate.”

“You think this is more of his work?” Pip asked.

“I don’t know, but it makes sense in a perverse kind of way.”

“Can trace registration number on backhoe,” Hamati said. “That may give clue.”

In a dazzling white flash and ear-shattering boom, a tree some fifty metres away took a lightning strike. A moment later the first heavy raindrops began to fall, quickly becoming a deluge.

“Back to the shuttle!” Loraine shouted over the ringing in her ears, running off without looking to see if anyone had heard her.

Pip, Cloe, Hamati and Cam took off after her, but Joel faltered. “Willy?”

“I’m right here, Joel. What’s wrong?”

“No, it can’t be, not here, not now.”

Joel started running further away, past the burning tree and into the rain and darkness. Willy followed as best he could.

* * *

His short legs not made for sprinting, Hamati reached the shuttle well behind the others. "Is wet out there," he said as a puddle rapidly formed beneath him.

"Where's Joel?" Loraine asked.

"And Willy?" Cam added.

"They not back?"

"Joel has his phone," Pip said. "Try calling him."

Loraine pulled out her phone but frowned as she tried to place the call. "Damn, the storm's wiping out the satellite signals."

"The worst of it should be gone soon at the rate it's moving."

Loraine sighed. "Joel was right; I hate storms."

Cloe patted her on the arm. "They'll be fine, I'm sure. They're probably just taking shelter in one of the old houses until it passes."

"But, but what if that grave digger is still out there?"

"I think that's unlikely," Pip said. "Did you see the treads on that backhoe?"

"What about them?"

"They were partly buried in the soft ground and had grass growing all through them. That thing hasn't moved for years."

"That makes sense if it really was Tristan," Cam said. "He's been dead for the best part of a year now."

Loraine sighed. "If he really is dead."

"He is, I'm sure," Pip said.

Loraine's phone rang, causing her to jump. "Joel, where are you?"

"Hello Loraine, it's not Joel, it's Scott Davies here."

"Oh sorry, what's up?"

"Bad news I'm afraid."

"What's happened? Is David okay?"

"For now he is, but while we were putting our case to the Attorney General, some lower circuit magistrate signed his execution warrant and he's to face the firing squad at dawn tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But, but can't you appeal?"

"Believe me, we're trying but it's a bank holiday here and all the high court judiciary are out playing in a divot tournament."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Everything on Hazler is ridiculous. Owen and I are doing all we can but I think you and Pip need to be here now."

“Of course, we’ll come straight away. How long do we have?”

“It’s noon here now so we have another eighteen hours.”

“I’ll put Pip on and you can give him directions.”

“What’s up?” Pip asked as she handed him the phone.

“We, we have to go to Hazler right away. D-David’s being executed tomorrow morning.”

Cloe wrapped her arms around her as Pip took down the details from Scott. “Be strong, dear, we have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Outside, more lightning flashed nearby as the rain intensified. Loraine wiped her hands over her face, straightening herself up as Pip handed her phone back. “Where the hell is Joel?” She tried calling him again.

“This service is temporarily unavailable. Please call your provider if the problem persists.”

Cloe stopped her from hurling her phone across the shuttle. “What do you want us to do?”

“I, we can’t, no we have to, but, oh hell!”

Hamati stood. “Hamati stay here to find Joel while rest of you go.”

Pip nodded. “Joel and Willy are in no immediate danger, but David is.”

“All, all right, I suppose, but Joel better have a good story when you find him.”

Hamati patted her on the shoulder. “Hamati find them, don’t worry.”

Loraine covered her face again as Pip secured the hatch for lift-off.

* * *

Hamati watched as the shuttle disappeared into the gloom, gritting his teeth against the rain before trotting back up the hill towards the cemetery.

Pip’s description of what they’d both felt earlier had been spot on: *a telepathic emptiness, a hollow space in his peripheral perception*. It had been a long time since he’d last felt that, a very long time.

“Hamati, what are these Gomeral doing here?” Drago said.

“They’re my personal slaves, sire.”

“I don’t recall Jarred ever needing slaves, but then you’re not your father.”

“No, I’m not.”

A few kilometres off the coast here was an island where first Roly and then Drago had lived. Both were Pasha, the ultimate telepaths, but Roly had for the most part kept his powers suppressed, ruling instead with gentle persuasion and reasoning.

Drago, though, was a different beast altogether. Just ten years old when he’d killed Roly, he’d had little control over his fledgling powers, but later in life had wielded his omniscience like a heavy mace, smashing any resistance to his will. At other times, particularly in court when concealing his thoughts from petitioners, plaintiffs and accused, he’d draw his influence inwards, creating a telepathic vacuum around himself. It was a trick he’d no doubt used in the lead-up to Roly’s assassination when stealth had been the order of the day, but once Hamati had recognised it for what it was, it became a signature that had proved invaluable in evading Drago during the Gomerall uprising.

Now, here in this desolate village where Roly had been born so long ago, Hamati sensed that signature again. Loraine had been right; there’d been a face in one of the windows, he’d seen it too. A boy’s face but not Drago’s; his skin had been black with a thatch of bright red hair whereas this new boy, this new Pasha, had a tanned complexion with brown hair.

Gritting his teeth again and masking his own telepathy, Hamati headed back up through the ruined houses to where he’d seen that face, a good idea of who he expected to find there.

He’d recognised the name on the last opened grave; it was a Barungi family of some standing on the west coast. One of their number, a middle-aged woman, had come to his village to liaise in the months before the uprising. Esmeralda had been dangerously attractive, a distraction he hadn’t needed while trying to protect Pedro and Elsa. *If only he could go back and live those days over, the outcome may have been different.*

She’d been there when the star dimmer failed, but he didn’t know if she’d fled into Sheol or not. It had been a chaotic time, with some

Barungi joining the Tivinel in their City of Towers, so perhaps that's where she'd been all those millennia.

With lightning flashing again, he opened the door to the house where he'd seen the face. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he saw a table in the corner of the room where the remains of a meal set for two still sat.

"Esmeralda, are you here?" he said in his native tongue, feeling as if the veil of all those years had been lifted.

From behind him came footsteps on the stairs as a Barungi woman descended into view. Although haggard and drawn, her inner beauty remained unblemished and when she smiled, he knew that any resistance would be futile.

"Hamati, I've been expecting you."

Us Against the Planet

“No, Cam, it’s out of the question, you know that,” Pip said, shaking his head.

“But –”

“When Pip says no, he means it,” Cloe said. “Not that it ever stopped Clem.”

“It’ll be hard enough just getting permission for Damon to land after that stunt he pulled getting you out. The Hazler police have you on their most-wanted list and the moment you step through any immigration control point, you’ll wind up standing next to David in front of the firing squad.”

Cam shrugged. “If that’s my fate then so be it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“No, Cam’s right,” Loraine said. “It’s us against the planet and we need as many *us* as we can muster.”

“That gives me an idea,” Damon said, picking up his phone. “I think someone might still owe us a favour.”

“Who?”

“Go and have some coffee and I’ll bring him over when he arrives.”

Loraine pulled out her phone after taking a sip of coffee, giving Joel’s number another try. This time she was rewarded with a ring tone.

“Hello, this Joel’s phone.”

“Oh, um, is that you Hamati? It’s Loraine here, I take it you’ve found him.”

“Yes, Joel and Willy safe.”

“Can I speak to him please?”

“Sorry, that not possible right now.”

“What? Why?”

“Is difficult to explain, but he safe and sound so don’t worry. He happy, has found answer to DNA riddle. Go rescue David and I tell you afterwards.”

“Should I send a shuttle to pick you all up? We can do with all the help we can get on Hazler.”

“No, can’t do that. You go, Hamati talk later. Goodbye.”

Loraine stared at her phone, not quite believing that he’d hung up on her.

“Is everything okay?” Cloe asked.

“I, um, I don’t know. Hamati answered Joel’s phone so obviously he’s found him, but he sounded strange and wouldn’t let me talk to him. He said he’d tell us everything after we’d rescued David and then hung up.”

“How odd.”

“You should trust him,” Pip said, “and I’m not just saying that because he’s my friend. I’m sensing something, a premonition perhaps, but as you know they’re always very vague for me.”

“Don’t let your coffee go cold,” Cam said. Loraine glared at him again but drained her cup.

The clumping of heavy boots approached the cafeteria, a sound that took Cam a few moments to recognise as everyone in the seminary went barefoot. He turned as Damon led General Piper into the room.

“You should’ve called me sooner, Pip,” Piper said. “We could’ve nipped this whole nonsense in the bud.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think.”

Cam looked at Loraine, expecting her to bite Pip’s head off for not thinking, but she didn’t. He sighed.

“It can’t be helped now. I can get you past the authorities on Hazler and then we can see about rescuing your friend, okay?”

“Yes, of course, thanks for coming!”

“Always a pleasure, Pip, you know that, particularly when I get the chance to upset the applecarts of civilian bureaucrats.”

Loraine leapt up and gave Piper a hug. “At last we’re getting somewhere!”

“Steady down, lass, we still have a lot of delicate work ahead of us. I doubt the Hazler police will let us just walk in and take David from them.”

“No, of course not, I didn’t mean –”

Piper grinned, silencing her.

“Where’s Colonel Gallagher?” Pip asked.

“I sent him on ahead to smooth the way.” Piper grimaced, wondering whether putting *Gallagher* and *smooth* together was an oxymoron. He turned to Cam. “I hear someone wants you just as dead as David.”

“Yeah, my mother.”

Cloe gasped. “Surely not.”

“I’m an embarrassment to the family on account of my relationship with Davo.”

“How ridiculous, particularly in this day and age.”

“*This day and age* never made it to Echelon Hills.”

Piper handed Cam a large paper bag. “I hope I got your size right.”

“What’s this?”

“Your uniform; you’re now Ensign Cam.”

“Gosh, thanks! I, um, I won’t have to wear boots, will I?”

Piper grinned. “I didn’t think that’d work, which is why I chose a naval ranking for you.”

Cam blushed. “Thanks.”

“Damon will stay here; we need someone on the outside to free us when we’re all captured and locked up.”

“It’ll also divert suspicion if someone calls the seminary or has a trace on the *Renewal*,” Damon said.

“Which they will if they have any sense.”

Cam stripped off the hoodie and jeans he’d been wearing since fleeing Hazler in what seemed a lifetime ago.

“I’ll look after those for you,” Damon said, taking them as he pulled on his new uniform.

“Perfect,” Piper said. “I take it you can swim.”

“Of course; any friend of Davo wouldn’t last long if he couldn’t.”

“Great, in our navy that’s all an ensign needs to know.”

* * *

“Excalibur, this is Oswald Control, you’re clear to land, General.”

“Roger, Excalibur out.”

Piper began his descent before turning back to the others.

“If Gallagher’s done his job properly, we should be able to just walk straight through and into a military transport with no questions asked. If not, act stupid and follow my lead.”

“Cam won’t have to act,” Loraine whispered.

Cam turned away, covering his face and moaning. “You’re right; this is all my own stupid fault.”

“What’s done is done and can’t be undone,” Cloe said.

“Unless you’re a damn singleton,” Loraine said. “I have a feeling we’re going to need Joel’s talent before we’re through with this. Why’d he have to go running off?”

“There are greater forces at work here,” Pip said. “Of that I’m sure.”

Loraine looked at him, an outburst teetering on the brink, but in the end she just nodded.

The *Excalibur* touched down with barely a quiver. General Piper stepped briskly out as soon as he’d opened the hatch, waving the others to follow.

At the entrance to the terminal, a soldier stood to attention and saluted. “Go straight on through, sir. Colonel Gallagher is waiting for you on the other side.”

“Thank you, Corporal.”

“Sir.”

Inside, the customs officials waved them through to the door marked *Valet Parking* where Colonel Gallagher stood twiddling his thumbs alongside a large troop carrier. He turned to look at Cam, a grin spreading across his face. “Who’s the monkey in the sailor suit?”

“Gallagher, meet Ensign Cam. If he lives up to expectations, I’m thinking of making him your replacement.”

Gallagher chuckled. “Does Walker know about this?”

“Of course not. Now everyone get in before someone notices.”

As if on cue, a policeman walked up to Piper. “Excuse me, General, but are these your prisoners?”

“No, they’re civilian VIPs we’re taking on a guided tour of the naval base here.”

The constable gave Cam a quick glance, nodding as he took in his naval uniform and well-tanned bare feet. “Oh, right, of course, well enjoy your visit then.”

“Thank you, Constable.”

The constable turned away, walking towards a man in black standing at the far end of the terminal building.

“Sheeze,” Gallagher said once the constable was out of earshot. “The things we do.”

“Shut it, Gallagher. Just get in and drive.”

“Where are we going?”

“Scott Davies wants us to meet him and the Attorney General at the café on the corner of Profit Street and Doubloon Boulevard.”

“I know the place. Crappy service but the coffee’s good.”

“Oh no,” Cam said. “That’s one of my parents’ cafés.”

Piper moaned. “Are the staff likely to recognise you?”

“I don’t think so; I haven’t been there since I was ten.”

“Well, just keep your head down and don’t say anything.”

“The story of my life.”

“Poor Cam,” Cloe said, patting him on the shoulder. Loraine glared at him again.

Scott waved them over to a large table in a sunken alcove at the back of the café. Sitting next to him was a bulbous man in a grey double-breasted suit.

“Everyone, this is Simon Greaves, the Hazler Attorney General.”

“Thank you for helping us,” Pip said, shaking his hand and introducing the others.

“So far I don’t seem to have been able to do anything to aid your cause.”

“Where’s Owen?” Cloe asked.

Scott grinned. “Out on the divot course trying to nail any judges he might know.”

“So what are our chances of a reprieve?”

“Very good,” Simon said, “but unfortunately it’s only likely to be posthumous.”

“Good grief. Is there nothing we can do?”

“Legally, if Owen can find someone to issue an injunction between holes at the tournament, then yes, otherwise I’m afraid that’s it. Of course, if one were to look beyond the law, there are possibilities, one might say, but risks as well, grave risks.”

“David being shot at dawn is a pretty grave risk in my book.”

“Hush,” Piper said as a waiter approached the table.

“Are you ready to order now?”

“Long blacks all round,” Piper said before anyone else could speak. Cam looked about to say something but Cloe poked him in the ribs. He covered his face as the waiter glanced at him.

“Thank you, General, they won’t be long.”

“Aren’t long blacks *supposed* to be long?” Loraine asked, chuckling once the waiter had gone.

“Joel would’ve been roaring his head off under the table by now,” Pip said.

“Yes, he would. Hamati said he’d found the answer to his DNA riddle. What do you think that means?”

Pip stared into space for several long moments. “It means the message Roly left for him has been received and understood. Beyond that, I don’t know.”

Loraine again looked about to explode but acquiesced under Pip’s gentle smile. “Do we at least know where they’re holding David?”

“Yes,” Scott said. “He’s under police guard on the top floor of the Bayview General Hospital. It seems they want to keep him fit and healthy before killing him.”

“Excellent,” Piper said, turning to Gallagher. “Did you get the stuff I asked you to?”

“Of course.”

“Here’s the plan. They change to the night shift at eight o’clock, so that’s when we hit as those finishing will be thinking about dinner and those coming on will still be half asleep. Gallagher and, um, Loraine will be disguised as hospital staff while the rest of us create a distraction.”

“I’m not hearing any of this,” the Attorney General said.

“Of course not, but you’ll be coming with us as our insurance policy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m not, but I’m sure the penalty for holding a public servant against his will for a few hours couldn’t be any greater than that for breaking out a death row prisoner. With any luck they’ll give us concurrent sentences.”

“How do we get in?” Scott asked. “I’m sure the front desk won’t take kindly to a bunch of misfits causally wandering up to their most secure ward.”

Gallagher grinned. “One of the attendants has *volunteered* to let us in through the delivery dock at the back. From there we take a service lift to the air conditioning plant room and the fire stairs back down one level to a disused operating theatre. Once we have David, we go back the same way.”

At that moment the waiter returned with their coffees. “I hope these are to your liking, General.”

“I’m sure they will be,” Piper said, placing a high denomination note in the waiter’s poorly disguised open palm.

“Yuck,” Cam said once the waiter had gone. “I hate Mother’s long blacks.”

“Drink it, Ensign, and that’s an order.”

“All right.”

Piper glared at him expectantly.

“All right, sir.”

“See, Gallagher, he’s a fast learner. You watch, in a few years he’ll be sitting behind Walker’s desk.”

“God help us.”

As they stood to leave, a man in black at the next table pulled his hood tightly around his head.

* * *

A delivery van was just pulling out of the hospital’s back gate as they arrived, the area being otherwise deserted. A nervous young man peered out of the loading dock as Gallagher led them in.

“Is everything set?”

“Yes. The money?”

“It’ll be in your account first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“Always glad to help a young lad in distress.”

“What was that all about?” Piper asked as the lift doors closed.
“Not drugs I hope.”

“No, gambling debts. He got in over his head at the casino and some unpleasant men were pestering him.”

“One of these days your little schemes are going to come unstuck, you know that, don’t you?”

“Let’s just hope it’s not today, *sir*.”

The lift opened onto the air conditioning plant room. Gallagher emptied the sack he’d been carrying, revealing an assortment of clothing. Stripping off his uniform, he donned a pair of blue surgical trousers, matching tee-shirt and a white coat. Rummaging through the pile, he pulled out a stethoscope and clipped it around his neck.

“Loraine,” Piper said, “the nurse’s uniform is for you.”

“Nurse?”

“This is Hazler, remember. Making you the doctor and Gallagher the nurse wouldn’t have worked.”

“All right, I suppose. Is there somewhere private I can change?”

“Around there behind that heat exchanger.”

“Excellent, you both look the part,” Piper said when she returned.
“Now we just need to prepare our distraction. Do it, Gallagher.”

Gallagher grabbed hold of Cam, wrapping one arm around his chest while wrenching his bicep with the other. Cam screamed as his shoulder popped out.

“What the hell is this?” Loraine shouted.

“Hush, we have to make it realistic. Okay, let’s go down.”

After descending the fire stair to the old operating theatre, Piper led the still-yelping Cam through into the corridor while the others remained behind.

“Quickly,” Piper said to the startled floor nurse. “He fell on the stairs and dislocated his shoulder.”

“Let me see,” the nurse said. “Oh my, that’s a bad one. Now I want you to be a brave little boy and stop your crying while I pop it back in, okay?”

While the other nurses gathered around to watch, Gallagher and Loraine pushed a gurney past them, dashing down the corridor to the end where a bored policeman sat outside one of the private wards.

“Where’s, um, Collins?” Gallagher asked while glancing at the folder he was holding.

“In here, but no-one’s allowed to see him.”

“Don’t be stupid.” He pulled a transparency from the folder. “See this? His spleen has a small tear right down the bottom here. We didn’t see it on the original scans, but if it’s not treated right away he’ll be dead within hours.”

“But he’s being executed tomorrow morning, what difference does it make?”

“Are you daft, Constable?”

“What do you mean?”

“If he dies tomorrow morning in front of the firing squad, everyone’s happy and can get on with their lives as normal, except him of course, but anyway, if he dies tonight from a ruptured spleen there’ll be a coronial inquest and I know for sure this city’s coroner takes a dim view to police brutality, a very dim view. Do you understand now?”

“I, um, I guess so.”

“Good, well don’t just sit there, come and help us get him on the gurney.”

“All right.”

David looked up as they entered, gawking when he saw who the nurse was. Loraine held her finger to her lips, hoping that the policeman didn’t see it.

“It’ll be easier if you unlock the straps,” Gallagher said to the policeman. “You do have a key, don’t you?”

“Um, no.”

“We’ll do it the hard way then.”

He pulled a scalpel from his pocket, using it to slice through the wrist and ankle straps with the precision of a surgeon.

“Right, I’ll take his shoulders, you grab his waist and, Sister, you can do the legs. One, two, three...”

With David safely on the gurney, Gallagher patted the constable on the shoulder. "Well done, you've saved his life so he'll be fit and well to be shot tomorrow."

"Thanks."

"Now here comes the tricky part," Gallagher said to Loraine as they approached the nurses' station, but they were in luck as all the nurses were still fussing over Cam. Heads down and looking on a mission, they pushed the gurney past and down to the operating theatre. Once inside, David leapt off, wrapping Loraine in a hug.

"Don't celebrate yet," Gallagher said, "we still have to get out of here and off the planet."

A moment later Piper and Cam joined them, Cam holding his shoulder but no longer yelping.

"You'll make a fine soldier, Ensign." Gallagher went to slap him across the shoulders but pulled back at the last moment.

"You're a bastard, you know?" Loraine said. "A large-as-life out-and-out bastard."

"Funny," Piper said, "lots of people have called him that. Just be glad he's on our side."

Cam and David locked eyes, smiles spreading across both their faces in spite of Cam's pain.

"Come on," Gallagher said, holding open the door to the fire stair, "let's go before someone out there puts two and two together."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Cam asked David as they stepped onto the loading dock.

"A whole lot better than you by the look of things."

"Hush," Piper said.

Something moved in the darkness between the dock and the troop carrier. A moment later bright lights came on all around them, momentarily blinding them.

"Move back against the wall with your hands above your head," a voice said from behind the lights.

Cam struggled to raise his injured arm, getting it only as far as shoulder height.

"You, sailor boy, both arms up NOW!"

"I can't, I dislocated my shoulder."

“There’s no such thing as *can’t* in my book,” the burly policeman said, stepping forward and kneeing him in the stomach. Cam fell to the ground, crying out in pain as he jarred his damaged shoulder.

“All right, stay on the ground but spread your arms and legs so I can see them.”

Cam complied as the policeman put a gun to his head.

Gallagher whipped out his scalpel, holding it against the Attorney General’s neck. “Back off or I’ll cut his throat.”

The policeman laughed. “Do your damndest, Doctor; politicians are easily replaced but I’m guessing sailor boy here isn’t just some disposable deckhand. His feet may look the part but the rest of him doesn’t and he’ll have a bullet through his head before you can draw so much as a drop of blood.”

“No!” David cried.

“You know him, do you Collins? Let me guess, this is your lover boy Cameron Dunn; his mother will be delighted when I tell her I’ve killed you both.” He squeezed on the trigger.

“Wait,” Piper said, turning to Gallagher. “Drop your knife and let him go.”

Gallagher glared at Piper, shaking his head before lowering his gaze and dropping the knife.

The policeman grinned. “Step aside, Mr Greaves; now you can formally witness the executions.”

As he did, four more armed policemen came forward, pointing their weapons at the others.

“Hey look, the one done up as a doctor is General Gallagher! There are plenty of people around here who’d be glad to see a bullet through your head.”

“It’s Colonel Gallagher now,” Gallagher said.

“General Walker got wise to you, did he? A pity he didn’t boot you all the way down to Private, but no matter.”

“Enough of the chit-chat,” the burly policeman said, now standing but keeping his gun trained on Cam. “Do any of you have last requests?”

“Um, let us go?” David asked.

“You’ve just earned yourself the first bullet, smart arse. Anyone else?”

“Who tipped you off?” Piper asked.

“A fair question, General, as I’m sure you’ll be meeting him very soon. He was a tall man in a hooded black cassock; called himself *The Ferryman*.”

“No, he couldn’t!” Loraine shouted. “You’re lying!”

The policeman shrugged. “It’s the truth, lass; the plain and simple truth. He said as much as it pained him, sacrifices had to be made for the greater good.”

Loraine turned to Pip, but he was looking up and to the left over the policemen’s heads. “It’s happening again, that hollowness, only stronger this time.”

“Look!” she said, following his gaze.

Beyond the glare of the floodlights, a shimmering glow hung some five metres above the ground. As they watched, it began to take the form of a dolphin.

“It’s just a trick, ignore it,” the burly policeman said. “Take aim and on my word...”

“*These are not the fugitives you seek,*” said a voice from all around them, a young boy’s voice.

The policemen all looked at each other, confused expressions on their faces.

“*These are not the fugitives you seek.*”

“These are not the fugitives we seek,” the policemen said in unison.

“*Be on your way and safe travelling.*”

“Be on your way and safe travelling.”

They stood two on each side of the troop carrier, ushering them on. David helped Cam up before following the others on board.

“Safe travelling,” the burly policeman said, smiling and waving as Gallagher started the vehicle.

“That was amazing, Pip!” David said once they were underway.

“It, it wasn’t me. There was someone else, someone much more powerful.”

Loraine’s phone rang.

“*Is Hamati here. Are you all safe now?*”

“Um, yes. Did you, was it you?”

“No, someone else, someone special. Will talk later, just wanted to be sure you’re safe. Goodbye.”

Before she could say any more, he’d closed the call.

“This is weird,” Cam said.

Insurance Policy

Supreme Councillor Michael Chandler leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head. “This has been one enormous shamble, hasn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Simon Greaves said. “At least we’ve forced this Pasha to show his hand.”

“And as a result you have five policemen suffering deep psychiatric trauma and a public execution that had to be cancelled because the star of the show has gone missing. But I always thought killing that Collins boy was a mistake anyway, let alone everyone else. Dead men tell no tales and right now we need as many tale-tellers as we can find.”

“But killing is the Hazler way.”

“It’s high time Hazler changed its ways then.”

“At least we now know he’s from the dolphin clan,” the man in a black-hooded cassock at the back of the room said.

“Yes, Charon, the lesser of two evils, I suppose.”

“If he’s anything like Roly, it could be a pleasant change for the galaxy.”

“No, our democratic government is sacrosanct; Morgoth taught us that lesson big time. What I don’t understand is the Black Delphinidae’s harbouring him; at last report they were right behind the screening process. Hamati said –”

“Don’t talk to me about Hamati. I trusted him once long ago and it cost me my wife and daughter. What’s more surprising is the support they had from the military.”

“I had no inkling of Piper’s involvement,” General Walker said. “I’ll be convening the other Joint Chiefs of Staff for a disciplinary hearing first thing tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Chandler said, “not yet at any rate. Keep a close watch on Piper and Gallagher but don’t let on that you suspect anything.”

Walker nodded. “So where do we go from here?”

“The Tivinel overlords we arrested claim they have sufficient psychic powers to contain a boy Pasha,” Greaves said, “and are willing to help in return for their freedom.”

“That could be risky,” Charon said.

“No riskier than our present predicament. The security services will keep a tight rein on them.”

Chandler scratched his chin. “There’d be a public outcry if word got out that we’re setting them free after all my speeches condemning them and their actions on Ignus.”

“Report it as a mass breakout; *mind-bending Tivinel overwhelm their guards* or something.”

“That’s plausible, I suppose. Walker?”

“The military would have no objections.”

“Very well then, but if it backfires on us we’ll all be in deep shit.”

“I’m sure there’ll be a convenient scapegoat we can blame if it comes to that,” Greaves said.

Chandler nodded. “What other angles can we try? Any idea who the boy’s parents might be?”

“They’d have to be a pure-blood Tivinel and a pure-blood Barungi,” Charon said. “How old is he, any idea?”

“His voice sounded young,” Greaves said, “maybe eight or ten.”

Chandler nodded. “The Barungi returned to Huntress ten years ago so that’d be about right. None of the Tivinel on Ignus could have done it, as they were unable to leave the planet then, and the overlords have returned negative swabs in the screening. It must have been an overlord we haven’t caught or from somewhere else we don’t know about.”

“What about that one from Earth who caused the ruckus last year?”

“Tristan, yes, I’d forgotten about him. I wonder, at that ceremony when the Barungi returned to Huntress I’m sure there was a delegation from Earth.” Chandler swung around to face his ultranet

terminal. “Let me just find the guest list – here it is – well there you go, a Doctor Tristan Gosling from AusScience was amongst them.”

“So he was in the right place at the right time, but did he have the right genes?”

“Simon, contact your counterparts on Earth and see if they have any DNA samples from him.”

“I’ll do it right now.”

He pulled out his phone, speaking for a few minutes before closing the call and turning back to the others.

“They have some hair samples which they’re running the screening test on now.”

“That’ll prove interesting, I’m sure,” Charon said.

“I thought Tristan’s motivation had been to prevent the birth of another Pasha,” Walker said. “Why would he go and father one himself?”

“Perhaps as an insurance policy; if his plan to change the course of history failed, better to have one he could control than a wildcard stranger.”

“He didn’t take his own dying into account.”

“No-one ever does.”

The Attorney General’s phone beeped with an incoming message. “It’s a positive swab.”

“So that’s it then; he’s the Tivinel father. What about the mother? Hamati’s screening of the Barungi has so far been negative.”

Walker flicked his fingers. “Hamati must know who she is! That’s why he’s suddenly changed allegiance and is now protecting her and the boy.”

Charon pulled back his hood, revealing an icy glare that sent shivers down Walker’s spine. “Yes, he does. They called her the Witch Queen of the West.”

“Do you remember her name?”

“It’s a name I’ll never forget for as long as I draw breath. Esmeralda.”

* * *

Esmeralda handed Hamati a cup of herbal tea. “It’s been a long time since we last did this.”

“Much too long; where were you all that time?”

She took a sip. “There was much chaos and panic when the star dimmer broke. I followed my group of westerners through the portal into Sheol but we became separated from everyone else. We stumbled upon the Tivinel thought-weavers who were creating their City of Towers and stayed with them for a while – who knows how long in that place where time doesn’t matter – but when the politics became unpleasant, Charon took us further downstream on his ferry where he helped us weave a place of our own.

“That’s where we stayed all those millennia until word reached us that our planet had been restored and the half-caste Pip would be opening the portal for our return. We were towards the end of the queue as we passed through but you were so caught up in the moment you didn’t see me.”

She closed her eyes, letting her mind go back to that fateful day.

Esmeralda blinked at the sudden daylight as she stepped out onto solid ground for the first time in three million years. Two Gomeral, one young and the other elderly, helped her up.

She moved to the side with her friends, standing apart from the other groups of Barungi all chattering in wonder at their home-world’s restoration.

Suddenly everyone hushed as Hamati emerged from the portal and turned to the young Gomeral.

“You have kept your word, bearer of the Black Amulet,” he said in the Gomeral tongue. “I hold your oath fulfilled and return our hostage to your care.”

Surprising her, the Gomeral replied in the Barungi tongue. “I am honoured to have been of service.”

“May the grace of the Black Dolphin be with you both.”

As Hamati bowed, concluding the ceremony, Esmeralda turned to her companions. “We should return to the west as soon as we can.”

“I have a ship,” a voice said from behind her. “Perhaps I can be of some assistance.”

She turned, looking up to see a young Tivinel man standing before her. “Why thank you.”

He led them to the edge of the village where a great many spacecraft were parked. Opening the hatch on a small cruiser, he waved them on board.

“I didn’t think any Tivinel were still alive,” Esmeralda said. “Are you a survivor of the apocalypse?”

“No, I was born on a planet in a distant galaxy. There are few of us left now, too few, but if my work succeeds perhaps I can change that.”

The man grinned but said no more as he prepared for take-off.

“This part of the planet was in darkness and covered by ice for much of the time,” the man said as they descended towards the remains of the west coast village, “so the houses here fared better than those in the east. A lot of work will still be needed to make them habitable, but my friends and I will be happy to help for a while.”

“I’m most grateful, but before I can accept your help you must tell me your name.”

“Of course, my lady, I’ve been most remiss. I’m Tristan.”

Hamati coughed, spilling his tea. “Did you say Tristan?”

“You know him?”

“We met briefly under, how should I say, unpleasant circumstances. Did you know of his plans?”

“Not immediately, otherwise I’d have never let him do what he did.”

“You’re not saying –”

Esmeralda nodded, taking another sip of tea before closing her eyes again.

Esmeralda woke in the early hours of the morning, something tingling uncomfortably in her telepathic perception. Leaving her partly-repaired house, she walked towards that source of unease, finding herself under starlight in the old cemetery where a backhoe sat idling.

“Who’s there?”

“You have quite a family history, Esmeralda.” Tristan said.

She finally saw the open graves before her. “What have you done?”

“Just seeking the truth, my dear. Come and I’ll show you.”

Hesitating for a moment but not sensing any malice, she stepped around behind the backhoe to where Tristan was crouched in front of an instrument with a glowing screen.

“I have quite a family history too, except for a great-grandparent with too much of a liking for Earthlings, but you have the genes that could make good that error.”

Before she could move, Tristan was on top of her, his strength and weight too much for her to resist. Suddenly he was inside her, thrusting, throbbing. Pain shot through her like a red-hot poker, whether it was physical or psychic she didn’t know. Defenceless and broken, her mind turned inward, shutting out the world in a void of blackness and despair.

Little by little her senses returned. It was over, now she felt only numbness and a dull ache spreading outwards from her core.

“If my plans succeed this will have never happened,” he said, releasing her, “but should they go awry, you’re my insurance policy. This child you now bear may well be the key to the survival of our peoples.”

“Are you completely mad?”

“Perhaps, but you know I speak the truth. The Tivinel are all but spent and soon the Barungi will fade into oblivion too. Gomeral run the galaxy now but we can push back, we must push back.”

He stood, switching off his instrument and packing it into its box.

“For now I take my leave, Esmeralda, but guard my child with your life. In return, my people will provide regular food drops but you must contact no-one; no-one must know you’re here. Carry out no further repairs to the exterior of your houses, this village must look unoccupied. Is that understood?”

“What, what right do you have –”

“I have every right; you and your friends will die if you disobey. Trust me; I will know if any of you so much as put one foot out of place.”

Esmeralda rubbed her face, surprised to find it wet with tears. “He was true to his word; every few weeks, we’d wake to find ample supplies of food on our doorsteps. Even before my son was born I knew what it was I was carrying, but I had to be brave.”

Hamati wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly as more tears flowed down her cheeks.

“I hated him; you can’t believe how much I hated him. I can scarcely believe it myself. But when Caleb was born everything changed; he’s the most adorable son you could possibly imagine and Tristan was right, I’ll guard that child with my life.”

She straightened herself up.

“Hamati, if you’ve come to take him from me, you will fail, I promise you that. You will die before you can lay one finger on him.”

“No, I could never do such a thing, for I’ve felt his presence and it’s a wonder to behold. Did you know Tristan is dead? He can’t harm you anymore.”

“I suspected as much when the food drops stopped but I didn’t know for certain. Caleb felt it though, I’m sure.”

Hamati glanced at the remains of the meals on the table. “Yet you still have food.”

Esmeralda laughed. “We may have cowered but we’re not without guile. We get by well enough.”

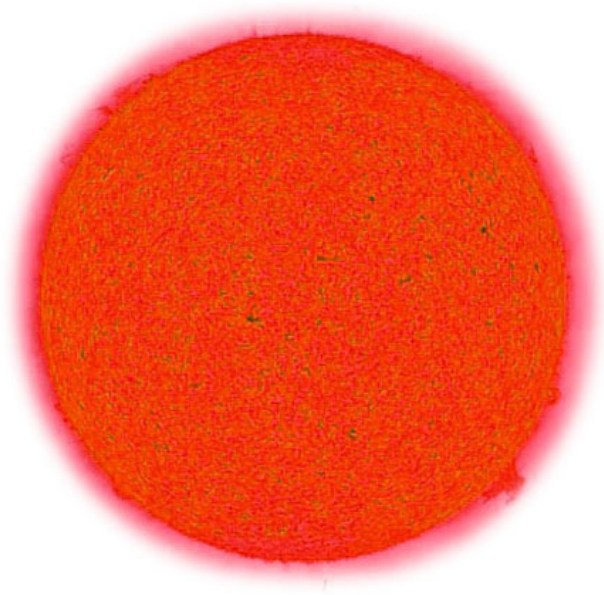
“That I can truly believe.”

She kissed him on the forehead. “Your young friends are with Caleb now; shall we join them?”

“Yes,” Hamati said, but his thoughts had turned back millions of years to those heady days of Drago’s star dimmer and the Gomerall uprising it caused. With the birth of a new Pasha, he couldn’t help wondering if the same might be about to happen again.

Part Two

The Star Dimmer



Inundation

Long ago, on the planet now known as Huntress...

The water surged again, pounding against the levee in a breaking wave sending foam and spray over the top.

“More sandbags over here, quickly!” Pedro yelled into the howling wind and rain.

Two Gomeral boys came running towards him, pushing a laden wheelbarrow through the mud and slush behind the levee.

“Can we help?” Hamish, the older of the two, asked.

“Yes; you see how I’m crisscrossing the bags to give it strength?”

“Uh huh.”

“You two can do the same starting from the other end.”

The boys set to work, strengthening the barrier against the onslaught of tide and storm. Once satisfied with their workmanship, Pedro moved further along the wall, looking for weak spots. Seeing a torn bag that had almost emptied its contents, he returned to grab a replacement and had it in place just as the water surged again.

“How’s it going?” Hamati asked as he came up behind him.

“We’re holding but only just. If the surges get any bigger –”

“Just do your best, Pedro, that’s all we can ask.”

Pedro spied another weak spot further down the wall where water was starting to push through. “Hamish, Jordan, as soon as you’re finished, refill your barrow and help me down there.”

Hamish grinned, giving him the thumbs up.

“The boys are enjoying it at least,” Hamati said, following Pedro down to the new breach.

“Only because it’s something new for them and they still hold out hope that their efforts won’t be in vain. The way sea levels are rising

and storms are becoming more frequent and powerful, soon no amount of sandbagging will hold it back.”

Hamati gripped Pedro’s elbow. “Without giving away anything of the future, what would you have me do?”

“Focus on your subspace research; that’s how, um, other civilisations have overcome these sorts of problems.”

Hamati nodded. “I will, of course, but I’ve struck an impasse. I know there’s something more, something I’m not seeing –”

“I can’t give you any technical answers, you know that, but perhaps you should swallow your pride and compare notes with the Tivinel researchers.”

Hamati grimaced. “No, I can’t do that, not unless I have no other choice.”

“You were happy enough to collaborate with them in the early stages of your work.”

“That was before Drago and the war. Now, anything I gave them would just be used to make weapons for killing more Barungi.”

Pedro sighed.

“There you are!” called a voice from the gloom. A moment later Elsa came running up to them, wrapping them both in a hug. “The tide has turned and the radar’s showing the storm’s moving out to sea. We did it!”

Pedro looked back at the sandbags, making sure they were still holding. “We’ve won the battle but not the war; the seas will keep rising and the storms will intensify until your pig-headed uncle and his Tivinel counterparts bury their respective hatchets and...”

“And what?”

“Sorry, I almost said something I shouldn’t have.”

“How, um, how do you know when there’s something you shouldn’t say? Surely if it was so easy to change the future, just your being here would’ve done that already.”

“I don’t know, it’s just a gut feeling, I suppose, yet there’s something else, something I came across back when I was working on my doctorate, or should I say when Peter was working on his.”

Elsa gave him an inquisitive look.

“Sometimes I think I’m just one of Peter’s thought bubbles that escaped, but even that metaphor’s tied in with the idea of quantum

fluctuations. The physicists back then only thought it applied to particles but what I, um, we discovered was that it worked for time as well.”

Hamati’s eyes lit up. “Of course, but if that were the case –”

A bright flash of lightning seared the gloom, followed moments later by the crack and roar of a strike that was uncomfortably close.

“I thought you said the storm was moving away,” Hamati said to Elsa.

“It was, but –”

Pedro followed her gaze out across the ridge separating the farmlands from the sea. “Holy shit!”

Illuminated all too clearly now by the setting sun, a huge mass of greenish-grey thunderhead churned and swelled, sending down a proboscis into the sea like a giant sucking insect. More lightning flashed as the waterspout pulsed and thickened.

Faint at first, but growing rapidly louder, came the roar of water as a tsunami-like wave tore its way up-river, sweeping aside everything in its path. Above the ruckus, the screams of those unfortunate enough to be caught in its path could just be heard as they too were swept away.

“Run!” Pedro yelled, grabbing hold of Elsa’s hand.

Hamati followed as they dashed through the field of crops, seeking higher ground as the wall of water sliced through the levee bank, taking less than a second to obliterate their hours of sandbagging work. Seawater spread out across the land, rising to waist height as they splashed their way forward.

Elsa tripped, falling face-first into the surging water, her hand wrenched from Pedro’s grip.

“No!” Hamati shouted, diving into the murk.

Momentarily stunned, Pedro was about to do the same when Elsa’s head broke the surface. He leapt over to her, wrapping both arms around her before she could be swept away. Hamati, now covered head to toe in mud, wedged himself on her other side as the rush of water eased and slowly began to subside.

All around them, as far as they could see in the still-gloomy light, seawater covered the farmland.

“Not everything’s been flattened,” Pedro said, looking at the foliage still poking out above the water.

“Maybe so,” Hamati said, “but as soon as the salt permeates the roots everything will be dead and nothing will grow here for decades to come.”

The storm, its fury spent, dissipated as quickly as it had formed, leaving an eerie calm and silence in its wake as they joined the surviving Barungi and Gomeral trudging their way back home across the devastated landscape.

* * *

“We were damn lucky no-one was killed,” Hamati said as Pedro and Elsa joined him the next morning to inspect the damage. “My, what a mess.”

In several places, the entire levee bank had washed away, allowing the high tide to cover hundreds of hectares of what had been prime agricultural land. The crops that hadn’t been flattened by the rush of water were already withering from the salt inundation.

“The weather experts are mystified by that storm cell,” Elsa said. “They reckon it formed in only a few minutes and dissipated just as quickly.”

Pedro nodded. “Small-scale weather systems are inherently chaotic. With the right mix of pressure gradient, humidity, temperature and spin, anything’s possible.”

“We should repair and strengthen the levee,” Hamati said, “although with the damage the salt water has done to the soil, there’s really not much point now.”

“Are there any salt-tolerant crops you could plant?”

“I’ll have to ask our farmers.”

“Salt bush and mangroves are all it’s good for now,” Charon said, walking up behind them.

“They don’t sound very appetising, Dad,” Elsa said, giving him a quick hug.

Charon shrugged. “If the sea level keeps rising at the current rate, in a few short years the entire flood plain up as far as Benton will be inundated.”

Hamati nodded, turning to Pedro. "You say something to do with subspace will provide the answer to this."

"In the long term, yes, but given how bad it's already become I reckon you'll need some pretty drastic short-term measures as well."

"Drago's keen to deploy the Tivinel's star dimmer once they've figured out how to make the damn thing work, but I can't help thinking that'll only make things worse. We really need to stop burning fossil fuels."

"Uh huh."

"You and your damned future, Pedro!" Hamati looked around once more at the devastation. "I suppose I really don't have any choice now but to confer with the Tivinel researchers, do I?"

"That'd be the best course of action, I think."

"It'll have to be on neutral territory. Drago won't allow Barungi to go anywhere higher than fifty metres above sea level, and that's the old sea level before the damn thing started rising."

"What about Benton?" Elsa said. "You could use one of the rooms in Dad's pub."

"The *Ferryman's Arms*?"

"That can be arranged," Charon said. "I'll make sure you won't be overheard."

Hamati scratched his head. "How will we convince the Tivinel to come?"

"Pedro and I can do that," Elsa said. "Who amongst them do you most trust?"

"Glamming was good to work with and certainly knows his stuff. Last I heard, he was based in Dartmoor."

"That's the village just below the volcano temple, isn't it?" Pedro asked.

"Yes. You'll have to be careful; the Unity League has spies everywhere up there."

"I know someone who can keep watch," Charon said, scratching his chin, "but yes, you'll need to keep your wits about you. Don't talk to strangers."

Elsa gave him another hug. "No, Daddy."

“Indentured Gomerl slaves are free to come and go without question, but wear your identity cards at all times. Grab whatever you need and meet me on the ferry in an hour’s time.”

Elsa gave Pedro a wink before running back to the village. Sighing, he turned and followed in her wake.

* * *

Charon stood alongside the gangplank, checking the tickets of the Barungi workers as they boarded his ferry. Normally buoyant and cheerful, today they were sullen and quiet, as if the storm and inundation had knocked every last vestige of hope from them. From what Pedro knew of their future, they had good reason to feel that way.

He and Elsa followed the last of the workers on board.

“I’d like you both to go out on the bow and keep watch for debris in the water,” Charon said as he untied the ropes. “It’ll be a slow trip but I still don’t want to hit anything.”

Pedro nodded, taking Elsa’s hand as they stepped onto the foredeck.

“They make a lovely couple,” one of the Barungi workers said to Charon.

“Too lovely, I fear.”

The river was chocolate brown with mud carried from the farmlands by the receding waters, but there was no obvious floating debris big enough to damage the vessel. After passing through the narrow gorge between Kurramurra village and the inland flood plain, the extent of the damage became obvious. The once-green fields were now a sea of mud extending as far as the eye could see, with bogged or overturned farm machinery dotting the landscape.

“You’re being very quiet,” Elsa said, squeezing Pedro’s hand.

“Huh? Yeah, I suppose I am.”

“Is the future really that bleak for us?”

Pedro remained silent.

“What was it you were saying yesterday about being a thought bubble that escaped?”

Pedro smiled, glad for the change of subject. “Peter’s work suggested the possibility of quantum fluctuations in time, bubbles of existence in which events play out differently. He called them time cusps and I was created in one.”

“Created? How?”

“He and Billy Collins caused a temporal paradox when they saved one of their friends from being killed by a Barradhim operative and I was a by-product of its resolution, condemned to a life in the shadows until, well, until another friend saved me.”

Pedro stared down into the water, pretending to look for debris but in his mind’s eye seeing the smiling face of Jim Hamilton, the Eridanian boy who’d offered compassion and love in a world filled with hatred.

“You’re crying,” Elsa said.

“No, just remembering a dear friend who’s passed on.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be; he found true happiness at the end.” He looked up at her, smiling. “Perhaps that’s my fate too.”

Around the river’s next bend they passed the limit of the inundation, with unblemished green fields now ahead on each side. Bird calls could once again be heard and in the distance, the sound of a harvester at work drifted on the light breeze. From within the cabin, the Barungi workers began chattering to themselves, the veil of despair lifted for the moment. Charon opened the throttle on the ferry’s engine, sending it surging forward through now clear water.

Ahead rose the mountains of the Tivinel heartland. From there, Drago’s expanding network of roads, cities and industry radiated north, south and west over the rolling hills, spewing out the carbon dioxide and other fumes that were rapidly poisoning the planet.

Charon cut the engine as the ferry approached the Benton wharf, with Pedro and Elsa handling the ropes as it docked. In their usual style, the Barungi workers left the vessel in single file, heading to their respective workplaces just below Drago’s fifty-metre elevation limit.

“Do you want to drive up to Dartmoor?” Charon asked Elsa.

“No, I think we’ll walk.” She patted Pedro’s bare stomach. “This one needs some exercise.”

Pedro pulled in his tummy while thrusting out his chest. “No I don’t, but walking will be nice, I think.”

“Keep your identity cards on show around your necks and don’t talk to anyone,” Charon said. “I’ll be in the tavern if you need me.”

Leaving the river behind, they passed through the centre of Benton, heads down and looking only a few paces forward as Gomerall slaves were expected to do. A new checkpoint manned by armed Tivinel guards stood on the western side of the town where the road to Dartmoor headed up into the hills.

“So where are you two going?” the nearest guard said, giving their cards a cursory glance.

“Dartmoor to do our master’s bidding,” Elsa said, keeping her head bowed.

“Make sure you’re back before dark.”

“Of course.”

The guard handed them each a day pass.

“What happens if we’re not?” Pedro asked Elsa once they were away from the barricade.

“The Unity League thugs are free to rape and kill us.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry; during daylight hours we’re protected by Drago’s edict and he takes a very dim view of anyone breaking that.”

“I’ll let you explain it to the thugs then.”

“Ha ha.”

“So much has changed here since I first arrived.”

“Yes and no; the evil was around then too but was mostly kept hidden under Roly’s rule.”

“Did Roly know about it?”

“He must have; he was a Pasha after all, but there’ll always be an underbelly in society and trying to suppress it will only make it worse.”

Pedro looked at her. “I never thought of it that way.”

“That’s because you’re a scientist at heart.”

Pedro gulped as they rounded a bend and came face to face with the black maw of the Deadfall Ridge tunnel. “I’d forgotten about this.”

“There were snipers here during the war but it’s fairly safe now.”

“*Fairly* safe?”

“Just walk purposefully like you’re on a mission and don’t look scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Good; you’ll be fine then.”

Before Pedro could argue further, she strode into the tunnel. Not daring to look around, he lowered his gaze and strode purposefully forward after her.

Once out of the tunnel, the road headed steeply uphill, with the thick forest canopy all but blocking out the sun. Pedro was glad when they topped the ridge and headed down through more open country, crossing a stream at a small bridge before turning right and following it up along its broadening valley.

Soon the forest gave way to farmland. Pedro chuckled as he remembered Cam stealing fruit from one of the orchards here, but suspected such an innocent act would be viewed rather dimly in what was clearly a police state now. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw the razor wire fence between the road and the trees.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing; there’s nothing funny here, not now.”

“Okay then.”

After a final burst of altitude through the backstreets of Dartmoor, they reached the town square where Pedro had once sought directions from a man munching on a bread roll amongst the busy market stalls. Now there were no bread rolls, no munching men nor even any market stalls; instead there was just a hoarding emblazoned with *Keep Out* signs.

“I wonder what’s happening here,” Pedro said to himself.

“They’re building a huge statue of Drago slaying Roly,” a man said from behind him. “We can’t wait for the unveiling!”

“Oh, I see; thanks.”

“My pleasure, young man.”

“Um, excuse me,” Elsa said as the man was about to walk off. He turned to her as she pulled Hamati’s note from her pocket. “Can you tell me where we might find this address?”

The man scratched his chin for a moment. “It’s three blocks down on the left, I think. You’ll see an old playground and it’s just around the corner from that.”

“Thanks.”

“Any time, miss.”

“See,” Elsa said once the man had gone. “Not everyone here is a thug.”

“I never said they were; they just have an appalling taste in statues.”

The side street bustled with office workers in orange robes darting from one building to another, most carrying envelopes or bundles of papers.

“Stop gawking,” Elsa whispered.

“I’m not.”

Head down and teeth gritted, Pedro strode ahead, a Gomerai slave on a mission if ever there was one. Elsa chuckled before dashing off after him.

Pedro stopped dead in his tracks, uncontrollably gawking this time. At the *old playground* he’d expected to see rusty swings and broken seesaws, but instead before him was an immaculate grass field on which elderly men and women played what looked to be the Huntress equivalent of lawn bowls.

“I guess I lost something in the translation,” he said as Elsa caught up with him.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Where’s this place we’re looking for?”

“The man said it’s just around the corner.”

He followed as she led the way, unable to stop glancing at the playground and chuckling to himself. A block further back, the man who’d given them directions pulled out his phone.

Collaboration

Elsa stared at the building in front of them, unsure if they had the right place, until Pedro spotted the tiny sign in the corner identifying it as the *Subspace Research Establishment*.

On entering, they found themselves in front of an unattended reception desk. Pedro coughed loudly.

A man poked his head around a door in the far corner of the room. “You people! The Gomeral Youth Hostel is two doors down.”

“No, wait!” Elsa said as he started to turn away. “We’re here to see Dr Glamming.”

“I am he. Who sent you?”

“I’m here on behalf of my Uncle Hamati who sends his compliments.”

“Elsa? You can’t be, you’re all grown up now!”

“Indeed I am. My uncle wishes to meet with you in Benton to collaborate in your respective research.”

“Does he really? Couldn’t he have just come here himself?”

“The Pasha would kill him the moment he set foot on the road up the hill.”

“Ah yes, of course, the edict. It’s the Barungi’s own fault, you know.”

Pedro placed a hand on Elsa’s shoulder before she could respond.

“Who’s this you’ve brought with you? Your husband?”

Elsa flashed a grin at Pedro. “Not yet, but I’m working on him. This is Pedro who’s quite well versed in subspace theory.”

“Is he really? How odd. How’s Hamati then? Is he keeping well?”

“It’s been a stressful time for him, firstly taking on his father’s mantle and now with the storms and seawater inundation of our farms. He’s hoping that collaborating with you might lead to a solution to this mess we’re in.”

“A mess indeed, if only we could ... no, never mind, that’s just wishful thinking.”

“Perhaps, sir,” Pedro said, “if you and Hamati were to compare notes, some of your wishes might come true.”

“Compare notes? The Tivinel overlords would never allow it.”

“Do they need to know?”

Glamming glanced around the room, as if the overlords were hiding in the corners. “No, perhaps not.”

“You’ll come then?” Elsa asked.

Glamming stared at Pedro for a moment. “You, boy, come with me.”

Pedro followed him into the adjoining room, leaving Elsa thrumming her fingers on the reception desk.

Glamming pointed to a whiteboard covered in diagrams and mathematical equations. “What do you make of this?”

Pedro rubbed his chin; it’d been a long while since the days of his doctoral work as Peter Thorpe and in his time here he’d barely scratched the surface of ancient Huntress’s mathematical notation.

“You do know what this is about, don’t you?”

“The star dimmer,” Pedro guessed.

Glamming nodded. “In principle it looks feasible but there’s something in the equations that doesn’t make sense. Can you see it?”

Pedro grimaced, closing his eyes for a moment before looking afresh at the whiteboard. Something resonated from his very early work when trying to resolve the riddle of astronomical *Dark Matter*. He pointed a finger at one of the equations. “This says the subspace photonic meta-particles have no net mass or charge, but they do.”

Glamming stared at him as if he’d just turned into a chicken. “Say again?”

“You heard me the first time, Dr Glamming. Best if you meet with Hamati to discuss it further, don’t you think?”

Glamming’s mouth opened and closed several times. “I, um, very well then. When is he available?”

“Anytime you want.” Pedro hoped that was true.

“Tomorrow?”

“I don’t see why not. The ferry arrives just before nine and we’ll arrange a private room for you in the *Ferryman’s Arms*.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Thank you so much, sir.”

Glamming stared at Pedro’s navel. “Amazing.”

Elsa looked up as Pedro rejoined her. “Well?”

“He’s coming tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“That’s what he said.”

“I hope Hamati’s available.”

Pedro pulled open the door for her like a good husband-to-be. “So do I.”

“I should call Dad and let him know to arrange a room.”

“Don’t,” Pedro said as she pulled out her phone. “The ultranet here is probably bugged.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It would be if I was running the Unity League, given what we’ve seen of them coming up here.”

On the right, the elderly bowlers were still bowling. Pedro glanced just in time to see several of them look away, but spotted something else odd about the scene before him. While there were plenty of bowls being rolled across the green, there were no jacks. “Quick, Elsa, run!”

He took off down the road with Elsa hot on his heels, not turning around but hearing the not-so-elderly bowlers jumping the fence after them.

An arm appeared out of nowhere, whacking Pedro across the chest as he ran straight into it. A moment later Elsa slammed into his back, winding him.

“Come in here, quickly,” the man who’d given them directions at the square said, hauling them inside a terraced house before they had a chance to decline his invitation. He slammed and locked the door behind them. “Down the stairs and into the basement, NOW!”

Still struggling to draw breath and unable to think, Pedro complied, with Elsa close behind.

At the bottom of the stairs two men the size of *All Blacks* rugby forwards stood with their arms folded. “In here, quickly now.”

They followed Elsa and Pedro, turning and closing the door behind them. In the centre of the floor was an open trapdoor under a table covered with playing cards and gambling chips.

“Down there.”

As soon as they’d complied, the trapdoor closed, plunging them into total darkness. From far above they could hear pounding on the door followed by someone forcing their way into the house. A moment later the door to the basement opened.

A chair scraped across the floor, accompanied by the pounding of heavy feet as one of the forwards must have stood. “Yes?”

“Where are they?”

“Who?”

“The two Gomeral we saw coming in here.”

“Huh? Do you see any Gomeral, Lachie?”

“No Gomeral in here, Bruiser. Do you folks want to join the game?”

Pedro could hear muttering as the door slammed closed and footsteps mounted the stairs.

“I told you no-one came in here!” the man from the square shouted. “Now leave before I call the police.”

“We are the police.”

“Arrest me then or leave.”

After a few moments the door to the street opened and closed, plunging the house into silence. Pedro and Elsa waited, hardly daring to breathe.

The door to the basement opened. “They’ve gone.”

Elsa climbed back up into the room. “Who are you? What’s happening?”

“I’m a friend of your father, Elsa, so just relax. As for the people chasing you, if they really were police, which I doubt, they were probably just curious why two Gomeral pretending to be slaves were wandering around up here.”

“We’re not pretending,” Pedro said, following her up and flashing his identity card.

“Perhaps not technically, but you need to learn how real slaves are expected to behave in public if you want to continue using that cover. I don’t know what you two are up to, and I don’t want to know, but I

promised Charon I'd see you safely back to him and I'm a man of my word."

"You said you thought they probably weren't police," Elsa said.

"That's right, they could've been Unity League operatives, in which case you'd disappear without trace, or more likely they're just a bunch of thugs wanting to detain you until nightfall and have what they call a bit of fun."

Elsa turned pale. "So what do we do? They're probably waiting outside for us to think the coast is clear, and we can't hang around more than a couple of hours otherwise it'll be nightfall before we reach Benton."

"Go back down through the trapdoor and turn to your right, where you'll find a tunnel you can crawl through to a jumble of boulders behind a waterfall. Climb up on the other side of the stream to an old overgrown forest trail which will take you along the spur to the road just above the Deadfall Ridge tunnel."

Pedro looked at Elsa, who nodded. "Thanks so much for your help."

"These are dark days and we must do what we can."

Pedro led the way into the tunnel. "I wish I'd brought a torch."

"You're not scared of the dark, are you?"

"No, I just don't want to bump my head on anything."

"That's why I let you go first."

Pedro muttered something under his breath.

"I didn't hear that."

"Good."

After crawling along in total darkness for what felt like hours, Pedro began to see a glimmer of light ahead. The tunnel turned to the right where it emerged behind a pile of huge boulders with water splashing down over them.

"Be careful," Elsa said, stretching as she emerged behind him. "The wet rocks will be slippery."

"I know."

Pedro's feet went out from under him at the top of the first boulder, causing him to slide down the rock face and drop with a loud

splash into the deep pool below. Elsa sighed before following in a more controlled descent.

“That was fun,” Pedro said, brushing the water from his hair as he climbed onto the far bank. After scrambling up a few metres through tangled undergrowth, they emerged onto the old trail.

“Let’s hope the thugs don’t know about this route,” Elsa said as they started walking.

“There’s not much we can do about that now.”

Taking a deep breath and smiling at the sunshine filtering through the trees, Pedro trotted off down the track, relishing the touch of gritty dust and the deep cushion of leaf litter under his soles.

* * *

“Get down,” Pedro said as a truck rumbled past close by. Just ahead of them, through a patch of thick scrub, the road to Benton crossed the spur they’d been following before dipping into the tunnel.

“If anyone’s waiting to ambush us,” Elsa said, “this is where it’ll happen.”

With no sound of any other traffic, they stepped out onto the road shoulder, taking a good look around before striding down the hill towards the tunnel.

“This is it,” Pedro said as they stood in front of the gaping hole in the cliff face. He looked up, just in case someone was going to roll a boulder down on top of them, but that appeared unlikely. With no sound of traffic and no sign of anyone lurking nearby, he lowered his head, took Elsa’s hand and strode purposefully into the tunnel.

Bending as it did, they were soon in darkness, causing Pedro to again wish he’d brought a torch, but no, that would’ve made them easier targets. Feeling the camber of the road with his soles, he stayed close to the centre of the tunnel in the hope they’d hear any assailants concealed against the walls.

Stepping on just the balls of his feet, he crept quietly forward. Something brushed his right shoulder, causing him to almost jump before realising it was Elsa’s sleeve. He was sure the hordes of assailants would be able to home in on his pounding heart.

Just as he saw the first glimmer of light from the far end, he heard something move. Elsa heard it too, for she stopped and squeezed closer to him. His ears starting to ring as he strained to listen, he caught a whisper of rustling clothing and what might have been a faint footstep to his left. A musky smell like stale deodorant wafted by on a slight puff of breeze.

His bladder felt suddenly full. *No*, he thought, *this isn't how my life ends, standing petrified in a dark tunnel peeing my pants until a truck comes through and runs us down.*

He leant over to Elsa, whispering in her ear. "On the count of three, we run for it, okay?"

He felt her nod.

"One ... two ... three!"

Pedro ran, every cell in his body focused on that glimmer of light, willing it closer, closer, closer, whack!

He stumbled and fell in a tangle of arms and legs.

Lying next to him in the mouth of the tunnel, dazed but not outwardly hurt, was a middle-aged man in a black hooded top.

"Charon?"

"What the hell?"

Elsa ran over to him, helping him up. "Dad? Was that you in the tunnel?"

"Yes, I was looking for you."

Pedro slapped his forehead, feeling like he'd just won first prize in the *village idiot* competition. His knees and elbows skinned, he gingerly stood, stumbling his way forward into the daylight.

"I told you not to talk to strangers," Charon said to Elsa as they walked down the final stretch into Benton.

"We didn't."

He glared at her.

"Oh, you mean the man in the square. He talked to us first."

Charon sighed. "You two have a lot to learn if you're to survive long enough to be useful. Did you speak to Glamming?"

"Yes, he's coming down tomorrow to confer with Hamati."

"Your uncle will be relieved, I'm sure. I'll reserve the *Wheelhouse Room* at the tavern for them."

“Thanks, Dad.”

He turned to Pedro. “What did you make of him?”

“He’s eccentric but knows his stuff and seems willing to cooperate. What’s interesting is he’s stuck on a different part of subspace theory to Hamati so if they collaborate they should make good headway.”

“Perhaps there’s hope yet.”

“I hope so.”

They reached the checkpoint at the edge of town where Pedro and Elsa handed back their day passes. The guards looked disappointed that they’d returned alive and unscathed.

“We have a couple of hours before the ferry’s due to leave,” Charon said once they were through, “so come on down to the tavern. You both look like you could do with an ale or three.”

Pedro glanced down at his stomach. “Perhaps not; Elsa thinks I need to lose weight.”

Charon scratched his chin. “Yes, you do. I’m sure there’s some tonic water you could have.”

Elsa chuckled.

“Cheers,” Charon said, clinking glasses as they sat at a table in the far corner of the saloon bar. Pedro swallowed a mouthful of tonic water, coughing and almost spitting it out.

Elsa stared at him.

“Did you get any inkling of what the Tivinel scientists are up to?” Charon asked.

“Yes, it looks like they’re focused on their star dimmer.”

“So the Pasha’s pushing forward with that then.”

“If they can make it work.”

Elsa scratched her head while taking another swig of ale. “Didn’t the climate modelling show it’d only make things worse?”

“I’m sure they’re right,” Charon said, “but Drago won’t listen. All he cares about is expanding his industrialisation of the planet.”

“I hear they’re building starships to go off exploring the galaxy for other worlds to conquer.”

“That’s another reason why the Tivinel are keen to pin down their subspace theory, although they have enough of it working to have conducted test flights around the solar system.”

This time Pedro did cough up a mouthful of water.

Elsa turned to face him. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry. I didn’t think they could be so far advanced without yet discovering –”

“Discovering what?” Charon asked.

“The thing he can’t mention without destroying the future,” Elsa said before Pedro could respond. She took another swig. “Is it safe to leave you two alone while I visit the bathroom?”

Charon and Pedro both nodded.

“Sir,” Pedro said as soon as she was out of earshot. “You’ve no doubt noticed how close your daughter and I have become and, um, and I was wondering if, like, if you’d consider allowing me to marry her.”

Now it was Charon’s turn to take a swig of ale. “That tonic water must be pretty potent, but no, you must realise I have no say in the matter.”

“Huh?”

“You’re both indentured to Hamati, in case you’ve forgotten, so only he can say yes or no to the question of marriage.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Informally, though, I’d be delighted to have you as my son-in-law.”

“Really?”

“For glory’s sake, Pedro, tip out that water and let me get you something befitting the occasion.”

Charon stood and strode towards the bar as Elsa returned. ‘What’s happening?’

“I’ve just asked your father for permission to marry you.”

“Gosh! What did he say?”

“He said Hamati must decide since we’re indentured to him.”

She looked crestfallen. “Oh, I see.”

“What’s wrong? Do you think he’ll say no?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

Charon returned with a fine bottle of port. “Get this into you, my future son-in-law.”

Elsa shook her head. “Oh no. Don’t forget you have a ferry to drive home in an hour’s time, Dad.”

Elsa stood in the wheelhouse, steering the ferry as Charon and Pedro sang sea shanties to the Barungi workers. A tear ran down her cheek; it had all been so sudden. Pedro’s arrival with those people from the future and then his decision to remain here with her had been a dream come true, but with him had come the foreboding of dark times ahead, very dark times.

In Roly’s last words before his death he’d said *a time of upheaval approaches, but don’t lose hope, for from this will spring a far greater good*, while earlier on his island, he’d turned to Pedro and her, saying *you are both young in body but wise in spirit; through your understanding, some of this world’s ills may be healed. All I ask is that you follow your hearts and be true*.

Her heart implored her to embrace Pedro’s love, of that she was sure, yet marriage brought with it the expectation of children and, with their world in such a precarious state, that was something she didn’t want to contemplate, not while he knew what was coming but she did not.

The door behind her opened and closed as Pedro stepped alongside. He placed a gentle hand on her cheek, turning her face towards his. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing; no, everything.”

She wrapped her arms around him, burying her head in his shoulder and crying her eyes out. Pedro patted her on the back with one hand while steering the boat with the other.

Wiping her face, she straightened herself up. “I love you, Pedro, be sure of that, and I want nothing more than to be your loving wife, but, but there’s one condition.”

Pedro had been dreading this moment. “What’s that?”

“You must tell me what you know of our future.”

“I see.”

He looked back to the cabin, hoping they weren't about to be disturbed, but Charon was taking another swig of port and starting a new song so he thought that unlikely.

"You must promise not to tell anyone else, especially Hamati or your father."

"I do, I swear."

He steadied himself while trying to figure out what he could say that'd be sufficient to appease her but not endanger that very future.

"The Tivinel will deploy their star dimmer but the climate models are right; it only makes things worse. Drago will realise too late that his grand plans are falling apart all around him and will make the Gomerai his scapegoats. There'll be an uprising – Hamati's already guessed as much and wants us to be at the forefront – and the Gomerai will flee to other worlds, beginning the far-flung civilisations from which I came."

Elsa smiled. "So that's what Roly meant with his *greater good*."

"Yes."

"Is that it?"

"In a nutshell, but remember I only learnt of it as ancient history passed down as legend, so I'm sure the way it really unfolds will throw up many surprises for us."

"What about that bit of subspace theory you're hiding from Hamati?"

"Oh, that; I expect it'll all be revealed tomorrow if their collaboration goes to plan."

She wrapped him in a hug and kissed him. "Thank you, Pedro."

Pedro kissed her back, knowing there was more, a whole lot more, he hadn't told her.

* * *

Hamati stood waiting impatiently on the dock as Pedro and Elsa moored the ferry and rolled out the gangplank. After the Barungi workers had disembarked, they put an arm around each of the now-sozzled Charon's shoulders and escorted him from the vessel.

"What the hell is this?" Hamati asked, shaking his head in disgust.

"It's a long story that's best left for another time," Elsa said.

“Very well, if you say so. Did you speak with Glamming?”

“Yes, he’s coming down to Benton to meet with you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Is that a problem?” Pedro asked.

“No, you just caught me by surprise, that’s all. There’s much to do.”

Giving Charon another shake of the head, he turned and trotted off home.

“We’d best put this one to bed before he passes out on his feet,” Elsa said, grinning at Pedro while hoisting Charon back up.

Deployment

Hamati was already waiting on the dock when Pedro and Elsa arrived. With him were the two young Barungi research assistants who'd been doing much of the theoretical work since Hamati had taken on the responsibilities of clan leader.

"Do you think Charon will be in any fit state to drive the ferry this morning?" Pedro asked Elsa.

"I've seen him worse."

Pedro grimaced, holding his hands over his throbbing forehead. "Now I know why I stopped being an alcoholic."

"You were an alcoholic?"

"It was a long time ago, soon after I split from Peter. My life went on a rapid downwards spiral which ended in an assortment of bars."

"How did you escape?"

"That friend I mentioned yesterday, Jim Hamilton, rescued me and took me on the journey which ultimately led to here."

Elsa kissed him. "I'd better be careful not to let you slip back into your old ways."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Charon came striding down to the wharf, looking like nothing at all had happened the night before. "All set, Hamati?"

"I think so."

Pedro looked at Elsa, who shrugged before following everyone on board.

"Elsa," Charon said. "I'd like you and Pedro to keep watch for debris again."

"Sure, Dad."

With all the Barungi workers on board, Charon turned the ferry upstream into the still-muddy waters.

Hamati stepped out onto the foredeck shortly before they arrived at Benton. "I just wanted to thank you both for your efforts yesterday. From what Charon has told me, it was quite an adventure."

"Thanks," Pedro said, "had we known the dangers we wouldn't have volunteered."

"Yes we would have," Elsa said, poking Pedro in the ribs. "It was fun."

"Nonetheless, I'm most grateful. Charon also told me there was something you wanted to ask."

Pedro gulped. "Um, yes. Elsa and I would like to marry but we need your permission."

Hamati placed a hand on each of their shoulders, a slight frown creasing his face. "These are troubled times with much uncertainty and risk, but I'm sure you know that already. On the other hand, a wedding might be just the tonic the village needs right now so yes, of course you have my blessing. Everyone's been telling me you make such a lovely couple so who am I to argue?"

Elsa wrapped him in a hug. "Thank you, Uncle!"

"Thank you, sir," Pedro said, shaking his hand.

Hamati laughed. "He's so polite, Elsa; you have him well trained already!"

"Here's the wharf," Elsa said, looking up. "Come and help me with the ropes, Pedro."

Hamati watched them dash off, a troubled expression crossing his face.

* * *

"Hamati, you old rascal!" Glamming yelled as they entered the *Ferryman's Arms* tavern. "Let me buy you a drink."

"Later, once we've solved the riddles that have brought us here," Hamati said, wrapping his arms around his old friend. "Right now we have work to do and I don't know about you, but I need to keep a clear head."

"Yes, of course, forgive me, but afterwards when we celebrate our success, the drinks are on me."

Hamati turned. "These are my assistants, Brody and Kyle. They've been doing all the heavy research for me of late."

"I work best alone, as you know, but then I don't have other distractions apart from stray Gomeral pounding on my door." He shot a glance at Pedro and Elsa. "Shall we make a start?"

Charon led them into the *Wheelhouse* conference room where computer terminals, whiteboards and copious quantities of notepaper had been laid out.

"Where shall we begin?" Hamati asked, taking a seat in front of one of the terminals and opening his research files.

Glamming stepped up to a whiteboard, pen poised. "Early in our research, as you know, we discovered that subspace is folded over upon itself along a line through the core of the galaxy, which sparked my interest in developing a climate control device that would divert some of the sun's energy to the opposite side of the fold. My theoretical and experimental work provided sufficient justification for the Tivinel Research Foundation to supply funding and, in later years, for the Pasha himself to come on board."

"Ah yes," Hamati said. "I've heard of your star dimmer, of course."

"Such a crude name for my *Solar Photonic Deflector*, but no matter. After much early success, my work has stalled as there's a slight but important inconsistency between my theory and experimental observations." He began filling the whiteboard with equations.

"I can see your dilemma," Hamati said when he'd finished. "For energy to be transferred across the fold, the subspace photonic meta-particles must have either mass or charge but your equations allow neither. As we discovered early on, the fundamental subspace equations have no closed form solutions so approximations are needed. We've been using numerical finite difference methods which have yielded some good results, yet at times a tiny change in the parameters has caused it to blow up in our faces. Perhaps we need to go back to first principles."

Hamati nodded to Brody and Kyle who began filling whiteboards of their own.

Elsa nudged Pedro's ribs. "This looks like it's going to take a while and I'm dying for a coffee."

"Me too."

Bowing to Hamati, they both left the room. After ordering the coffees, Elsa led Pedro out onto the terrace overlooking the river where a gentle sea breeze took the edge off the day's heat.

Pedro sat, leaning back in the wicker chair with his hands behind his head. "This is the life."

"It's hard to believe that only two days ago we were fighting floodwaters in a storm. Do you think what Hamati and Glamming are doing will be enough to make a difference?"

Pedro grimaced but tried to hide it. "It'll definitely make a difference, but whether it's enough to save this world remains to be seen. The Gomerai who flee elsewhere will take that knowledge with them, though, so those worlds will be spared the anguish we're now going through."

Elsa kissed him. "Thanks for confiding in me; it means so much."

Pedro tried to smile in spite of the dark foreboding gripping his heart.

"Your coffees," the waiter said, sneaking up behind them.

"Thank you." Pedro took a sip. "This is really nice, a lot better than some of the crap they served up as coffee back where I came from."

"Dad's always said it pays to go for the best."

"Definitely. Your father's a good man, Elsa."

"I know, unless you catch him in one of his bad moods."

Pedro laughed. Out over the river, a flock of birds circled and swooped.

"This is so beautiful," Elsa said. "I wish we lived in happier times."

"So do I."

"There you are, Pedro," Brody said, stepping out onto the terrace. "Hamati wants you in the conference room."

He followed the young Barungi inside, leaving Elsa to ponder what was happening.

“You cunning devil, Pedro,” Hamati said. “It was there staring me in the face all along.”

“I’m sorry, have I missed something?”

“There’s a tiny factor in the subspace equations that we both optimised away, but because it’s always positive, it grows in significance when integrated over space and time. Once we put it back in, the instabilities in my modelling disappeared and Glamming’s photonic meta-particles now have mass. It took us a little while to realise its significance, but, but gosh!”

“Subspace power,” Glamming said, “enough subspace power to run the whole planet and then some. You saw it straight away, dear boy, when you pointed out my erroneous equation yesterday.”

Pedro blushed. “Oh, right; I’m glad you finally figured it out. It’s been hard trying to keep my mouth shut all this time, but you needed to discover it for yourselves.”

Glamming stared at him again. “Hamati, where did you find this Gomeral? His insight into our work is amazing.”

“He found me.”

“How odd. I want him on my team; how much is he?”

“Sorry?”

“He’s an indentured slave, is he not? How much do you want for him?”

Hamati shook his head. “He’s not for sale.”

“Every man has his price, my friend. Name a figure; my masters have deep pockets, far deeper than any Barungi lowlander could ever imagine.”

“I have a pretty good imagination, Doctor Glamming, but no, he’s not for sale.”

Glamming grinned. “You’re teasing me, of course, you old rascal. You must know the Pasha insists that all slaves be tradable on the open market.”

Hamati slapped his forehead. “Yes, of course he does; forgive my memory lapse, but please allow me until morning to give you a price so I may consult my advisers.”

Glamming took Hamati’s hand. “Agreed.”

Once the hand-shaking and back-slapping had finished, Hamati turned to Pedro. "That'll be all for now, lad; thank you for your help and guidance."

Pedro left the room as quick as he could, tears forming as he tried to hold back a yelp of anguish.

"What's wrong?" Elsa asked as he rejoined her on the terrace.

"Your, your uncle is selling me to G-Glamming."

"What?"

"They finally figured out that subspace is a source of unlimited power, but Glamming thinks I'm the genius behind it and wants me on his team."

"Hamati wouldn't do that; he can't!"

"I, I don't think he has any choice; there's some edict or other of Drago's that requires unrestricted slave trading."

Elsa wrapped her arms around him, crying again on his shoulder. "J-just when I thought everything was going to be perfect. I won't let you go, Pedro, I swear, I won't let you go, not now, not ever, and especially not to any pompous old fart like Glamming."

"Uncle, you can't do this!" Elsa said, cornering Hamati as soon as they were back on the ferry. "If you try to sell him we'll run away together and you'll never see us again."

"My dear Elsa, calm down, please." He pulled out his phone and opened his personal diary on it. "Fortunately, I recorded a note this morning confirming your betrothal, so that makes it legal."

"Huh?"

"Over lunch, I had Brody and Kyle go through the fine print in Drago's edict on slave trading. A slave cannot be sold if doing so would break up a family."

"But, but what if he insists you sell him me as well as Pedro?"

"Then that would be breaking up *my* family as well as your father's. You're both safe, I assure you."

Elsa didn't look entirely convinced but hugged him anyway.

Hamati turned to Pedro. "The only way Glamming will get his hands on you is over my dead body."

Pedro turned pale. "I hope it doesn't come to that, sir."

Hamati shook his head. "From now on it's *Uncle*, not *sir*."

“All right, I guess, but Doctor Glamming’s not going to be too happy.”

“Leave him to me.”

“*What do you mean you can’t sell him?*” Glamming asked. “*When we agreed and shook hands, you had only to determine a fair price for the slave.*”

“There’s a complication as he’s betrothed to my niece.”

“So?”

“I suggest you read the fine print of Drago’s edict, in particular paragraph 7d. As much as it pains me to renege on our deal, I can’t break up their family.”

“*I’ll buy her too then, but I’m not paying any extra. Agreed?*”

“Sorry, but doing that would break up my family and Charon’s. Drago’s edict defines family to include parents and their siblings; if I recall correctly, it was the Tivinel Mayor Sandford who insisted on that.”

“*Then I’ll buy you and Charon too!*”

“Charon’s not a slave, as you well know, and I can hardly sell myself, can I?”

There was a long silence on the end of the line. “*You haven’t heard the last of this, Hamati, not by a long shot.*”

Hamati put down the phone.

* * *

Brody knocked on Hamati’s door. “Excuse me, sir, but the Pasha wants you to go to his island right away.”

Hamati sighed. “Very well, if he insists.”

“He wants you to bring Pedro and Elsa too.”

A chill ran up his spine. “Go and fetch them, please.”

He finished the memo he’d been writing before leaving his office and descending the stairs to his basement workshop. Removing the ebony dolphin amulet from around his neck, he pressed it into the receptacle in the far corner of the wall, activating the portal into Sheol.

The revelations following his collaboration with Glamming had improved his understanding of that realm the Barungi had called the *Dark Cave*, but even so, there were still some things that puzzled him. He suspected Pedro would know the answers but knew enough not to press him on it.

Elsa knocked on the open door from the back garden before leading Pedro into the room. “What’s happening?”

“The Pasha wants to see the three of us.”

“Did he say why?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Pedro said. “Do you think he suspects something?”

“Of course he does, but we’ll have to play it by ear and deflect his attention as best we can.”

Pedro thought back to his presence in 1989 when he’d deflected a mind probe from Barrad. That had been easy, but Barrad was a bully, not a Pasha.

“You go through first,” Hamati said, leading them to the shimmering rectangle of light in the floor, “and wait for me inside. We need to hold hands in there as it’s easy to get lost.”

Pedro followed Elsa, remembering the ninety-degree rotation in gravity as they passed through. Hamati joined them a moment later.

“Take my hands and follow me,” he said. “It’s not far.”

“How is it you don’t get lost in here?” Pedro asked.

“I’m not sure, but I think my telepathic senses guide me. It’s like I just know where the portals are.”

Hamati stopped, turned to the right and stepped through into the Pasha’s palace. Waiting for them was the attendant Pedro had nicknamed *The Screw* on account of his resemblance to a stereotypical prison guard.

“This way; the Pasha awaits you in the grotto.” He led them down a long narrow flight of stairs to the back of a sea cave behind the palace.

Surrounded by half a dozen grey dolphins, the Pasha floated in a sheltered pool of water opening onto the sea. On seeing their arrival, he swam towards them, climbing the steps carved into the stone.

Naked, he perched himself before them on a rock, with water running from his thatch of bright red hair down his nose and chin to form a puddle beneath him. He'd been a ten-year-old boy when Pedro had last seen him, but was now well on the way to becoming a sinewy young adult.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice. I have court with the Tivinel in a little while and wanted to speak with you beforehand."

Hamati bowed, prompting Pedro and Elsa to follow suit.

"This is not my court so we can dispense with the formalities, my friends." He turned, waving his arm towards the dolphins. "Those are my children; such wonderful playmates. I can control them with my mind, like this."

As he turned his head, all six of the dolphins leapt high out of the water, waving their fins before plunging back in.

"They can swim much faster and further than me, though, which is a bit of a bummer, don't you think?"

Hamati scratched his chin. "Perhaps, sire, you could project your mind into theirs so that you're swimming as them rather than with them."

"An excellent suggestion, Hamati; I'll start practising as soon as I'm free of those damned Tivinel."

Hamati grinned while Pedro blinked, not sure if what he'd just witnessed marked the beginning of the end for this world.

"Speaking of Tivinel," Drago continued, "I hear you've been collaborating with them and that congratulations are in order. Your discovery of subspace power is indeed fortuitous."

"Thank you, sire."

"Doctor Glamming told me that your young slave here was instrumental in your breakthrough, is that right?"

"I think he exaggerates; Pedro merely pointed out a shortcoming in our respective models."

"Nonetheless a worthy effort deserving of the highest praise, I must say. I understand Glamming wants to purchase him."

"Yes, but he's betrothed to my niece and so can't be sold without breaking up their family."

“Indeed, and I sense that you’d be loath to sell him at any price, am I right?”

“Yes, sire, I’m very fond of him.”

Drago nodded. “Glamming wanted me to grant him an exemption from my slave trading rules but I told him that wouldn’t be possible.”

“Thank you, sire.”

“Young Pedro and his friends were of great aid to me when I claimed power and I haven’t forgotten that favour, but Doctor Glamming is an important cog in my master plan so I had to cut a deal with him, so to speak.”

Pedro grimaced.

“His star dimmer, or should I call it his *Solar Photonic Deflector*, will be ready for deployment in a few weeks, thanks to your efforts, and he’s asked that Pedro and his betrothed pilot the ship.”

Pedro and Elsa both gasped while gripping each other’s hands.

“He said your insight into the machinations of subspace makes you the ideal person for the job and I was forced to agree, but I did impose one condition.”

“What’s that, sire?” Hamati asked.

“He’s to give you the full technical documentation on his dimmer and ship. I sensed in him an intention to entrap them, so your challenge between now and then is to discern the nature of that trap and devise your escape.”

Pedro gulped, turning pale and clasping Elsa’s hand even tighter.

“Your solution will prove most entertaining, I’m sure, and should you succeed I’ll honour your marriage with a royal blessing.”

“Sire,” Elsa said, forgetting she was supposed to be a slave, “I really think –”

Drago raised his palm, silencing her. “I have every faith in your success, my friends, but now I must take your leave as the Tivinel mayor and his cohorts will be arriving shortly and I have much to prepare.”

“Thank you, sire.” Hamati bowed, took Pedro and Elsa by the hand and turned to leave.

“One more thing, Hamati.”

“Yes?”

“Tell your friend Charon he must limit his alcohol consumption whilst operating his vessel.”

“Of course, sire.”

* * *

Pedro rubbed his eyes. “I’ve been staring at these schematics for two weeks now and still can’t spot the trap.”

“Maybe Glamming was bluffing,” Kyle said.

“If his aim was to frighten us to death,” Elsa said, “he’s certainly done that.”

Pedro shook his head. “No, I don’t think it’s a bluff. There’s something in the back of my mind, something I once heard or read but, no, it won’t come.”

“Go and get some rest and a good meal,” Brody said. “You two have hardly been eating this whole time.”

Elsa patted Pedro’s now hollow stomach. “That’s true.”

She led him into the dining hall, taking his hand as they joined the queue to the servery.

“I now know how Joel felt when he had his breakdown here,” Pedro said.

“That was scary; he thought they were serving dead rats or something, didn’t he?”

“Yes. The food here’s not that great, you must admit, but I don’t think they’d stoop that low.”

Pedro blinked as he reached the head of the queue, convinced for a moment there were dead rats in one of the trays, but they were just root vegetables with long tails. “The chicken and rice please.”

“You’re going to love this, Pedro,” the server said. “The chef put in extra spices just for you.”

Pedro forced a smile.

“I’ll have the same,” Elsa said.

“You’re a brave lady, miss.”

“Huh?”

“I mean going off in that spaceship thing.”

“Yes, it’s pretty daunting, especially when the person in charge is trying to kill us.”

“You’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“Thanks.”

“I wish people would leave us alone,” Pedro said as they claimed a table in the corner. “It’s bad enough having it hanging over our heads without being constantly reminded of it.”

“He means well, I’m sure.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Dig in; we’re both overdue for a good feed.”

A couple of Barungi fishermen sat chatting at the next table. “Aye, the bay’s silting up badly after that storm, Jerome. They’ll need to start dredging soon to provide safe passage for the fleet.”

Pedro almost choked on a mouthful of chicken. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“I’ve just remembered something! I need to look at those diagrams again.”

“No, the diagrams will still be there in an hour’s time but your dinner won’t.”

“Yes, you’re right.” He took another mouthful while trying to anchor that memory. “Thus us vuwwy nuss.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Suwwy.”

He chewed and swallowed. “This is very nice.” Grabbing a napkin, he started drawing with the end of a piece of chicken. “The star dimmer creates a shell enclosing the sun, sending some of its energy across to the other side of the fold. The dimmer itself is directly opposite its centre of gravity, so is fully enclosed on that side of the fold by the sphere of energy coming across.”

“Uh huh.”

“If we’re sitting in our ship next to the dimmer, as soon as we turn it on we’ll be trapped in there.”

“But can’t we go back to the other side?”

“No, because anywhere inside the shell on this side will be so close to the sun our ship would melt.”

“What about through subspace itself?”

“The subspace photonic meta-particles have mass, remember; that’s what this has all been about. I need to check the numbers, but I

think the wall of particles going from one side to the other would be dense enough to breach the hull if we tried to go through.”

Elsa covered her face. “So we’ll be trapped then.”

“Not necessarily. That thing I heard or read was about creating a safe passage through. If I could just figure out how it’s done...”

“Brody and Kyle can do that, I’m sure, if you point them in the right direction. Now eat your dinner before it goes cold.”

Pedro grinned. “Yes, dear.”

* * *

Hamati joined Pedro and Elsa just as they were finishing what was likely to be their last breakfast alive. Elsa could tell straight away that there was no good news, but asked anyway.

Hamati shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not. Brody and Kyle have been working shifts right through the night and reckon they’re close, but close isn’t close enough, is it?”

“So what do we do?”

“You’ll have pressure suits since you need to leave the ship to deploy and activate the dimmer, so keep them on and try coming back through subspace. The hull will almost certainly be breached but there’s a chance it might have enough structural integrity to bring you safely home.”

“A chance?”

“A chance, yes, but you don’t want to know the odds.”

Pedro stood, shaking Hamati’s hand. “I guess this is it then. Thank you so much for all you’ve done for me; for us.”

“It’s been an absolute pleasure, Pedro. I’m just so sorry I got you into this mess. If only I’d —”

“No, what’s done is done, Hamati.”

Pedro was about to leave when Brody burst through the door. “We’ve cracked it!”

“What? How?”

“If we apply a cross-polarisation field at the subspace transition surface, the photonic meta-particles will follow a curved trajectory as they pass through.”

“Okay, but how does that help?”

“Imagine a cyclone with the wind following its curved path. What’s at the centre?”

“The eye of the storm; a hole!”

“Exactly; if we can achieve the right amount of curvature, there’ll be a stable hole through the flux you can use as safe passage.”

He handed Pedro a memory stick and a sheet of paper.

“Once you’ve activated the dimmer, set the controls as shown to open the safe passage. The memory stick holds the navigational path you’ll need to follow on your way out.”

“That’s great! Thank you.”

Elsa wrapped Brody in a hug, smothering him with kisses. “When we get back, we’ll throw a party for you and Kyle that you’ll never forget.”

“Thanks, I think.”

Elsa and Pedro followed Hamati to the portal into Sheol, passing through to the Pasha’s palace where the subspace ship sat waiting in the forecourt.

“Here, you’ll want this,” Hamati said to Pedro, handing him a dolphin-shaped amulet.

“Huh?”

“You’ll need it to open the access panel on the dimmer. Don’t ask me why Glamming decided to do it that way; it came up when we were celebrating our successful collaboration and he thought it’d add an extra level of security.”

Pedro hung it around his neck as Glamming stepped over to him. “Are you clear on what you have to do to activate the deflector?”

“Yes, press each button in the sequence and wait for the light to turn green.”

“Good man. I’ve set it for twenty percent dimming which should be enough to return our equatorial sea and air temperatures to their pre-industrialisation levels.”

“Yes, I saw that in the technical documentation.”

Glamming turned to Hamati. “This lad is too good to waste; are you sure you won’t reconsider?”

Before Hamati could reply, Drago, wearing a scarlet robe with a golden dragon emblazoned on the back, descended the palace’s grand steps to the forecourt, prompting everyone to bow.

He mounted the dais, raising his hands. “My friends, welcome to this auspicious occasion. Today marks a turning point in the development of our world. Thanks to the efforts of Doctor Glamming and the *Tivinel Research Foundation*, we can put an end to the flooding and storms that have impacted so badly on our lowland farms of late.

“But that’s not all. As an indication of what we can achieve if we all work together, he and Barungi clan leader, Hamati, have made the long-awaited breakthrough in subspace technology, allowing us to tap into a source of boundless free energy that will rapidly replace our use of fossil fuels.

“Thus, this star – this *Solar Photonic Deflector* – is a short-term measure only. Once carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and oceans begin to fall, we’ll be able to discontinue its use, but for now it gives us the breathing space we need.

“But enough of words; I’m sure the crew are anxious to be on their way so please stand aside while they prepare for launch and join with me in wishing them every success in their mission.”

The gathered dignitaries all applauded politely as Drago stepped down and sauntered over to Pedro and Elsa. “Did you solve the puzzle?”

“Yes,” Pedro said, “we hope.”

“Excellent work; we must talk some more when you return.”

“Thank you, sire.”

“No, thank you.”

He ushered them on board the ship to more applause from the crowd.

Pedro ran his hands over the flight console, reconciling it with the documentation he’d been poring over. He noted with smug approval the very recent switch from combustion-fuelled engines to subspace-powered turbines for atmospheric flight, making the craft much lighter and, he hoped, easier to handle.

At the back, a net in the cargo airlock held the metre-wide metallic cube comprising the star dimmer, prompting him to check that the memory stick and list of control settings were still in his pocket.

“*Star Dimmer One, this is Central. You are clear for departure.*”

Elsa handed him the microphone. “Thanks, Central, we’re on our way.”

Crossing his fingers and toes, he squeezed the activator while pulling back on the joystick.

“We’re flying!” Elsa said.

Far below them, the Pasha’s island became just a dot in the ocean.

“Central, this is SD1, we’ve reached jump altitude.”

“Roger SD1, the board’s all green so you’re clear to go.”

A flash of blue light accompanied their jump to subspace, followed seconds later by another flash as they emerged in position on the other side of the fold.

Elsa glanced around through the cockpit windows. “There’s not much out here other than a few very dim stars.”

“No, space is pretty empty on this side of the galaxy. The world I came from has a twin solar system on the other side of the fold, but that’s rare.”

“I’d love to visit your world some day.”

Pedro grimaced, a chill of premonition running up and down his spine. “It’s time to get into our pressure suits and do what we came here for.” He unbuckled his seatbelt, surprised to find he was weightless. “There’s no artificial gravity.”

“I guess we haven’t invented it yet.”

Suited up, they squeezed into the lock either side of the dimmer.

“Wait a sec,” Pedro said, unclasping his helmet and removing the dolphin amulet from around his neck. “I’m going to need this out there.”

With the amulet and dimmer instruction sheet secured in the pocket on his suit, he activated the lock, checking that their tethers were securely attached while it depressurised.

Taking Elsa’s hand, he propelled them out through the open hatch.

“This is scary,” Elsa said, her gaze darting about at the vast emptiness surrounding them.

“Keep your eyes on me and take slow steady breaths,” Pedro said as he pulled the dimmer out behind him.

She forced a grin. “Thanks.”

After removing the net from around the dimmer, he pushed the amulet into its receptacle, causing the cover over the controls to slide open. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

He pressed the first button of the activation sequence. A light flashed red three times before turning green. Smiling, he pressed the next button.

“It’ll take about ten minutes for the dimmer to ramp up,” he said once he’d completed the sequence.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s to stop it creating a shockwave in the sun’s corona. That’s what caused all the –”

“All the what?”

“Sorry, I was hoping I wouldn’t have to tell you about that.”

Elsa looked into his eyes. “Is it before or after the Gomerall uprising?”

“After.”

“Good; I don’t want to know about it.”

A blue light came on, indicating that the dimmer was fully operational. Pedro carefully pulled the instruction sheet from his pocket, fearing that with his thick gloves, it might slip out and float off into space. Holding it tightly, he began adjusting each of the controls, making sure they were set precisely to the values Brody had calculated.

“Could you double-check these for me please?” he said once he’d finished.

Elsa went through each of them, nodding as she mentally ticked them off. “All correct, captain.”

“Phew.” He pulled the amulet from its socket, watching as the cover slid back across and merged seamlessly with the hull. “Time for us to skedaddle.”

Back on board the ship, he pushed Brody’s memory stick into the navigation console, breathing a sigh of relief when the screen reported a successful upload.

“I have every faith in Brody’s and Kyle’s work,” he said as he pulled his gloves and helmet back on, “but we should suit up and depressurise the cabin just in case.”

Elsa stopped him; instead lifting his helmet up and giving him a long kiss. “Just in case.”

“Thanks.”

Their suits checked and the cabin voided of air, he activated the return jump, holding his breath as the space around them flashed blue.

The Beginning of the End

“Star Dimmer One, this is Central,” Hamati said into the radio. “Do you receive, over?”

There was no response.

“Patience, my friend,” Drago said.

“The deflector is working as planned,” Glamming said. “Solar irradiance is holding steady at eighty percent of nominal.”

Hamati gave him a dirty look.

“What?”

“You’re not expecting them to return, are you?”

“Such ventures always entail risks, my friend.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me, something about a trap, perhaps?”

“Sometimes the greater good requires sacrifices, as I’m sure you know. If they’d been my slaves, I might have spared them and sent someone else, someone more expendable, but –”

Hamati’s face turned red. “Why you low-down, good-for-nothing son-of-a-”

“Central, this is SD1; we’re back in orbit and preparing for re-entry.”

“Woohoo!” Hamati said, dropping his fists, but Glamming turned away, chuckling to himself.

Pedro pressed the button for the retro-thrusters, but nothing happened. “Oh shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

Unbuckling his seatbelt, he floated around behind the seat, pulling open an access panel in the floor and poking his head in. “It looks like bloody Glamming had another card up his sleeve. When he switched

to subspace-powered turbines for atmospheric flight, he removed the retro-thruster fuel tank as well.”

Elsa turned pale. “Is there anything you can do?”

“There is, but it’s going to be tricky.” He grabbed the microphone. “Central, this is SD1. We have a problem with the retro-thrusters. I’m thinking we could achieve the same thing with a subspace micro-jump, but I need guidance.”

“SD1, this is Central, please wait.”

Elsa looked at Pedro, who shrugged.

“Pedro, this is Drago speaking. I can foresee the possible outcomes you face and can guide you on the correct path, but I’ll need to take over your mind for a little while. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Just listen to my voice as I home in on you, keep focusing, that’s good; yes, there you are.”

Pedro expected something like Barrad’s probing of his mind, but it wasn’t; instead it felt like he was having an out-of-body experience without leaving his body. Although able to sense everything that was happening around him, he had no control over any of it, not even his thoughts.

His hands reached for the navigation console, opening a maintenance menu and keying in a series of arcane commands. With the final one, the space around the ship twinkled blue, accompanied by a nauseating moment as the planet below them appeared to leap forward.

Opening other windows on the screen, Drago checked readouts of their altitude, speed and position.

Your orbit will now take you into the atmosphere at the correct angle of descent, came the understanding of a thought. Engage the turbines once you start to feel turbulence. You’ll be able to fly it down from there. Suddenly, like a rubber band snapping, Drago had gone and Pedro was back in control of his body.

Feeling dazed and a little queasy, he grabbed the joystick, starting the turbines once there was enough air for them to work against.

Swooping west across the continent, he circled over the Pasha’s island before descending to a gentle touchdown in the forecourt.

Hamati ran towards them as they stepped from the craft, wrapping first Elsa and then Pedro in a bear hug. Pedro glanced around, looking for Glamming with murder in his eyes, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Drago stepped up to them while giving Pedro a wink. “Welcome home, my friends. Congratulations on a successful mission.”

“Thank you for your assistance, sire.”

“We must talk later, Pedro. I sense there’s more to you than meets the eye; a lot more.”

Elsa coughed. “Sire, I can’t help thinking this might have been a whole lot easier if you’d been able to control the dimmer remotely. Is there a reason that can’t be done?”

Drago turned to Hamati, prompting him to respond.

“The dimmer is diametrically opposite our sun on the other side of the galaxy, putting it about fifty thousand light years away, so even if we could beam a strong-enough radio signal to reach it, it’d still take fifty thousand years to get there.”

Drago nodded. “Is there no way to communicate through subspace?”

“Actually, sire, my researchers have been studying that very problem. There’s a phenomenon called quantum entanglement that shows promise.”

“Really? How does that work?”

“Pairs of subatomic particles can share quantum states, so in principle changing the state of one will instantly affect the other even if they’re separated by great distance, but the catch is that measuring that state destroys the very quantity we’re trying to observe, so it looked to be a dead end.”

“I see. What’s changed?”

“Conditions are different at the subspace boundary in fractal crystals and theory suggests a way it could be done. My researchers are currently devising an experiment to test it.”

“Excellent work, Hamati; please keep me informed of progress.”

“Of course, sire.”

Drago nodded before turning away to chat with another dignitary, while Pedro breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for the distraction Elsa provided.

Brody turned to Pedro and Elsa, putting down his champagne glass while all around them music played and people danced. “Thanks for a great party; it’s been a hoot!”

“It’s the least we could do,” Elsa said, kissing him. “You guys were marvellous.”

“It was a rush job and to tell the truth, I wasn’t all that confident in the control settings I gave you.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Kyle said. “He spent half the night triple-checking the simulations.”

“Whatever,” Pedro said, “you got us back safely and that’s what counts.”

Brody picked up a package from a table in the corner. “This is for you; it’s the documentation on the dimmer along with all our notes and calculations. We thought you’d like it as a keepsake.”

“Thank you so much, I do.”

The shook hands just as the music tempo kicked up a notch.

“Come on Pedro,” Elsa said. “Let’s dance!”

“She’s drunk,” he whispered as she whisked him away.

Pedro left his room in the early hours of the morning, sneaking down to the piles of rubble in the back corner of the Black Delphinidae seminary grounds. It was all that remained of the library and museum after a Tivinel bombing raid during the brief war, but for now his attention was focused on the partially collapsed cave behind it. Climbing over and around the fallen boulders, he squeezed through a narrow gap and into an underground passageway.

Holding his torch in his mouth, he rummaged through the extensive archives before finding a suitable place for the package of star dimmer documents.

“These are for you, Clem,” he said to the empty room, hoping they’d survive to a time in the far-distant future when that young *bearer of the black amulet* would come exploring.

Dusting himself off, he returned to find Elsa standing in the doorway to the seminary. “What have you been up to?”

“Securing the future.”

* * *

“This should hold for now,” Pedro said as he inspected the new levee bank upstream of the inundated farmland.

Elsa looked at him. “You don’t sound too confident.”

“The sea levels are continuing to rise in spite of the star dimmer.”

“Perhaps you need to give it more time.”

“Yes, perhaps, but the climate scientists predicted that the icecaps would continue to melt at the present dimming level.”

“Are they right?”

Pedro shrugged.

She poked him in the ribs. “You and your damned future.”

Brody came running up to them. “There you are! Hamati wants us all back at his place as the Pasha has summoned us to the island.”

Elsa and Pedro exchanged glances before following him.

The Screw greeted them with a nod as they arrived through the portal onto Drago’s island.

“He’s in the grotto,” he said, leading them down the stairs to the sea cave at the back of the palace.

Drago, again naked, sat half submerged on the steps leading into the water, his head bowed as if in deep meditation.

The Screw placed a hand on his shoulder. “My lord, Hamati and his Gomeral are here.”

A few moments later, the six dolphins came bounding in from the open sea, forming a half-circle around Drago’s legs. He suddenly stirred, rubbing his hands over his face and through his tangle of long red hair before standing and turning. “Hamati, I must thank you for your suggestion; projecting my essence into them and becoming *the mind of the dolphins* is such an amazing experience. There’s so much out there for dolphins to explore!”

Pedro felt that familiar cold shiver run through him. *The beginning of the end, playing out just like in the story he’d heard, only this was for real in the here and now. Just one false step, one careless word, would bring the whole future tumbling down around him.* He shuddered again.

“My friends,” Drago said, climbing onto his favourite perch atop the rock, “thank you for coming at such short notice. Following your successful deployment of the star dimmer, I’ve commissioned the

Tivinel Research Foundation to design a fleet of starships, for I'm sure there are other worlds out there just waiting for us to exploit. The construction and testing site will require a considerable expanse of open and flat land close to our expertise and workforce, making your inundated farmland the perfect spot. I have a large team of Gomerall workers who have just completed a project on the west coast so I'll be moving them across to start work in the coming weeks. Given the excellent and courageous work of your slaves, Hamati, and your intimate understanding of the technicalities of subspace flight, I'm putting you in charge of this facility."

"I, um, this is quite a surprise, sire. Thank you, I think."

"You'll do a wonderful job, Hamati, I'm sure." Drago turned to Elsa and Pedro. "I want you two to oversee the workforce and begin the training of pilots and crew, under Hamati's direction of course. I know you're betrothed, but time is of the essence and I must ask that you postpone your wedding until this work is completed."

"But, sire," Elsa said before Pedro could poke her in the ribs.

"Right now I'm asking, but I can make that a commandment if you'd prefer."

"Sorry, sire, I meant no offence."

"Apology accepted." He turned to Brody and Kyle. "Reliable communications will be a key element of my fleet, so I hope your research into subspace quantum entanglement is bearing fruit."

"Indeed, sire," Brody said, bowing. "Our experiments in the lab look most promising, but we now need to test it over greater distances."

Drago smiled. "Of course. My seneschal will issue warrants granting you both free passage across the planet."

The Screw nodded.

"Once you have built your first starship, you'll be able to conduct your experiments over much greater distances, but if my foresight is any guide, your outcomes will be quite favourable, yes, quite favourable indeed."

"Thank you, sire."

Drago turned to Pedro. "I'm perplexed, as I'm sure there was something I meant to discuss with you after the star dimmer

commissioning but for now it escapes me. You don't recall what it might have been about, do you?"

"I'm sorry, sire, but no."

"Never mind; if it was important I'll remember in due course. So many distractions, yes, way too many. Now if you'll excuse me, I must get back to my children."

As Hamati and his entourage bowed, Drago climbed down into the water where the dolphins were waiting, adopting his meditative pose as he passed his mind into theirs.

"Wait here," The Screw said once they were back in the portal room. He dashed out, returning a few minutes later with a large envelope which he handed to Hamati. "These are the blueprints for the buildings you're to construct, along with the travel warrants for your researchers."

"Thank you."

"You should've asked Drago about the sea level rises, Uncle," Elsa said to Hamati once they were back in his home.

"I was going to but he didn't give me a chance. I think he cares more about his dolphins now than he does about his people."

Pedro shuddered again.

"Are you all right?" Elsa asked.

"Yeah, something about those dolphins is freaking me out, that's all."

"It's pretty creepy what he's doing."

"Unnatural," Hamati said, "but who are we to argue?" He handed Pedro the building plans. "Best you two start organising supplies. We're in for a very busy time, I fear."

* * *

Pedro and Elsa stood watching as the ocean-going passenger ship docked at the Kurramurra wharf and the Gomeral slaves disembarked.

"They all look rather scrawny," Elsa said.

"Almost malnourished, I'd say. I hope our kitchen is well-stocked."

Elsa scratched her head. “That’s a good point; I wonder who’ll be paying for their food?”

“The Pasha, I presume, since this project is his idea, but –”

“What?”

“It’s just that he seems a bit preoccupied with his dolphins now to worry about trivialities like feeding slaves.”

“He has staff, doesn’t he?”

“You mean The Screw?”

“Um, yes, I see what you mean.”

She took Pedro’s hand, leading him over to Hamati.

“Uncle?”

“Yes?”

“We were wondering –”

Hamati turned away before she could finish, distracted by the sight of a middle-aged Barungi woman striding towards him.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said to him. “I’m looking for Clan Leader Jarred.”

“I’m sorry but Jarred is dead.”

“Oh no, please forgive me, I didn’t know.”

“That’s all right. I’m his son, Hamati; can I help you?”

“I need to speak with the clan leader.”

“That’s me.”

“Oh, right. I’m Esmeralda.”

Hamati slapped his forehead. “Of course you are; it’s just I wasn’t expecting you.”

“The workers have been with me for some time so I thought I’d come across and help them settle in. I also have some interest in what you and your people are doing here.”

“Really? Come to my office; I’ll arrange refreshments and introduce you to my researchers.”

“Thank you.”

Hamati turned back to Pedro and Elsa as he escorted Esmeralda away. “You two can take care of our new arrivals, I’m sure.”

Pedro shrugged before climbing onto the railing. “Oi, everyone, listen up! Welcome to Kurramurra; I hope you had a pleasant journey here.”

From the moans and guffaws he suspected they hadn’t.

“I’m Pedro and this is Elsa; we’re nominally in charge of this project so if you have any questions or problems come to us. We’re slaves too so I can’t promise we’ll be able to do much, but we’ll try our best.

“For now you’ll be billeted in the Black Delphinidae seminary; it’s a bit of a hike from here but I’m sure you’ll want to stretch your legs after your long voyage. Once we start, your first task will be construction of the accommodation block so we can house you on site for the rest of the project. Are there any questions?”

“When can we eat?”

“The seminary’s servery will be open by the time we arrive, so if you can try not to die of starvation for another hour, you’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

Elsa climbed up beside him. “Before we move off, there are a few ground rules I should mention. The river, as you can see, is still pretty murky after the floods earlier this year so swimming’s not a good idea, but the ocean beach down on the bay is fine. There’s a general store, barber, apothecary, tavern and a few other shops along the beachfront. Please keep any drinking in moderation and don’t bring alcohol onto the seminary grounds or the worksite. Enjoy your stay and, as Pedro said, if you have any questions we’re here to help.”

The crowd applauded and cheered as she stepped down.

“Right, everyone, follow us.”

* * *

Esmeralda took a sip of herbal tea. “The last time I saw your father, Hamati, you were but a wee child. I bet you don’t even remember me.”

“Dad talked a lot about you, so I do, of course, but you were quite young too, I think.”

“Fifteen, if I recall, but so much has happened since then. Your sister, Matera, is she –”

“Yes, she’s fine. She married the ferryman, Charon.”

“Not that Tivinel?”

“Uh huh, but he’s not a bad man, not really.”

“I told her nothing good would come of it.”

“But something good did come, something very good; their daughter Elsa. You saw her with me when you came off the boat.”

“That Gomeral girl? But, oh my!”

“She’s my favourite niece.”

“Unless there’s something you haven’t told me yet, Hamati, she’s your only niece.”

“Well, yes, but she’s still my favourite. She and the young man with her are betrothed.”

“That’s wonderful; I love a wedding! When is it?”

“There’s a slight problem; Drago won’t let them marry until the starship project is completed.”

“That vile spawn of demons; just who does he think he is?”

“Um, the Pasha, I suppose.”

Esmeralda sighed.

“How are things in the west?”

“Not good; the Tivinel have mostly been indoctrinated by Unity League and are making life tough for everyone else. Food is in short supply and the Gomeral slaves are suffering the most.”

“Have you told the Pasha?”

“We never see him now; he used to pay us frequent visits on his yacht but that all stopped a few months ago.”

Hamati blushed. “That might have been my fault.”

“How so?”

“Drago was experimenting with mind control over a pod of dolphins but bemoaning that they could swim faster and further than he could, so I suggested he should project his essence into them.”

“What happened?”

“He loved it so much it’s all he ever does now.”

“Oh, that explains a lot.” Esmeralda downed the rest of her tea. “Tell me more about this starship project of yours.”

“It’s not really mine; it was Drago’s idea and he put me in charge of making it happen. The *Tivinel Research Foundation* has given us blueprints for the ships and manufacturing facility; we just have to build them and train the pilots and crew.”

“Why you?”

“I’ve been leading a team of subspace researchers and became involved in the star dimmer project, and thanks to Drago’s climate

change, we have a large area of vacant flat land where our farms were inundated by seawater a while back.”

“Your research sounds fascinating. Can you show me what you’ve been doing?”

“Certainly; come on over and I’ll introduce you to the team.”

Hamati led her through the backstreets of Kurramurra to a light industrial area just below the ridge in the north-eastern corner of the town. Here, a small technology park nestled amongst the warehouses and automotive repair shops.

“This is nice,” Esmeralda said, entering the glass-walled, single-storey building on an elevated block.

“My father set it up for me back in, um, happier times.” Hamati’s eyes glazed over for a moment as his mind drifted back to those care-free days of his youth. Esmeralda took hold of his hand.

“Boss, you’ve come at just the right time!” Brody said, bounding out to greet them.

“Esmeralda, meet Brody, one of my enthusiastic researchers. What’s up?”

“Kyle has set up the subspace communicator on the other side of the planet and is about to test it.”

“Lead us through.”

Before them opened a brightly lit room filled with workbenches, computers and test equipment. The faint waft of hot solder resin hung in the air.

“Brody and Kyle are working on a subspace communications device utilising quantum entanglement at the junction of left- and right-handed fractal crystals,” Hamati said, leading her over to a bench in front of the window.

“That sounds fascinating; we have people in the west who’d love to be in on something like that.”

Brody did a final check of his equipment before picking up the phone. “Everything’s set here, Kyle, so let’s give it a try.”

A collection of jiggling lines suddenly appeared on a spectral display that had previously shown only noise, with the status window encouragingly saying *Synchronising*.

“Come on, you can do it,” Brody said to the device, which responded by changing its status to *Locked*.

A loudspeaker on the back of the bench plopped. “*It’s Kyle here, it looks like we have a solid lock. Do you receive?*”

Brody picked up a microphone. “Loud and clear, mate. Woohoo!”

“*The round trip delay is still reading zero so I guess that confirms the entanglement’s not limited by light speed.*”

“Well done!” Hamati said, shaking Brody’s hand. He picked up the microphone. “Great work, Kyle, and safe travel home.”

“*Thank you, sir.*”

Esmeralda gave Brody a kiss and a hug. “So what’s the next step?”

“We need to send it into space, preferably on a subspace ship.”

“What about the one that was used to launch the star dimmer?”

Hamati shook his head. “That belongs to the Tivinel and they won’t let us use it.”

“How ridiculous!”

“Of course it is, but let’s just say their principal researcher has a grudge against me.”

“What happened?”

“Bloody Glamming wanted to buy Pedro and of course I refused.”

“Pedro?”

“My niece’s fiancé.”

“Oh, I see. Why did Glamming want him?”

“Pedro has, um, an amazing insight into subspace physics.”

“I hear the *Tivinel Research Foundation* is flush with funds; you should’ve pressed Glamming to make you a better offer.”

“Pedro is not for sale, not at any price.”

Esmeralda looked at him, sensing the sudden strengthening of his telepathic barriers.

* * *

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Pedro asked the Tivinel architect who was overseeing the concrete pour for the starship factory’s foundations.

“How dare you question my authority or expertise! What would you know, slave?”

“Sorry, but I was here when the sea inundated all this land and it’ll be my job to clean up the mess when it floods again. If it was up to me, I’d be building everything on piers.”

“That will never happen again thanks to our illustrious *Solar Photonic Deflector*.”

“But –”

“Enough! Another word from you and I’ll report you to your master.”

Pedro suppressed the urge to laugh, turning instead and going to find Elsa.

All around him, the Gomerai slaves were hard at work, digging trenches, laying pipes and erecting formwork. *This’ll be a grand facility if it doesn’t all wash away*, he thought, finally spotting her chatting with the foreman in the far corner of the worksite.

“Bloody self-righteous Tivinel!” he said as they looked up.

“What’s wrong?” Elsa asked.

“How high do you reckon the water was here when it flooded?”

“At least a metre, I’m sure.”

Pedro nodded. “I suggested to that damned architect that it might be a good idea to put the buildings on piers but, oh no, their *illustrious solar photonic deflector* will prevent any more floods.”

“That thing’s a hoax,” the foreman said. “It doesn’t do anything besides make its inventors rich.”

“It’s no hoax, Trevor,” Pedro said, laughing. “Just wait till they crank it up a bit; it’ll do far more than anyone wants.”

Far More than Anyone Wants

Hamati raised his glass. “Cheers.”

Pedro, Elsa and Esmeralda reciprocated.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been across your work at the starship factory as much as I’d have liked. How’s it all going?”

Pedro glanced at Elsa before speaking. “Good thanks; we’re well ahead of schedule. The superstructure of the first ship is complete and the cabling and propulsion system are now being installed. We hope to have it ready for its first test flight in a few weeks.”

“That’s fantastic; I’m sure the Pasha will be pleased.”

“That’s if he can tear himself away from his dolphins long enough to notice.”

“Are the workers meeting your expectations?” Esmeralda asked.

“Absolutely; we couldn’t have asked for a better team.”

“It’s almost like they have a sixth sense of what needs doing and when,” Elsa said.

Esmeralda nodded. “That’s called experience and familiarity from working together on other projects.”

“Even so, it’s pretty amazing to watch them; everything just *happens*.”

“I’m taking Esmeralda to Honeydew Cove for a picnic tomorrow morning,” Hamati said. “You’re both welcome to join us.”

“Thanks, Uncle, but no, we’re at an important stage of the construction now and need to be on site, don’t we, Pedro?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Thanks for the offer, though, we both appreciate it.”

“That’s fine, but you must let us make it up to you once your work is finished.”

“Of course.”

Hamati led Esmeralda along the road south to the bayside village, but instead of crossing the stone bridge over the gorge, he turned onto a faint track around the headland.

“We used to have a nice path direct from Kurramurra over the ridge to the cove, but the top is well above Drago’s fifty metre limit so we had to abandon it and go the long way around.”

“That just shows how ridiculous Drago’s edict is.”

“This way’s quite scenic, though, so I can’t complain too much.”

Esmeralda chuckled. “You’re always the optimist, Hamati.”

“Of course; it’s the only way I can lead my people in these dark times.”

Some twenty metres below, waves pounded on the rocks as they rounded the headland forming the northern entrance to Sandpiper Bay. Sea birds rode the rising eddy currents, their eyes scouring the water for any sign of fish on the outgoing tide.

Once around the point, the track descended to a series of tidal rock shelves crossing a small inlet. Halfway along, a creek babbled down, splashing delightfully cold water onto their feet as they crossed.

“How old is Pedro?” Esmeralda asked.

“About the same age as Elsa I’d say; twenty or twenty-one.”

“I sensed something about him, something much older yet at the same time insubstantial, like he’s nothing but mist and dust.”

“You haven’t been probing his mind, have you?”

“No, not intentionally; it’s just an impression that formed over dinner last night.”

“I see; yes, he’s an unusual young man, but –”

Hamati stopped walking.

“But what?”

“Just ahead is a sea cave that goes right through to the other side of this headland, but usually it’s dry at low tide.”

“It’s not just the swell, is it?”

“Could be, but I think the sea level is rising faster than I’d realised.”

Esmeralda looked at the rippling waves covering the rock shelf. “I guess we’ll be getting our feet wet.”

“Be careful on the wet rock as it might be slippery.”

Behind a large boulder, a narrow slit in the cliff face opened into a huge cave, its sandy bottom covered in about ten centimetres of water. Around a bend to the right, it emerged through another more spacious opening onto a sandy beach.

“Welcome to Honeydew Cove.”

“This is beautiful!”

Fringed with palms, the beach enclosed a bay of sparkling blue water with small waves lapping on the shore. A terraced waterfall laced with ferns separated the sand from the far headland, with a picnic table built onto a rock shelf overlooking it.

“We should go for a swim to work up our appetite,” Hamati said, pulling off his clothes.

“Of course.”

She followed him into the water, wading out and diving under a small wave. “It’s so warm here!”

“Our currents can be fickle; sometimes it’s warm and sometimes not. You must be blessed.”

They ducked under another wave.

“You were saying something about Pedro being an unusual young man, Hamati.”

“Was I?”

“Now you’re dodging the question again. What’s his terrible secret?”

“If I told you I’d have to kill you.”

Esmeralda grinned. “I’d like to see you try.”

Another wave, bigger this time, broke on top of them.

“All right, Hamati, play your little games, but I’m concerned for Elsa, that’s all. Does she know his secret?”

“Yes, she does.”

“Good.”

“If that’s settled, we should have our picnic before the tide turns.”

Leaving the water, Esmeralda tackled Hamati around the legs; their wrestling, tickling, hugging and kissing soon devolving into lovemaking.



A sudden clap of thunder startled them from their intimacy. At the same moment, dark storm clouds moving rapidly from the north-west blocked the sun, accompanied by a wind gust.

“Bloody hell!” Hamati said. “Where’d that come from?”

“I don’t know,” Esmeralda said, dashing over to where they’d dumped their clothes and picnic basket, “but we’d better skedaddle before it hits.”

Running along the beach, they reached the headland only to find the tide had risen halfway up the cave opening.

“How long have we been here? It can’t be high tide already, can it?”

Hamati went to check his phone before realising he hadn’t brought it with him. “We must have, I suppose. Damn, we’ll have to swim through.”

With the strengthening wind, waves were already starting to pound into the cave opening. Waiting for a momentary lull, they dashed forward, swimming into the darkness. Water surged from behind them, pushing them forward and around the bend towards the far opening.

“Grab the rocks before it starts pulling us back,” Hamati said just as the current turned.

Once the water receded, they were able to push their way forward towards the narrow cleft, until a surge from that end stopped them.

“Go now!” Hamati yelled as another surge came into the cave behind them. With arms and legs flailing as they tried to avoid being pounded against the side, they rode the wave all the way through, pulling themselves hard against the cliff face as the next wave struck on that side.

Now scratched, bruised and thoroughly waterlogged, they scrambled along the rock shelves to the beginning of the track. With another crack of thunder, the rain began pelting down while the wind gusts kept trying to knock them off their feet.

“That was a bit more than I’d bargained for,” Esmeralda said, pausing to take stock at the track head.

“If we’d waited any longer I doubt we’d have got through.”

The storm cloud, its belly glowing green, was now directly overhead. Lightning flashed close by as a tree on top of the ridge took a direct strike, the crack of thunder a moment later almost deafening.

“We need to keep moving,” Hamati said, taking hold of her hand.

Fighting against wind, rain and the likelihood of being struck by lightning, they rounded the headland. Huge waves pounded on the rocks below, sending up more drenching spray. Once around and into the river gully, the wind eased but the rain intensified, reducing visibility to a few tens of metres.

“Keep going,” Hamati said as Esmeralda started to falter. “We’re almost there.”

The rain eased to a light sprinkle as they reached the descent into Kurramurra. Hamati turned to look back across the bay.

“Bloody hell!”

Descending from the cloud like the proboscis of a giant sucking insect, another waterspout formed, joining with the ocean and whipping up huge waves of white water as they watched.

“I have to warn Elsa!” Hamati yelled over the noise, dashing off down the road and leaving Esmeralda stumbling along behind.

He pounded on the door of the first house he reached.

“Is that you, Hamati?” the resident asked, taking a moment to recognise the drowned wretch before him. “What’s wrong?”

“Quickly, I need to use your phone.”

“This way.”

Leaving pools of water on the floor in his wake, Hamati followed him into the house. Grabbing the phone, he put a call through to his niece.

“Elsa, there’s another waterspout forming over the bay. You and Pedro have to evacuate everyone to higher ground.”

“Thanks for the warning; Pedro and the foreman are with me so we’ll start moving everyone out now.”

“Excellent; keep safe and I’ll come over as soon as it passes.”

“Thanks, Uncle.”

Esmeralda came in just as Hamati was closing the call. “Is she safe?”

“I hope so.”

* * *

“The buildings themselves look undamaged,” Hamati said as he led Pedro, Elsa, Esmeralda and the foreman, Trevor, back to the worksite.

Pedro helped Trevor haul the flood debris away from the door before pulling it open. “Oh no.” He turned away, feeling sick to the stomach.

The partially constructed starship had toppled over, its superstructure bent and mangled, while muddy and salty slime covered all the welding and assembly machinery. In amongst the mess were piles of soggy pulp that had once been blueprints, design notes and other documents.

Hamati ushered Trevor inside while Elsa consoled Pedro, with Esmeralda watching on from a distance.

“It, it’s all ruined,” Pedro said, tears streaming down his face. “I told that damned architect, I told him –”

“I know,” Elsa said, holding his head against her shoulder. “It’s not your fault, it’s not any of our faults, we’re just the meat in the sandwich. Come on home; let Hamati and Trevor decide what has to be done.”

“But, but the future needs those starships and we’re running out of time.”

“We’ll manage, Pedro, just like we always do, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess.”

Esmeralda watched as Elsa led him off across the sodden fields.

So you’re from the future, Pedro, but what are you? Why do I sense just mist and dust?

Hamati knocked on the door to Pedro’s room. “The Pasha wants to see us if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Yes, of course. Sorry, I guess the sight of the destruction hit me more than I expected.”

“It just goes to show you’re a diligent and caring young man, Pedro.”

Pedro blushed. *How things had changed since his previous life at that age when he’d been carousing the brothels and pubs of Sydney’s Kings Cross. His thoughts turned back to one of his last conversations with Peter.*

“What is it I’m becoming?”

Peter shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I’m becoming you, aren’t I?”

“Or perhaps I’m becoming you.”

“Either way will be interesting, I’m sure.”

Hamati coughed. “Pedro?”

“Sorry, I was wool-gathering. Yes, I’m fine; let’s go.”

He followed Hamati and Elsa through the backstreets of Kurramurra to the basement portal.

“Trevor has put together an inventory of what’s required to bring everything back to where we were before the storm,” Hamati said.

“Uh huh.”

“It’s quite a long list.”

Pedro scratched his chin. “I imagine it would be. Do you think Drago will approve the expenditure?”

“He’ll have to if he wants his starships.”

“That’s true.”

“Just let me do all the talking.”

“Of course, boss.”

“Elsa?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

Hamati pushed his dolphin amulet into the socket, opening the portal. “After you.”

This time The Screw led them into the palatial hall where Drago, wearing his scarlet robe, sat on his throne atop the dais. He stepped down as they approached.

“Thank you for coming, my friends. I hear you’ve had something of a setback.”

“Another storm, my lord, coupled with sea levels that continue to rise.”

“I understand, yes, as it would now appear the dimmer isn’t providing sufficient cooling to prevent that. But don’t worry; I’ve instructed Doctor Glamming to prepare his craft for another flight so adjustments can be made.”

“Thank you, sire. The project foreman has prepared this list of what’s required to bring the starship project back on track.”

Hamati handed him the document.

"This is quite a long list with quite a price tag, Hamati, and resources are stretched at present with the Tivinel's essential industrialisation in the north."

"Are you saying we're not to proceed?"

"No, I want those starships built as quickly as possible, but you must carry out this work within your existing budget. I'm sure there are savings and efficiencies you can find, my friend."

"If you say so, sire."

"Yes, I do. The lavish lifestyle of your Gomerall workers could certainly be trimmed, don't you think?"

"Lavish? But, sire —"

"There'll be no more *buts*, Hamati. You will complete this project on time and on budget, is that clear?"

Hamati bowed his head. "Yes, sire."

"Excellent; come with me out to the courtyard. It's time to put things right."

Elsa and Pedro exchanged nervous glances as they followed.

In the centre of the courtyard and gleaming in the bright sunshine sat *Star Dimmer 1*, with a grinning Doctor Glamming standing alongside it.

"Pedro and Elsa," Drago said, "I want you both to do the honours once more. Doctor Glamming will instruct you on the adjustments needed to the dimmer."

"Don't worry, it's quite straightforward," Glamming said, handing Pedro a sheet of paper. "You just need to advance the deflector level to seventy percent then run through the activation sequence to ramp it up."

"Seventy percent?" Elsa asked. "But won't that —"

"Hush, lass," Drago said, placing a hand on Elsa's shoulder. "The good doctor knows what he's doing, don't you, Glamming?"

"Yes, sire, most assuredly."

"Excellent. You may proceed."

Pedro glanced around. "You mean now?"

"Of course; you don't want any more storms to interrupt your work, do you?"

"I, um, I guess not."

“Excellent, and I almost forgot, Doctor Glamming has repaired the retro-thrusters so your re-entry should be straightforward this time.”

Pedro glared at Glamming but he’d already turned away. “Come on, Elsa, let’s get this over with.”

Pedro and Elsa stepped from the airlock. The star dimmer’s metallic cube hung motionless a few metres in front of them in the vast emptiness of space on this side of the galaxy.

“Are you sure Glamming’s changes won’t affect the safe passage?” Elsa asked.

“Yes; Brody explained how that was done and adjusting the deflection rate won’t disturb it.”

“All right, let’s do it then, I suppose.”

Grasping the sides of the dimmer with his legs to prevent any recoil, Pedro pushed the dolphin amulet into its socket, opening the cover plate. Reading through the instructions once more, he made the required adjustments and pressed the first button of the activation sequence. The light flashed red three times before turning green.

“How long will it take to ramp up?” Elsa asked once he’d pressed the final button.

Pedro pointed to the bottom of the instruction sheet. “About half an hour according to this. Just lie back and soak up the scenery.”

“What scenery?”

“There’s a faint star way over there, and look, there’s another one. You can count them if you want.”

“I’d rather go to sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll wake you when it’s done.”

Pedro had almost dozed off too when the blue light finally came on, indicating that the dimmer had reached its new deflection level. He tapped Elsa on the shoulder.

“Huh?”

“Time to go home.”

“Oh right.”

The hatch slid closed as he pulled the amulet from its socket. Holding tightly to Elsa’s hand, he pushed off from the dimmer with his legs, propelling them both gently back into the airlock.

“We should stay in our suits and depressurise the cabin again, just in case,” he said as the door closed behind them.

“Good thinking.”

They jumped to subspace in a flash of blue light, following the safe passage back to their own side of the galaxy and into orbit around Huntress.

“Now we find out if Glamming really did fix the retro-thrusters.”

Pedro initiated their re-entry burn, surprised to feel the craft start to decelerate. “Amazing.”

Once inside the atmosphere, he activated the turbines and flew them down to a smooth landing in Drago’s forecourt.

Pedro rubbed his eyes as he stepped from the ship, surprised at how dull it was. Overhead, the sky was a deeper blue, almost indigo. The sun, while still too bright to look at for any length of time, had a distinct yellow hue to it. He shivered as a puff of cool breeze brushed his bare chest.

Drago stepped forward to greet them. “Thank you for another successful mission, my friends. Doctor Glamming assures me that, with this level of dimming, the sea levels will soon return to normal and, with less energy in the atmosphere to whip up storms, you should suffer no more flooding.”

“I hope he’s right,” Pedro said.

Hamati came over to join them. “If you’re all set we’d better be off.”

“Thank you, Hamati,” Drago said. “Keep me informed of your progress on the starships.”

“Of course, sire.”

The Screw stepped from the shadows – much darker shadows now, Pedro couldn’t help noticing – to escort them back to the portal.

* * *

Trevor stepped over to Pedro and Elsa’s table in the dining hall. “Sorry to interrupt, but what’s happened to our food?”

Pedro looked up. “What do you mean?”

“The serving sizes are half what we were getting before. You can’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“Actually I hadn’t, as I’ve been preoccupied with everything else that’s been happening, but now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“Do you think you could have a word with Hamati?”

“Yes, of course,” Elsa said before Pedro could respond. “There must be a mix-up somewhere, I’m sure.”

“Thank you, miss; our bellies will be starting to rumble louder than thunder if this keeps up.”

Elsa quickly finished her dinner before taking Pedro by the hand and leading him in the direction of Hamati’s home. “This is part of the budget constraints, isn’t it?”

“I guess so, but it strikes me as false economy to starve the workers who are supposed to be making it all happen.”

“Do you remember how scrawny they looked when they came off the boat? I bet this is Esmeralda’s doing.”

“Whoa, that’s a long bow you’re drawing there, Elsa.”

“We’ll see what Uncle Hamati has to say.”

Pedro wrapped his arms around his chest as they stepped onto the street. “The nights are turning decidedly cold here now.”

“You can thank the star dimmer for that; they reckon we could have snow in a few months.”

“I can’t imagine the workers will be too happy about that either.”

“No, they won’t, especially if the budget won’t stretch to providing them with warm clothes.”

“Maybe we’ll have to teach them how to knit their own.”

Elsa poked him in the ribs.

“Ouch!”

“Your chest is icy. I should knit you a sweater, I think.”

“Nah.”

Hamati and Esmeralda waved them in. “Come and join us; we’re just finishing dinner. What’s up?”

“Thanks,” Pedro said. “The food servings for the workers appear to have been cut.”

“That’s right,” Elsa said, “and they’re none too happy about it; in fact we’re none too happy, are we, Pedro?”

Hamati looked to Esmeralda to respond.

“You know of course that we have tight budget constraints on the project in the aftermath of that storm, and worker consumables now make up a large part of our expenditure.”

“But they can’t work properly if you starve them.”

“It won’t come to that, I’m sure, but we all need to tighten our belts.”

Elsa looked at the copious quantities of food on the table. “There doesn’t seem to be much belt-tightening happening here.”

“Elsa, please, let me explain.” Hamati said. “With the dim sunlight now, the yield from our crops has dropped and fodder for our livestock is becoming scarce, causing food prices to soar. Esmeralda and I have made other cuts to our household spending, I assure you, but we simply don’t have the reserves to go significantly over budget on the starship project.”

“Anyway,” Esmeralda said, “you’ve lost that extra weight you were carrying, Pedro. That has to be a good thing, surely.”

Elsa looked ready to explode, but Pedro squeezed her hand.

“I’ll have a word with the chef,” Hamati said. “He might be able to come up with something that’s a bit more filling without breaking the bank.”

Elsa nodded half-heartedly. “Thank you, Uncle.”

“Excellent. Would you two like to join us for dessert?”

Brody knocked on Pedro’s door. “Excuse me, but there’s something I’d like to run past you.”

“Of course; come in.”

“We know that subspace is bounded by the galaxy’s gravitational well, and if a starship were to pass through that boundary it’d drop back to real space.”

“That’s right.”

“If my analysis is correct, it would have a considerable velocity away from the galaxy, far more than it’d be able to counter with its retro-thrusters.”

“Uh huh.”

“Depending on its speed of travel through subspace, it could even be close to light speed and if that were to happen, relativistic time

dilation would mean that before anyone on board noticed, they could be thousands of light years away.”

“Show me.”

Brody handed him his notebook.

“I see, yes, that’d happen if the speed through subspace is close to an odd multiple of the speed of light.”

“That’s right, but conversely, if it’s an even multiple, the real-space speed will be zero relative to the galactic core.”

“In which case there’d be no problem, right?”

“Indeed, so what I’m proposing is that the starships should always cruise at such an even multiple, so if the worst happens, a short burst of the retro-thrusters will bring them back within the subspace shell.”

Pedro nodded. “A wise precaution, indeed; make it happen.”

“Thank you.”

Pedro stared into space, the germ of an idea beginning to form. *By a happy coincidence, he was both three million light years from Earth and something like three million years in the past. It’d be a long shot, a wild stab in the dark if it came to that, but if there was no other choice...*

* * *

Pedro stepped up to Kyle’s desk. “Are you all set?”

“Yes, I’ve integrated the stellar database with this mapping software I found. Where do we start?”

“See if you can find a pair of stars half a light year apart that are about four or five hundred light years from here.”

“That’s a lot of space to cover.”

“If it helps, both stars are about the same size as our sun, although one of them is a fair bit older.”

Kyle applied the appropriate filters to the database. “It looks like there might be half a dozen good candidates.”

“Excellent. Can you give me a view of the night sky I’d see from each one?”

“Yes, just a moment.”

Pedro closed his eyes, trying to recall the constellations he’d seen while visiting Frank Halliday’s place on Meridian during the bunyip

affair, now grateful he'd been an astronomy whiz-kid for the first twenty-two years of his life as Peter Thorpe.

"Try this one for starters," Kyle said.

Pedro grabbed the mouse, using it to pan around that first star's night sky, but nothing resonated.

"Okay, give me a moment to bring up the next pair."

Once again he panned across the sky but nothing looked particularly familiar.

"No worries; let's try couple number three."

"You'd make a great game show ho—" Pedro started to say, but his jaw dropped the moment he looked at the screen. "That's it!"

"The younger star's catalogue number is SC523 and the older is SC524, both in the *Constellation of the Elf*."

Pedro felt as if he'd just been pulled inside out. "The what?"

Kyle flicked back to the view from Huntress. "See, this group of stars looks a bit like an elf if you have a good imagination."

"Amazing; not only does the constellation look the same from five hundred light years away, they've even given it the same bloody name!"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Now if you can go back to the view from the younger star, I'm pretty sure I'll be able to identify the rest of the ones I need."

An hour later, Pedro had the catalogue numbers and stellar coordinates for each of the future empire's twelve principal worlds. "There's just one more thing I need."

"What's that?"

"There's a neighbouring galaxy about three million light years away."

"You mean the *Milk Drop*?"

Again Pedro felt as if he'd been pulled inside out. "I guess so. Do you have a picture of it?"

Kyle opened a search engine, quickly finding a high-resolution image.

"Yep, that's the one."

"What do you want that for? You'll never reach it in one of your ships, unless – no, you couldn't, you wouldn't!"

“It’s a last resort if everything goes pear-shaped.”
Kyle turned pale. “Oh.”

Uprising

Trevor started the tractor, pulling the completed starship out of the assembly building.

“She’s a beauty, Pedro,” Hamati said.

“It’s a lot bigger than I was imagining,” Esmeralda said.

Elsa grinned. “It’ll take twenty crew and up to a thousand passengers. If Drago will provide the funding, we can increase that to five thousand in the later models.”

“I’m impressed.”

Pedro walked halfway up the boarding ramp. “Would the first group of trainee crew members like to come forward? It’s time to put your classroom theory to the test.”

He stood aside as the twenty trainees entered the ship to the cheering and applause of the crowd of onlookers.

“Good luck,” Hamati said as Elsa stepped up to join Pedro, “and try not to get lost in space.”

“We won’t. It’s baby steps today, isn’t it, Pedro?”

“Yep, baby steps. We won’t go anywhere near the galaxy’s core, I promise.”

“And don’t go too close to the edge either,” Esmeralda said.

“We won’t.”

Pedro and Elsa strapped themselves into the instructors’ chairs that had been temporarily added to the bridge. He opened a channel on the subspace communicator. “Kyle, this is *Conquistador 1*, do you receive?”

“Loud and clear, Pedro. You’re good for departure.”

Pedro turned to the helmsman. “Take us up to jump altitude then execute a subspace transition to orbital level fourteen.”

The helmsman grinned. “Yes, sir!”

With the roar of the atmospheric turbines, the starship took to the air.

“Jumping now,” the helmsman said as a twinkle of blue light flashed around the ship. He checked their position on the navigational display. “At orbital level fourteen, sir.”

Pedro opened the communications channel again. “Kyle, we’re now in orbit. Do you receive?”

“Still loud and clear, Pedro.”

He turned back to the helmsman. “Let’s go play with the outer planets, okay? Take us to an orbit ten thousand kilometres above Ares.”

“Yes, skipper.”

This time there were two distinct flashes of blue as the ship made its subspace jump. Below them hung the desolate landscape of their solar system’s equivalent of Mars.

Pedro turned to the planetary analyst. “Chelsea, what’s our altitude?”

“Ten thousand kilometres give or take bumps in the surface.”

“Atmosphere?”

“Ninety percent carbon dioxide with the rest a mixture of nitrogen and argon.”

“Surface temperature?”

“Directly below us, it’s minus fifty degrees.”

“Thanks; I guess we won’t be landing for a picnic today.” He opened the communications channel again. “Kyle, we’re now in orbit around Ares. How’s the signal and round trip delay?”

“You’re still loud and clear, Pedro, and the delay reads zero.”

“It looks like everything’s working perfectly so I’m going to take us to that star we were looking at recently.”

“SC523?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Is that wise? Shouldn’t you try somewhere closer?”

“Even the nearest star is too far for us to walk back, so I can’t see it making much difference.”

“Good point, Pedro. Call me when you arrive.”

“Will do. *Conquistador 1* out.”

“What’s this about?” Elsa asked.

“You’ll see.” Pedro turned to the helmsman. “Take us to a thousand light-seconds this side of SC523.”

“Just a moment, sir.” He entered one of the submenus on the navigation console. “The total flight distance is 453.2965 light years, sir, with no known obstacles in the way. Our subspace transit time will be five hours and seventeen point two minutes.”

Pedro reopened the channel. “Kyle, could you let Hamati know what we’re up to and tell him we won’t be back in time for dinner.”

“Yes, Pedro, he’s with me now and is none too happy.”

“Hamati, trust me, okay?”

“All right, Pedro, but just don’t get yourselves lost.”

“We won’t; it’s familiar territory for me, if you catch my meaning.”

“Enough said; do it before I change my mind.”

Pedro looked around the bridge. “Is everybody happy with this?”

The crew all looked at each other with nothing but eager faces.

“Right; let’s go.”

With a blue flash, Ares disappeared from the foredeck window, replaced by the utter blackness of subspace.

“You can all go and relax or get some food,” Pedro said to the crew. “Be back on deck in five hours from now.”

Elsa turned to him as she unbuckled her seatbelt. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“So do I.”

“Thirty seconds,” the helmsman said.

Pedro fastened his seatbelt. “I hope this works.”

Another blue flash heralded their return to real space. Outside to their left hung a star, slightly smaller in appearance to their own sun.

“Welcome to SC523.” Pedro turned to the analyst. “Could you scan the inner system for planets?”

“Yes, sir; it’ll take about ten minutes for the subspace Doppler reflectometer analysis.”

“What are you expecting to find?” Elsa asked.

“If I’m right, there should be a habitable world here.”

“Skipper,” Chelsea said, “I’m getting a strong return from a planet about twenty million kilometres from here.”

“Can we get an image from this far out?”

“Yes, sir, putting it on screen now.”

The blurry picture showed a world of blue oceans, green and brown continents, ice caps and swirling clouds.

“That’s the one,” Pedro said. “Helmsman, take us into orbit.”

“Yes, sir.”

With another brief subspace jump, they were circling the planet that would someday be known as Meridian. Pedro nodded to himself as he saw the familiar coastline where the port city of Azarath would be built.

“Is this where you came from?” Elsa whispered.

“No, but I visited here once, or will visit, or whatever.”

“It looks nice.”

“Yes, it is. A friend owned, or will own, a vineyard just north of that bay down there.”

“Gosh!”

Pedro turned to Chelsea. “Do you have a reading on the atmosphere?”

“Yes, it’s seventy-five percent nitrogen, twenty-three percent oxygen, with argon, carbon dioxide and a few other trace gases making up the rest. The surface temperature directly below us is twenty-three degrees.”

“Do you want to land?” the helmsman asked.

Pedro looked at Elsa, who shrugged. “Not today, otherwise Hamati will start to panic, but we must come back for a picnic sometime soon. Take lots of photos and any other readings you think might be useful; then we’ll head home.”

The crew all stood applauding while Pedro opened the communications channel. “Kyle, this is *Conquistador 1*, do you receive?”

“Loud and clear, Pedro. Where are you?”

“In orbit around a planet circling SC523. Tell Hamati I found what I was looking for and we’re about to head back.”

“This is fantastic; the signal strength is just as good as it was in the lab and the round trip delay is still reading zero.”

“Thanks, that’s great work, Kyle. I’m sure the Pasha will be pleased.”

“What’s your estimated time back?”

“About five hours from now.”

“I’ll make sure the servery’s open; Hamati’s planning a feast for all of you.”

“Thanks; see you soon.”

* * *

“That’s a great result all round,” Drago said, stepping down from his throne as The Screw led Hamati, Pedro and Elsa into the palatial hall.

Hamati bowed. “Thank you, sire.”

“You may proceed with the construction of another five starships in line with our original budget.”

“But sire, costs have risen, particularly since the star dimmer was ramped up.”

“I can’t just print money for you, Hamati; you’ll need to find further efficiencies or I’ll be forced to send in the Unity League actuaries to do that for you.”

“No need for that, sire. I’m sure we can manage with what we have.”

“Excellent. Now Pedro, could you accompany me outside for a few minutes?”

Pedro gave Elsa a puzzled look. “Um, of course, sire.”

“Thank you. The rest of you help yourselves to the refreshments at the back of the hall.”

Drago led Pedro out a side door to a stone plaza overlooking the sea, with a myriad of stars twinkling overhead in a cloudless sky.

“How many stars are in this galaxy, Pedro?”

“About forty billion, I think.”

“You seem to know a lot about stars.”

“Astronomy has always been an interest of mine.”

“Indeed. Out of those, how many do you think would have habitable planets orbiting them?”

“That’s really anyone’s guess. For main sequence stars, which are the great majority, maybe ten percent would be the right size and age to host such planets, but even those would need to have oceans of

water and continents, with plant and animal species sufficiently evolved to provide a stable oxygen-rich atmosphere.”

“Yet you found one on your very first trip. Either such planets are as common as dirt or it was an amazingly good coincidence, don’t you think?”

Drago placed a hand on Pedro’s shoulder. “I’ve had my eye on you ever since I first saw you and now it’s time to discover what it is that caught my attention. Tell me about this world you call – *Meridian*.”

Images flashed through Pedro’s mind of his arrival at the former Barefooters’ headquarters, the backstreets of Azarath, Frank Halliday’s mansion atop the hill amongst the vineyards and the downtown spaceport from which he’d left.

It’s the birthplace of the great Gomeral civilisation that spread out through that region of the galaxy.

“What other worlds do those Gomeral occupy?”

There’s Cornipus, the most populous world, with its great universities, libraries and cultural centres; Hazler, the commercial and industrial capital of the galaxy; Shimmel, a world of holiday resorts spread across its mountains and sparkling seas; Amber and Sontar, the galaxy’s food bowls; Nimber and Pulpar, the great shipyards and headquarters of the military forces; Ignus, a volcanic world of great mineral wealth and Frizian, a mostly frozen planet but home to the great spice harvests during its short summers.

“That makes ten; what of the other two?”

One is this world, which they call Huntress, at one time used as a prison colony although there were free settlers too, and Bluehaven, home world of the galaxy’s dolphins that carried your essence across the millennia.

“So it’s true, then, I see. What becomes of me?”

A boy, a Pasha created in your likeness, becomes the vessel for your return, and you take up residence here in your palace but the Gomeral don’t like it and seek to destroy you with their weapons.

“Do they succeed?”

No, instead you activate the star dimmers which you’d placed on the suns of each of their worlds, thus subjugating them to your rule.

“Thank you, Pedro, that’s all I need to know.” Drago removed his hand from Pedro’s shoulder, releasing him from the mind probe.

Pedro ran his hands over his face, trying to clear his thoughts. “Wh-what are you going to do?”

“Make sure it all comes to pass, of course.”

“Thank you, sire, for that too is my purpose here.”

“I know.”

Drago led him back into the hall.

“Hamati?”

“Yes, sire.”

“I need you to construct another portal into your Dark Cave and place it underwater on the planet Pedro calls Bluehaven.”

“Underwater?”

“Yes. Will that be a problem?”

“Um, won’t the water pass through it?”

Drago turned to Pedro, who shook his head. “Sheol isn’t a physical realm, so no, it won’t.”

“There you go; an answer from the expert.”

Hamati snapped his fingers. “Of course; that’s why there’s a ninety degree shift in gravity!”

“Yes, but it’s really just an illusion too.”

Drago nodded. “Let me know as soon as it’s in place.”

“Of course, sire.”

Drago signalled to The Screw. “Could you ask the Tivinel to join us now, please?”

The seneschal opened a side door, admitting Mayor Sandford, Doctor Glamming and their entourage of assistants, while Drago returned to his throne.

“My friends; please be seated. I’ve asked you here today to address concerns you’ve recently raised about food shortages and price increases. I understand this is a consequence of the star dimmer’s operation – sorry, Doctor Glamming, the *Solar Photonic Deflector*, I should say – but this is unavoidable for the present time. Taking into account the interests and standing of our world’s many communities, I have therefore decided to introduce food rationing for our Gomeral slaves, with a limit of five thousand kilojoules per person per day.”

Sandford nodded. “As you wish, sire. When does this take effect?”

“Immediately, Sandford, otherwise there’d be a run on our stores and massive hoarding of food once word got out.”

Hamati stood. “My lord, won’t there be health implications and a decline in productivity as a result?”

“Perhaps, although I’m sure the Gomeral can be persuaded to remain productive. None will die of starvation, if that’s your concern, and everything else is merely a matter of good management.”

“Sire, with all due respect –”

“Silence, Hamati! I’ve tolerated your insolence for far too long.”

Hamati sat heavily, grimacing in pain. “Sorry, sire.”

“Be thankful I’m not yet rationing the Barungi’s food.”

Sandford smirked.

“Or the Tivinel’s for that matter. That’s all for now; thank you for attending.”

The Screw began escorting them to the door.

“One moment, Doctor Glamming,” Drago said. “Could we have a quick word?”

“Certainly, sire.”

Drago escorted him to the far corner of the hall. “I need ten more star dimmers as quickly as possible. Can you do that?”

“Certainly, sire; I’ll have them ready within a month.”

“Excellent. Incorporate the Barungi’s subspace communicators into them as I’ll need to control them from here.”

“Of course; that’ll be easy as they’ve already published their work. What of that other matter we discussed?”

“In time, my friend; all in good time.”

* * *

Hamati asked Pedro, Elsa and Esmeralda to wait in his basement while he dashed upstairs, returning a few minutes later with a tray of drinks and nibbles.

“Drago probed my mind,” Pedro said. “He knows everything about who I am, why I’m here and what’s going to unfold.”

Elsa gave Esmeralda a cold glance.

“I trust Esmeralda implicitly,” Hamati said. “Whatever we say here will be kept in the strictest confidence, I’m sure.”

Esmeralda nodded. “How did Drago react?”

“He said he wanted it all to happen anyway, but I don’t trust him.”

“And with good reason,” Elsa said. “What was it like?”

“Creepy; he was recalling memories of places I’d seen on Meridian and what I knew of the other worlds. I could see what he was doing and was subconsciously answering his questions, but was powerless to resist.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“Yes it was, but there was one piece of information he didn’t find.”

“What was that?”

“The nature of his own demise. By chance or good fortune, he accepted my account of his return to power and didn’t pursue it further.”

“Gosh!”

“Luckily by the time I realised what it was he’d almost touched, he’d broken off the connection and took my sudden shock and disorientation as just after-effects of his probing.”

“You can’t let him come near you again.”

“I don’t intend to.”

Elsa turned to Hamati and Esmeralda. “What gives the Pasha such terrible powers? Is it just his genes?”

“Not entirely,” Esmeralda said. “Roly was from my family line and, while there’s been plenty of intermingling with Tivinel over the last five thousand years, none produced another Pasha.”

“That’s right,” Hamati said. “The Pasha alternates between the two primal families: your Dolphin clan, Esmeralda, and the Tivinel’s Dragon clan. I suspect while ever one lives, no other Pasha from that clan can emerge.”

“There must be a psychic element that switches off those genes.”

“Perhaps, but there could be other factors. The half-castes dwelling high in the limestone mountains occasionally produce a proto-Pasha, one with a Pasha-like genome that’s completely dysfunctional. Our curate, Isaac, is such a person.”

Pedro scratched his chin. "Would it be possible to turn off a living Pasha's genome?"

"That, my lad, is something we'd all like to know."

Elsa sighed. "Until someone can figure that out, we have more immediate problems at hand. What are we going to do about his Gomerai food rationing?"

"Remember that matter we discussed after my father's funeral?"

"The secret Gomerai society?"

"Yes, it's time to put words into action. I expect the last of the starships rolling off the production line in a few months will create a fair bit of media interest, so I'm thinking of sending the other five out for public display in our major cities, particularly those with high populations of Gomerai slaves."

Pedro grinned. "I can see where this is heading."

"I'd like you and Elsa to visit those cities to arrange the logistics and, um, perhaps you might bump into a few prominent Gomerai while you're there."

"I like it," Elsa said. "Which cities do you have in mind?"

"The big industrial centres are Hermitage, Stanberg, Port William and Cosgrove. Any ideas for the fifth?"

"The mining communities north-east of my home have many Gomerai slaves," Esmeralda said. "Perhaps Silvan Downs would be central to them."

"Could we offer the mining and industrial companies an incentive to send their slaves to the exhibits?" Elsa asked.

Hamati scratched his chin. "I'm sure that could be arranged as long as it doesn't cost too much."

"What about the slaves here and in the surrounding farmlands?"

"They'll have access to ship number six."

Elsa flicked her fingers. "Of course; silly me."

"I'll prepare the travel documents for you and pull whatever strings I can."

"Thanks, Uncle."

"Unless there's anything else, I'll wish you both a good night."

"Thank you," Pedro said, shaking Hamati's hand.

"No, thank you."

Hamati took Esmeralda's hand after Pedro and Elsa had gone. "I've been given foreknowledge of what's to come that I've sworn not to divulge."

"I'd guessed as much."

"If you have any family or friends in the west that you care for, it might bode well to invite them here for a visit."

"It's that grave, is it?"

"Yes."

* * *

Pedro stood in a tavern in the Tivinel heartland of Hermitage, facing a room full of Gomeral foremen having a *night on the town*. A more rough-and-tumble mob he couldn't imagine, bringing back unpleasant memories of his Kings Cross pub days. Yet appearances could be deceiving, for these were all solicited members of his secret Gomeral society, prepared years in advance for this day.

"Our planet is in deep shit."

He waited for guffaws to die down.

"The sun's been dimmed to perpetual twilight, our crops are failing, our livestock are malnourished and now our food is rationed, all to prop up the Tivinel's grand industrialisation that brings benefit to no-one but themselves.

"I say enough! The day has come to make a stand, to strike out at those who enslave us and begin afresh in a free Gomeral society of our own making. Our masters have provided us with the means for our escape; all we need do is grasp it.

"It won't be easy, let there be no mistake. You'll be starting from scratch with little more than the clothes you're wearing, facing all the unknowns of a new and unexplored world, but you'll be masters of your own destiny, no longer doing the bidding of those who care little for your needs and desires.

"But what if you stay? With the deployment here of subspace power, fossil fuels will soon be phased out and greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will plateau and diminish over time. In twenty, fifty, maybe a hundred years from now, it might be possible to switch off the star dimmer and return our world to its former state."

He paused, allowing his audience to ponder this option.

“Balderdash, I say! I’ve seen Drago’s grandiose plan, or enough of it to know that his vision of the future requires the utter destruction of this world. The apocalypse is nigh and those few who survive will face a lifetime of hardship and deprivation.

“Believe me or not, I don’t care which, but you’ve trusted me enough to be here tonight. In a few weeks from now, Drago’s starship project will be complete and one of the ships will be on public display in the city square, with the Governor agreeing to allow all slaves free access on the third day. The crew will take small groups through the bridge and engineering room, so all you need do is show your slave ID and you’ll be escorted to the passenger deck. The ship will take off shortly after the gates close at three o’clock.”

A man at the front stood. “What if this new world turns out to be inhospitable?”

“The starship and crew will remain with you, so in a worst case scenario you could return. We’ve also identified a number of other worlds with compatible ecosystems and your crew will be able to take you to those if need be, but from what we’ve been able to ascertain, Meridian has more than enough resources for you to prosper there.”

“How many people can the starship take?”

“It’s designed to comfortably carry a thousand passengers, but at a pinch we could squeeze in up to ten times that. The journey to Meridian takes a little over five hours so you won’t have to endure too much discomfort as long as you visit the bathroom before you leave.”

“Can we bring any animals?”

“No, as introduced species could pose a grave risk to the planet’s native ecosystem.”

“What if the Tivinel get wind of what we’re doing and try to stop us?”

“That’s a definite risk and we’ll have people on watch to divert any undue attention, but it’d be good if you could also plan some diversions of your own.”

Several of the group chuckled. “I’m sure we can create a bit of mayhem, folks.”

“Just don’t get yourselves arrested and miss the flight.”

“We won’t.”

Pedro looked around the room for any further questions, but none were forthcoming.

“That’s it, then, I guess. If there’s anything else, you know how to contact me, otherwise I’ll see you all on our new home. Oh, and of course tonight the drinks are on me.”

Everyone stood applauding as Pedro grabbed his glass and took a long swig of tonic water. *One down and four more to go*, he thought.

* * *

Charon sat nursing an ale at one of the concession stands in the Hermitage town square, watching the comings and goings around the starship on display.

“Mind if I join you?” a voice from behind said. He turned to see the Tivinel mayor, Sandford.

“What a wonderful achievement this is,” Sandford said, waving his arm towards the starship, “even if it was built on Barungi land.”

“Yes indeed; the design produced by our *Tivinel Research Foundation* has proved a huge success in the test flights. I’m sure the fleet will bring great rewards for our people.”

“Worlds beyond count to conquer and exploit, I’ve been told, and this is just the beginning, my friend, just the beginning!”

“It was good thinking on your part to allow the slaves to visit today; it shows them what sacrifice and hard work can achieve when we all pull together for the common good.”

“It does indeed; I couldn’t have put it better myself, particularly when that half-witted Barungi clan leader is paying for it. I can’t understand why he’s doing that; it makes me wonder if —”

“Perhaps it was at the Pasha’s behest.”

“Ah, now that makes sense. He’s become a wonderful leader in these few short years; a true statesman and visionary if ever there was one. Such a contrast to his predecessor, I must say.”

“Yes, he’s quite the contrast.”

Sirens blared in the adjoining street as several fire engines dashed by.

“A bit of trouble brewing by the look of it,” Charon said.

“Yes, I’d better go and see what’s up. It wouldn’t look good for me to be sitting here drinking while my city burns to the ground.”

“No indeed; I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“It’s probably just a grass fire started by kids playing with matches, but we can’t be too careful these days.”

Charon waved before turning back to the square, where the policemen who’d been mingling with the crowd were turning and making for the exit. Once they’d gone, groups of Gomeral lingering around the food stalls began sauntering towards the ship, disappearing one by one into its maw.

“Charon, is that you?” a loud voice said from behind him. He turned to see a flustered Tivinel man in a business suit.

“What’s wrong, Reginald?”

“I seem to have misplaced a busload of slaves. You haven’t seen them by any chance, have you?”

Charon patted his arm. “I did, I’m sure, but I overheard one of them suggesting they should adjourn to a nearby tavern.”

“Did he say which one?”

“No, I’m afraid not, and there are quite a few in this part of town, aren’t there?”

Reginald sighed. “I’d better start searching then; I’ll join you for a drink if I find them before closing time.”

Charon waved as he marched back towards the gate, metaphorical steam coming from his ears.

The crowd dwindled as the day drew to a close, with an announcement calling all those remaining to head to the gate. Charon stepped over to the ship, peering in to see one of the crew give him the thumbs up. Walking around the perimeter to make sure no-one was lurking, he turned to join the last of the visitors at the exit.

Watching from outside the fence, he observed the boarding ramp close and the ship slowly rise into the air.

“They sure didn’t hang about,” a passer-by said.

He looked around as more sirens blared in the distance, seeing a dozen palls of black smoke hanging in the air. *Those are more than just grass fires*, he thought, chuckling.

* * *

Pedro looked across to the river where Elsa piloted her father's ferry towards the makeshift pier.

"These will be the last of the slaves from Benton and Dartmoor," Hamati said.

Kyle looked up from the communications desk set up next to them. "All the other ships have jumped to subspace."

"Excellent; as soon as this lot are on board, you can be off too, Pedro."

Pedro gave Hamati a hug. "Thanks for everything you've done over the past six years. I don't know where we'd have been without you."

"I'm just doing what I would've done had you not been here, Pedro. I'm sure your future is safe."

"Yes, today we've cleared the last hurdle."

Esmeralda, accompanied by her family and friends from the west, waved from the far corner of the field.

"You'd better go see what she wants," Pedro said, giving Hamati a final handshake.

"Good luck with your new home; I wish we could join you."

"Your fate lies along a different path, Hamati, but we'll meet again, I know."

"Until then, farewell."

Pedro watched as he dashed away, wondering if he really understood what fate awaited him.

"What's up?" Hamati asked as he trotted over to Esmeralda.

"You've said goodbye to your friends enough times already and you promised to take my cousins to lunch at the bay."

"Yes, you're right, and I don't think I could stand to watch Elsa and Pedro walk onto that ship."

"They'll be fine; anyway you'll be able to talk to them over Kyle's radio once they've landed."

"Okay, let's go."

He followed them back along the road to their waiting vehicle.

Pedro turned back to the river after watching them walk off, only to see a powerful cruiser speeding towards them from the direction of Benton.

“We’ve got company!” he yelled to Elsa and the slaves who were halfway between the river and the ship, dashing off towards them across the salt flats as they started running towards him.

By the time he reached Elsa, two dozen Tivinel were almost upon them, men and women he’d seen before. “It’s the thugs from the old playground in Dartmoor!”

“We have to hold them off!”

Pedro signalled to Brody and Kyle to hurry everyone on board the ship, before turning to face his opponents. Elsa picked up a couple of dead branches, throwing one to him.

“Oi, this is private property!”

“Says who?” the leading thug yelled back.

“Says me!”

“Why should we take your word for it, you piss-weak son-of-a-bitch Gomeral slug?”

“Polite, aren’t they?” Elsa said.

Pedro raised his branch as the thug charged, taking a big back swing and bringing it crashing down across the man’s shoulders, but he hadn’t counted on the rot that had eaten through all but its outer shell. The branch shattered into half a dozen impotent pieces, leaving him holding just ten centimetres of crumbling stick.

“You shouldn’t have done that, squirt.”

The thug raised his fists, while from the corner of his eye Pedro saw another tackle Elsa to the ground, her branch as ineffective as his.

The last thing he heard as a huge set of knuckles struck his head was the roaring sound of the starship taking off.

The Apocalypse

Charon barged into the Black Delphinidae seminary where Hamati knelt in silent prayer before the shrine.

“My daughter was indentured to you, meaning you had a duty of care to protect her. Perhaps you can explain how she was kidnapped so easily on your watch.”

“I’m so sorry, Charon, so sorry. Had I known there was any risk, I wouldn’t have –”

“You wouldn’t have what? Gone off with your floozy?”

“Esmeralda is no floozy.”

Charon laughed. “She’s had you under her spell since the day she arrived, hasn’t she? Those slaves she brought with her don’t call her the *Witch Queen of the West* for nothing, it seems.”

“Careful what you say, Charon.”

“Why? Do you think she’ll put a spell on me? Matera’s beside herself with worry, Hamati, and what are you doing? Cowering here in the dark, that’s what! Either you bring her back safely or you’ll be just as extinct as that black dolphin you’re praying to.”

Hamati felt an icy coldness against his chest as Charon strode from the room. A vision came unbidden, of a blond-headed boy with penetrating blue eyes and, suspended on a fine chain around his neck, the sacred talisman of the Black Delphinidae creed. *Clem*, a voice whispered from the deepest recesses of his mind.

Removing the ebony dolphin he’d worn since Roly’s death, he bowed to the shrine before stepping out into the vestuary.

“Your Grace?” the curate asked.

Hamati handed him the amulet. “The Black Dolphin’s essence has left me, Isaac. Take this to your people in the mountains, who will become custodians of the creed until a new emissary is chosen.”

“Are you sure of this?”

“Yes, for I’ve betrayed my faith and my calling. Now I must go find my niece and her betrothed. Fare you well in these dark and troubled times.”

Isaac bowed. “And you, Hamati.”

* * *

Pedro moaned, wondering why his head hurt and thinking for a moment he must have fallen off his bike at his childhood home in Brisbane. The smell of rotting seaweed didn’t fit with that picture, though, and as his eyes focused, he realised he was lying in the back of a damp sea cave.

“Excellent, you’re awake,” Drago said, once again perched naked on his rock. “I feared my helpers may have been a little too zealous.”

“Wh-what is it you want?”

“Now, now, all in good time, my friend. We’re on the same side, remember?”

“Where’s Elsa? What have you done with her?”

“She’s safe for now, but before I reunite you with her, there’s a small task I need you to perform.”

Pedro tried to sit up but almost passed out with the pain shooting through his temples.

“Just relax; my seneschal will bring you some water shortly, but fear not, it’s something you already know that needs doing, just a loose end so to speak.”

Pedro tried to make sense of what he’d just heard, but the world spun away into dreams of bicycles with his school friends, Danny and Steve.

“Peter,” Steve said. “I can’t be with you in your hour of need, but I can be your guide. The future still hangs by a thread and only you can save it.”

“What must I do?”

“Trust your instincts and take the long shot.”

“Is there anything else?”

“I’ll be with you too, Pedro,” another voice said.

“Jim?”

“Yes. We can do for you what you did for Joel.”

“But how?”

“Drink this,” The Screw said, dragging Pedro back to consciousness. He opened his eyes to see a cup of water suspended in front of them.

Replenished, he found himself able to stand. The Screw, taking a strong grip of his bicep, led him upstairs and out onto the forecourt where Drago and Glamming stood alongside *Star Dimmer 1*.

Drago smiled. “Excellent, I’m glad we didn’t permanently incapacitate you. As I said, I have just a small task for you to perform, then you and your lady friend will be free to go, all right?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“That’s the spirit, Pedro.”

“What must I do?”

“I have ten more *Solar Photonic Deflectors* I want deployed on those stars you told me about, plus there’s the portal Hamati built for me that needs to go underwater on the world you call Bluehaven.”

“All right, but I’ll need the list of stellar coordinates I left back in my room.”

“Don’t worry, I can flush them from your memory.”

Pedro gulped.

After handing him a sheet of paper and a pen, Drago placed a hand on his shoulder. Pedro immediately found himself back in Kyle’s office on the day they’d been searching the star maps.

“If you can go back to the view from the younger star, I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to identify the rest of the ones I need.”

Pedro began writing as one by one the coordinates flashed before him.

“There’s just one more thing I need.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s a neighbouring galaxy about three million light years away.”

Unsure what Drago would make of it but determined nonetheless, he jotted down the declination and right ascension of the *Milky Way*.

“Look behind you,” Jim’s voice whispered.

Pedro went to turn his head. *“No, with your mind’s eye. Look back into Drago.”*

Pedro closed his eyes, letting his mind visualise the psychic connection between him and the Pasha. *“Good, follow it along.”*

Pedro saw a mass of DNA strands, twisting, joining, branching, with what looked like tiny molecular cars zooming back and forth along them, taking some paths but avoiding others, until a glowing light approached, allowing those previously closed paths to open and create a glow of their own. “What does it mean?”

The vision shifted; now he saw a red man in a corral with many red horses. Try as he might, the man couldn’t open the gate, until a blond man on a blond horse came by, opening it for him. The red man’s horses ran free, but he soon realised he didn’t need the blond man to hold the gate open as he could do that himself, so he slew him.

“I still don’t get it.”

“Just remember what you’ve seen,” Steve said. “When the time comes, you’ll understand.”

“What are you up to, Pedro?” Drago said, breaking the connection.

“Sorry, just wool-gathering.” He glanced down at the sheet of paper, making sure he had all the coordinates he needed.

“Remember you have to emerge from subspace on the opposite side of the fold to those stars,” Glamming said. “Were you to come out into the core of the star itself, it wouldn’t be pretty.”

Pedro grimaced at the thought, hoping none of those stars had a twin opposite it.

Glamming handed him a dolphin-shaped amulet. “Activate each dimmer as you release it so it’ll lock itself into position, but set the deflection rate to zero.”

“Uh huh. What about the Bluehaven portal?”

“Just place it in the water somewhere safe,” Drago said. “It’s already activated.”

“Okey dokey. Is there anything else?”

Drago looked at Glamming, who shook his head. “Just bring the ship back here when you’re done and, once we’ve confirmed that the dimmers are all in place and functioning, I’ll release your fiancée into your care. You have my word.”

Pedro considered saying what he thought Drago’s word was worth but, deciding it’d be counterproductive, boarded the ship instead.

“The dimmers are all in place and I’ve set the Bluehaven portal some ten metres underwater in a sheltered bay,” Pedro said as he stepped from the ship.

“Excellent,” Drago said. “Come with me while I check that they’re all functional.”

Inside the palatial hall, Drago opened a panel on the side wall, revealing a set of controls similar to those on the dimmer. He keyed through each of the star dimmers, checking its status readout.

“Well done, my friend,” he said, leading Pedro back outside. “That pretty much wraps everything up, don’t you think?”

“What about Elsa?”

“Oh yes, I almost forgot.” He turned to Glamming. “Bring the hostage out.”

Glamming dashed back up the steps and into the palace, returning a couple of minutes later with Elsa, her hands tied behind her back.

“Pedro, are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes, everything’s sweet now.”

“Yes, Pedro,” Drago said. “Everything’s sweet.” He nodded to Glamming who took a deep breath before pushing Elsa down the steps.

Unable to protect herself, she fell head-first onto the marble, her skull making a sickening thump as it struck.

Pedro rushed to her side, fearing the worst, but she was still breathing.

“You bastards!” he yelled as Drago and Glamming disappeared into the palace, closing and locking the door behind them.

Drago led Glamming into the portal room where Sandford and his Tivinel dignitaries stood waiting. “For now you must return to your lands. When the end comes, take as many of your people into the Dark Cave as you can, especially the thought-weavers as they’ll be able to make you a new home there.”

“What about you, sire?” Sandford asked.

“Don’t worry about me; I’ve planned my own escape. My friends, I foresee a time when not only will this world be restored in all its

glory, but the Gomerel will have spread to many others, creating a vast empire for my faithful Tivinel and I to rule. Await my return so that, together, we will become unrivalled lords of the universe.”

Once they’d gone, Drago descended the stairs to the sea cave where he entered the water. Summoning his pod of dolphins, he closed his eyes and passed his essence into them.

Pedro gently carried Elsa on board *Star Dimmer 1* and buckled her into a seat, checking that her airway remained clear. Closing the hatch, he strapped himself in and took to the sky, making sure he still had the dolphin amulet. Once in orbit, he executed a subspace jump to Huntress’s star dimmer.

After checking again on Elsa, he donned his pressure suit and passed out through the airlock to the dimmer, trying to remember what he’d read in the technical documentation on overriding the inbuilt safety mechanisms.

Pressing and holding down all the buttons at once, he waited for the light to go a constant red before setting the deflection rate to a hundred percent and giving the first and last buttons another quick press.

The dimmer shook, gently at first but soon becoming as wild as a bucking bronco. Pedro let go, using his tether to pull himself back into the airlock before it could strike him and do some real damage. As soon as he was back in the cabin, he executed a jump through the safe passage to an orbit around Huntress.

Looking at the last entry on his sheet of paper, he keyed in the coordinates for the Milky Way galaxy. “Help me, please. We have only four minutes before the solar flash reaches here.”

He turned to see the ghostly figures of Jim and Steve standing at the back of the cabin.

“*Let me sit on your lap and guide your hands,*” Jim said.

Pedro felt a tingling like an electrical charge where Jim’s ethereal body touched his, but tried his best to ignore it and concentrate on what they were doing.

“We have to programme the navigational computer to send us through subspace at as close to an exact odd multiple of the speed of

light as it can manage, while at the same time reaching the edge of the galaxy as fast as possible.”

“Yes, I know,” Jim said.

Pedro felt his hands being guided as he keyed in the settings. “This is such a wild shot in the dark. Can it possibly work?”

“No, but we’ll do it anyway. The future needs you, Pedro, and only you can save it.”

Fingers, toes and eyes crossed, Pedro executed the jump. Seconds after they’d gone, Huntress’s sun flared into an infernal ball of light, shrouding its planets in an expanding cloud of superheated plasma before fading away to become, on this side of the fold, a red dwarf.

* * *

Hamati stood alone in the seminary’s back field, watching the stars appear as twilight transitioned into night. Somewhere out there, on a planet Pedro had called Meridian, the Gomeral were setting up their new home, free from the trouble and strife still binding him to this world. He wished again that he’d joined them, but Pedro had told him that his fate lay along a different path.

Where were Pedro and Elsa? Were they safe? Were they even still alive?

He moaned. He’d let them down, let everyone down; if only he’d

—

A bright light flashed in the west, as bright as daylight. Brighter and brighter it grew, blindingly bright, forcing him to close his eyes and turn away.

His fate had arrived. The apocalypse, Pedro had called it, Drago’s utter destruction of this world.

Hunkering down, he covered his face and wept, but the light soon faded and the stars returned, the night peaceful once more. Returning at length to the seminary common room, he curled up on the nearest sofa and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Hamati woke to the sound of running footsteps and shouting voices. Rubbing his eyes, he thought it should be dawn by now even though everything remained dark.

“There you are, Hamati!” Brody said. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Everything; the sun’s gone out!”

“What?”

“Come outside and look.”

Hamati followed him out. In the east, where the rising sun should’ve been, hung a dim red globe surrounded by a scarlet haze tapering off into blackness. The air was hot in spite of the dark, with the wind already picking up towards gale force.

Kyle came running up to them. “I’ve just heard the news! There was a massive solar flare last night incinerating everything and everyone on the sunlit side of the planet.”

Hamati looked back at the red globe in the sky. “It’s that bloody star dimmer; the damn thing must have malfunctioned.” He reached out with his thoughts, sensing the absence of a familiar void. “The Pasha’s dead.”

“Gosh! What do we do?”

Remembering that, in spite of all that had happened, he was still clan leader, he ran his hands over his face and straightened himself up. “Call a town meeting at the square in Kurramurra. I want everyone there by noon.”

Streetlights illuminated the square as the Barungi townsfolk assembled, the sun even dimmer now than at dawn. Hamati looked around, trying to find Esmeralda, but couldn’t see her anywhere amongst the crowd. Sighing, he raised his hands to silence the chatter.

“My people, our world is lost. By accident or design, the star dimmer has failed, plunging us into perpetual night and destroying everything in the west. Even our derided Pasha is dead.”

Some half-hearted cheering rose from the crowd but it was sour comfort, he knew.

“Roly spoke of this day just before he died. *A time of upheaval approaches, but don’t lose hope, for from this will spring a far greater good.*

“Don’t lose hope! Something good will come of this, I know, something *great*, and we still have a part to play in that. The Gomerall

have taken our starships, for that was part of the plan, but we have another means of escape. As some of you know, in my basement is a portal to the Dark Cave. There we'll take refuge until the day our world is restored."

"How do you know it'll ever be restored?"

Hamati motioned Isaac to step forward.

"My people, the half-castes, took refuge in the limestone caves high in the mountains and survived last night's apocalypse. Hamati has passed the Black Delphinidae's talisman into our care, as is the will of the Black Dolphin. Our legends and folklore speak of the Fisherman, a saviour who will return the black dolphins to our seas, but first we must seek the truth behind what has happened, for this evil's roots extend far beyond Drago.

"My Barungi friends, this is our pledge: *in the dimming of the stars shall the truth be found and the exiled shall be redeemed.*"

The crowd offered polite but subdued applause as he stepped down.

"With all due respect to Isaac," someone said, "those are just words. How do we know his pledge will ever be fulfilled?"

Hamati grimaced. "We don't, but right now we have no other choice. The darkness and heat will soon kill our crops and if we stay we'll die. As of now we're a people in exile, cast into the abyss with only our faith to see us through.

"Return to your homes, talk to your loved ones and decide what you should do. At dawn tomorrow I'll open my basement portal into the Dark Cave and those who wish may follow me into that realm. What will happen then I do not know, but at least we can endure a little longer in that timeless place."

"We'll follow you to whatever end, Hamati," another shouted.

"To whatever end," the rest chanted as they slowly dispersed.

Charon grabbed Hamati by the arm as he stepped down from the podium. "Elsa and Pedro are dead."

"What?"

"A reliable informant told me they were taken to the Pasha's palace, so yesterday Matera flew to the west to try to secure their release. All who were there last night have perished."

Hamati covered his face. "I'm so sorry, Charon, so sorry."

“And so you should be. Where’s Esmeralda?”

“I don’t know; I haven’t seen her all day.”

“Good riddance, I say; perhaps you’ll come to your senses now.”

Hamati shrugged. “What will you be doing, Charon?”

“The Tivinel thought-weavers are already planning a new home for us in the Dark Cave; they speak of a fine city of towers where we can take refuge for as long as we must.”

“I wish you well, then.”

Charon shook his head. “You think you’re a great statesman, Hamati, but you’re nothing but a leader of ogres.”

With that, he strode off into the gloom.

* * *

Guided by his foreknowledge of what was to come, Drago sent the dolphins carrying his essence deep into the ocean when the sun flared, protecting them from the scorching heat until it was safe for them to surface for air.

As other dolphins passed, he spread his essence into them, creating a collective consciousness with many souls but just one mind. He was content to bide his time, knowing that soon the heat from the flare, and subsequent blanketing of the planet with plasma, would melt the ice caps, raising the sea level sufficiently for the dolphins to enter the many portals into the Barungi’s *dark cave*, the realm more commonly known as Sheol. From there, they’d pass through the newly deployed portal into the seas of Bluehaven, colonising that world.

It would take a long time, he knew, three million years to be precise, but eventually the Gomeral would spread far and wide from Meridian, colonising not only nearby stars but galaxies too, and from there would come a child bred in Drago’s likeness, a vessel for him to inhabit once more and take his true place as supreme ruler of the universe.

* * *

Pedro woke to a beeping from the navigational console, warning him that he’d almost reached the subspace boundary at the outer edge

of the galaxy. Ahead, some three million light years away and three million years into the future, was his and Elsa's only hope. *A shot in the dark, a million-to-one chance.* The slightest course error could see him miss the Milky Way galaxy entirely, while the slightest error in his subspace velocity could make his ship take years or millennia instead of days to reach its destination. Yet even if he pulled that off, there was no guarantee he could find the right sun amongst its hundred billion stars or arrive at a time in Earth's history when Elsa could be saved.

"It's too late to worry about that now," Jim said as the space around the craft flashed blue, signifying its transition from the galaxy's subspace shell into the vast emptiness of intergalactic real space.

At the speed he was travelling, so close to light speed that the difference was purely academic, all light from outside the ship was red- or blue-shifted far into invisibility, so all he could see from the window was the thinnest blur of colour directly tangential to his path.

He checked Elsa again, still deeply unconscious although her breathing and pulse remained steady.

"Don't lose hope, Peter," Steve said, reminding Pedro that, at his primal core, he was still Peter Thorpe.

I'm becoming you, aren't I?

Or perhaps I'm becoming you.

"What would Peter do in this situation?" he asked out loud.

"Exactly the same as you," Jim said.

Pedro's thoughts drifted back to that turning point in his life when he'd rescued Peter from the Blue Mountains wilderness and the Barradhim plotting his death. That had led him to Joel Morison and his battle with the Tivinel psychopath, Tristan, their chase bringing him here into the distant past where he'd spent the last six years as a living, breathing, physical young man. *How did that happen?*

Yawning and too tired to ponder such philosophical questions, he closed his eyes, wondering what had become of his friends and how Joel was faring now.

Part Three

The Boy in the Window



Bundle of Joy

“Joel, wait!”

“Sorry, Willy.” Joel stopped running, waiting for his friend to catch up. “Can you sense him?”

“Sense who?”

“I thought you were supposed to be the telepathic one. It’s –”

Joel suddenly turned, staring into the rain-soaked forest surrounding them. A flash of lightning revealed a young face staring back at him from behind a tree.

In the gloom that followed, Joel could hear scampering further into the forest.

“No, wait; it’s Joel, Joel Morison!”

The soft footsteps of bare feet on wet leaf litter approached. “J-Joel?”

In the next lightning flash he saw a brown-haired boy standing some five metres away. Aged perhaps eight or nine, he was wearing only a pair of dark-blue shorts.

Joel crouched down, a puzzled look on his face. “We won’t hurt you; it’s just you’re not who I thought you were.”

The boy grinned. “Who was I supposed to be?”

“Roly.”

“I’ve heard that name; my mum sometimes talks about him. Did you know him?”

“Yes.”

“You must be very old then.”

“No, um, I’m only nineteen; it’s hard to explain.”

The boy grinned again. “I’d like to hear your story, but perhaps after the rain has stopped would be better. I love the rain, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Who’s your friend?”

Willy took a step forward before crouching beside Joel. “I’m Willy. What’s your name?”

“Mum said I’m not supposed to talk to strangers, but you don’t look so strange. I’m Caleb.”

Willy nodded. “That’s a nice name.”

“Thank you.” Caleb looked at him, his expression suddenly far too serious for an eight-year-old. “You killed my father.”

“I what?”

“You head-butted him into the fiery pit, but you did it to save Joel and everyone.”

Willy covered his face. “Yes, I did. Can you forgive me, Caleb?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I wouldn’t have been born if he’d lived.”

Joel gasped. “Are you saying you’re Tristan’s son?”

“Yes, but before I was even born, he went away and never came back. Don’t be sad or sorry; my father means nothing to me, he just made me what I am.”

“What are you, Caleb?”

Caleb thrust out his scrawny chest as the darkness of the forest seemed to close in around them. “A beautiful little bundle of joy! Follow me!”

He ran off down the track, with Joel and Willy hard on his heels. The sky began to lighten as the storm moved further to the south-east and the rain eased to a light sprinkle.

The sun came out just as they reached the end of the track where it emerged onto a beach next to a small stream swollen with the storm’s rain.

“Help me set the fish net up,” Caleb said, opening a wooden box mounted to a post alongside the stream and pulling out a bundled-up net and some rope.

“What do you want us to do?” Joel asked.

“I’ll go over the other side then you can throw me one end of the rope.”

“Are you sure –”

Before Joel could finish, Caleb dashed nimbly across using a fallen log as a bridge.

“Okay, catch!”

Joel threw out the rope but it only reached the centre of the stream.

“Tie a heavy stick to it, Joel.”

“Here,” Willy said, handing him a sizeable lump of wood.

With the rope tied, Joel succeeded in reaching the other bank with his throw.

“Tie the other end to the net and I’ll pull it across, then tie your end to that tree next to you.”

“Gotcha.”

With the net deployed, Caleb dashed back across the log bridge to join them. “Want to go for a swim?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He ran down to the beach while untying the cord on his shorts. “You can take off your clothes if you want; I always do.”

Willy and Joel glanced at each other before following his lead.

“The water’s a bit cold but you’ll soon get used to it,” Caleb said, making his way out to the breakers.

“Nah, it’s nice.”

“Speak for yourself, Joel,” Willy said, wrapping his arms around his chest. “It’s bloody freezing!”

“That’s only because you come from a hot world.”

“That might be so, but it still doesn’t make the water any less cold.”

“Wuss.”

Caleb laughed at their banter before catching a wave and riding it all the way up to the sand.

Joel and Willy caught the next one in just as Hamati and a Barungi woman emerged from the track and sat on the sand next to where they’d dumped their clothes.

Caleb waved to them. “That’s my mum but I don’t know the man she’s with.”

“He’s Hamati, one of our friends,” Joel said.

“Hello, Hamati!”

Hamati waved back, grinning.

His curiosity satisfied, Caleb waded back into deeper water.

“Don’t go out too far,” the woman called from the shore.

“No, Mum!” He turned to Joel and Willy. “I mustn’t go out of my depth or I’ll drown. Look, here comes a big one! Quick, catch it!”

Hamati turned to Esmeralda. “They look like they’re having fun.”

“Yes, Caleb loves the surf and would stay down here all day if I let him.”

“Does he have any friends his own age he can play with?”

“No, everyone else in the village is around our age, but it’s probably a good thing given his mind powers. He’s a good-natured boy and well-mannered, but even just a flash of anger could have dire consequences for other children.”

“Oh, I see.”

“In olden times the parents of a new Pasha would have their clan for support, but here it’s just me and a few other old hags.”

“Esmeralda, you’re not –”

She laughed. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Hamati.”

A phone started ringing from in amongst the bundle of discarded clothes.

“Hello, this Joel’s phone,” Hamati said, fishing it out and switching to the galaxy’s modern-day common tongue.

“Oh, um, is that you Hamati? It’s Loraine here, I take it you’ve found him.”

“Yes, Joel and Willy safe.”

“Can I speak to him please?”

“Sorry, that not possible right now.”

“What? Why?”

“Is difficult to explain, but he safe and sound so don’t worry. He happy, has found answer to DNA riddle. Go rescue David and I tell you afterwards.”

“Should I send a shuttle to pick you all up? We can do with all the help we can get on Hazler.”

“No, can’t do that. You go, Hamati talk later. Goodbye.”

“You handled that diplomatically,” Esmeralda said as he closed the call.

“Loraine and her friends have enough problems of their own to worry about right now. Her brother is about to be executed on Hazler because they think *he’s* the new Pasha.”

“Good grief. Have people learnt nothing over the past three million years?”

“It seems not.”

“What brought you here, Hamati?”

“Roly left a message imprinted in Joel’s DNA which led us to your graveyard.”

“Why would he have done that?”

“To bring us to Caleb, I presume, but I don’t know what he wanted us to do once we found him. When Joel brought back the hair samples from Roly and Drago, I thought my role was to prevent the birth of another Pasha, but obviously we were about nine years too late to do that. As soon as I sensed Caleb’s presence, though, I realised this Pasha was different; there’s a quality about him so unlike either Roly or Drago.”

“Exactly; I felt that from the moment he was born. Roly was stoic, Drago was conniving but Caleb is, well, playful is the best way I can describe it. I call him my beautiful little bundle of joy.”

“I wonder if that’s because he came into his powers of his own accord without having to challenge and kill a predecessor.”

“I’m sure that’s a part of it, but there’s something more fundamental too.”

“Yes, you’re right. After Roly died I became custodian of the Black Delphinidae, which I passed on to the half-castes at the time of the apocalypse, but I sense something of the Black Dolphin in Caleb, something perhaps even stronger than the essence carried by the present day emissary, Pip.”

Esmeralda covered her mouth. “He and Pip won’t have to fight to the death, will they?”

“No, the Black Delphinidae doesn’t work that way. If anything happens, it’ll be a collaboration between them, I’m sure.”

“That’s a relief.”

Hamati glanced across to the roars of laughter where Caleb and Joel were splashing each other, with Willy watching on in quiet amusement. “Joel was a Black Delphinidae student and is a close associate of Pip; perhaps that’s why Caleb’s taken such a liking to him.”

Esmeralda laughed. “They both seem to have found a playmate.”

As they watched, the three left the water, Joel and Caleb still laughing as they strode up the sand.

Hamati stood, switching back to the common tongue. “Joel, Willy, this Esmeralda.”

Joel shook her offered hand. “I take it you and Hamati know each other, before today I mean.”

“Oh, yes, we go a long way back, don’t we, Hamati?”

“We first met when I was very small child.”

“Gosh! That would’ve been before Drago, wouldn’t it?”

“A long time before, yes. We met again just before apocalypse.”

“This is my friend Willy.”

Willy gulped as Esmeralda shook his hand. “Was, um, was Tristan your husband?”

“Good grief, no. Caleb, go check your fish net, okay?”

“Sure, Mum!”

She waited until he was out of earshot. “Tristan raped me. Caleb was meant to be his insurance policy, a Pasha he could control if his plan to make himself Pasha failed, but I guess he didn’t count on getting himself killed.”

Willy nodded. “I see.”

“Come and help me, Joel,” Caleb called out. “There are lots of fish in the net today!”

“You’re a Tivinel if I’m not mistaken, Willy,” Esmeralda said as Joel trotted off. “How do you and Joel know each other?”

“We were slaves in the mines on Ignus. Tristan kidnapped Joel, but he escaped and ended up working alongside me in the sorting room until we turned the tables on the mining companies.”

“I heard about that on the news. Was that your doing?”

“It was a team effort with my parents as well, but Joel found the orange ore and came up with the idea to buy the companies out from under the overlords.”

“That sounds like quite an adventure. Were you in on this, Hamati?”

“Hamati played just small part at end.”

Caleb and Joel returned, the latter carrying a bucket loaded with fish.

“There were lots more than we could eat,” Caleb said, “so I let the rest go.”

Esmeralda kissed him on the forehead. “Good boy. We should take them back to the house and pick out a few for dinner tonight; the rest you can give to the others in the village.”

“Yum! Do you like fish, Joel?”

“I love it, especially when grilled with a bit of lime and lemon.”

Caleb grinned. “Me too!”

“That was delicious, Esmeralda,” Joel said, scraping up the last morsel on his plate.

“Thank you; one thing I’ve had to learn living here is how to properly cook fish.”

“The vegetables were also excellent; so fresh and lush!”

“That’s all Caleb’s doing; I’m sure he talks the plants into growing the way we like them. Why don’t you show Joel your garden, honey?”

“Sure, Mum.”

Caleb took Joel’s hand, but the moment they touched the light dimmed momentarily.

“I hope the storm didn’t damage the subspace power inverter,” Esmeralda said, but the light settled and remained steady.

Caleb, heedless of such technicalities, hauled Joel out through the back of the house to a garden filled with raised planter boxes and trellises.

“This is amazing,” Joel said, gazing around. “Did you do all this yourself?”

“No, silly, all the uncles and aunts pitched in to help. I just look after the plants. Come and I’ll show you the greenhouse.”

Joel followed him along a twisting path weaving its way through a maze of leafy vegetables and fruiting plants, all in pristine condition with not so much as a leaf out of place. Around the final bend he reached a glass-walled shed, its sides fogged by the fine mist sprays running inside.

Within grew a wide assortment of tropical fruits, including one of Joel’s favourites, the Huntress miniature mango.

“Try one,” Caleb said, gently picking a couple from an overhanging stem.

“Oh, this is heaven,” Joel said, taking a bite. “The ones at the seminary are good but these take it to a whole new level.”

Caleb grinned after biting into his. “They’re my favourite too!”

Joel followed him back outside and around to the far corner of the plot where a small forest of nut trees grew.

“Is there anything you don’t have growing here, Caleb?”

“Only stuff I don’t like.”

Joel laughed. “So no Brussels sprouts then.”

“What are they?”

“Something no kids ever like.”

“Do you like them?”

“No.”

“You will when you’re older, though.”

Joel grimaced. “I’d better stay young then.”

Hamati and Esmeralda dashed out of the house just as Joel and Caleb were returning.

“What’s wrong?”

“Joel, is bad news from Damon.”

“Huh?”

“There was ambush on Hazler. Scott Davies arrested for treason, everyone else killed.”

“What? Killed? How? Loraine, is she?”

Esmeralda wrapped him in a hug. “I’m so sorry, Joel, so sorry.”

“Damon on way here,” Hamati said. “He tell you everything.”

Joel pushed himself away. “No, this is all my fault! I should’ve gone with them, if only I’d gone with them. I could’ve –”

“You’d have only wound up just as dead as them,” Esmeralda said.

Joel moaned. “If, if Loraine’s dead, I wish I were too.”

“I know how you’re feeling, Joel, but –”

“No you don’t! How could you?”

Esmeralda stiffened. “I lost almost everyone I knew and loved when the star dimmer destroyed our world. You’re not the only one to have experienced grief, Joel.”

“I, I’m sorry.”

Caleb took Joel's hand. "Perhaps I can help."

Joel looked down into his eyes. "H-how?"

"You can do something, something special, and I can help."

"Caleb," Esmeralda said, but her voice vanished beneath a rushing noise growing louder in Joel's ears. All around him everything brightened; brighter and brighter like a supernova exploding inside his head. He closed his eyes...

"Why don't you show Joel your garden, honey?" Esmeralda said as the noise subsided.

"Sure, Mum."

Caleb took Joel's hand as he opened his eyes. "What? Huh?"

"Joel, what's wrong?" Hamati asked.

"There's been a time cusp, one I created, I think. Loraine and everyone, they were, they were killed in an ambush."

"Are you sure, Joel?"

"Yes, it was my singlet thing."

Esmeralda frowned. "Your what?"

Caleb tightened his grip on Joel's hand while looking up into his eyes. "I can help, Joel, but you must help too."

"Huh? How?"

"Focus on Loraine with all your mind; help guide my thoughts to her."

Joel closed his eyes, in his mind's eye seeing flashes of Loraine like glimpses from a movie on rewind.

"I'm NOT afraid of storms, Joel! I don't know what gives you that idea."

"What about David? Aren't we supposed to be rescuing him?"

"I know what that is! Joel, you're autothermic. Hah!"

"You're not going blind; you probably just need glasses, that's all."

"Oh Joel, my sweet, adorable and utterly gullible Joel."

"This is too much for me, Joel, too much; I don't even know why we're having this conversation. If, if you survive and the world doesn't end, it, I think it'd be best if you didn't, didn't –"

"Don't do anything stupid or heroic, Joel! Go with the flow, just go with the flow."

“If Nature Boy doesn’t wash he can sleep by himself tonight.”

“Look, Joel, a shooting star!”

“You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Yes, Joel, I’d be delighted to become your wife.”

Joel watched, his feet glued to the pavement outside the Coolum Beach pizza shop, as Loraine ran up from the beach, the water spraying from her hair creating a golden halo in the afternoon sun. She was so beautiful, the most beautiful thing imaginable...

Suddenly he was standing in a floodlit loading dock, seeing through her eyes as five armed policemen raised their weapons.

“Who tipped you off?” Piper asked.

“A fair question, General, as I’m sure you’ll be meeting him very soon. He was a tall man in a hooded black cassock; called himself The Ferryman.”

“No, he couldn’t!” Loraine shouted. “You’re lying!”

The policeman shrugged. “It’s the truth, lass; the plain and simple truth. He said as much as it pained him, sacrifices had to be made for the greater good.”

Loraine turned to Pip, but he was looking up and to the left over the policemen’s heads. “It’s happening again, that hollowness, only stronger this time.”

“Look!” she said, following his gaze.

“Look!” Joel said back in Esmeralda’s house on Huntress.

Beyond the glare of the floodlights, a shimmering glow hung some five metres above the ground. As they watched, it began to take the form of a dolphin.

“It’s just a trick, ignore it,” the burly policeman said. “Take aim and on my word...”

“These are not the fugitives you seek,” Caleb said, snapping Joel back to where he stood, holding the boy’s hand. “These are not the fugitives you seek. Be on your way and safe travelling.”

Joel watched through Loraine’s eyes as the policemen waved them into the troop carrier. “Be on your way and safe travelling.”

Caleb released his hand. “Your friends are safe now, Joel.”

Joel nodded. “Thank you, that was amazing!”

Hamati dashed over to the table, picking up Joel’s phone and calling Loraine’s number.

“Is Hamati here,” he said when she answered. “Are you all safe now?”

“Um, yes. Did you, was it you?”

“No, someone else, someone special. Will talk later, just wanted to be sure you’re safe. Goodbye.”

Adversaries

Cam breathed a sigh of relief as Piper's ship jumped to subspace. He turned to see David grinning at him.

"What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking you were right; I should've broken my leg."

"Nah, a dislocated shoulder would've incapacitated you enough, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry I put you through that," Piper said, "but it was all I could think of to provide a genuine distraction without causing you permanent injury."

Cam rubbed his shoulder. "That's okay; it worked and it was worth the pain to get Davo back."

"Are you sure you won't accept my enlistment offer? You'd make a fine officer on my team, I'm sure."

David shook his head. "If you take Cam you'd have to take me and I doubt you'd want that."

Piper chuckled. "No, you're right; scrap that idea."

"I guess I won't need this anymore," Cam said, pulling off his ensign's uniform.

"That's a relief," Gallagher said, "and I'm sure Walker will be pleased he won't have *Admiral* Cam coveting his desk."

Piper groaned. "I wish you hadn't mentioned him. How the devil am I going to explain what we've just done?"

"The same as always, I guess, sir."

Damon ran towards them from the seminary as soon as Piper had landed and opened the hatch.

"What's wrong?" Pip asked.

"Everything! The Supreme Councillor's just made a special broadcast that, um, well just come inside and listen."

Everyone followed him into the common room where he already had the newsfeed open on one of the ultranet terminals. He tapped the *Play* icon.

“Hello, I’m Michael Chandler with news of a dire threat to the stability of our galaxy. Last night in Oswald City on Hazler, a group of renegades disguised as hospital staff attempted to break out a death row prisoner, but thanks to a tip-off, the Hazler police were able to foil their escape. However, a being with unprecedented psychic powers intervened, forcing the police officers to release them, and they escaped into the night, fleeing the planet before anyone became aware of the situation.

“A short time later, guards at the high-security prison on Meridian housing the former mining company overlords were psychically coerced into releasing them. It’s believed the same being was responsible for this incident.

“According to intelligence reports, this being is likely to be a boy Pasha, probably eight or nine years of age and just coming into his powers. A decade ago, the spirit of a former Pasha carried within the Bluehaven Dolphins’ collective consciousness wreaked havoc across the galaxy when he dimmed the suns of ten of our worlds, so the Council is taking the threat of this new boy with the utmost seriousness. I’ve been trying to contact the Black Delphinidae’s Pip Ingle, who dealt with the previous Pasha, but have been unable to reach him and fear he may have already been neutralised.”

Pip pressed the pause button. “Damon, has Michael called here?”

“No, everything’s been quiet.”

“I wonder if he was trying my private number.” Pip pulled out his phone, his brow furrowed as he checked for any voice or text messages. “No, there’ve been no missed calls on that. How odd!”

Piper and Gallagher exchanged glances as Pip restarted the news feed.

“General Walker, head of our Joint Chiefs of Staff, is preparing a military strike force to contain this threat once the boy is located, while police forces throughout the galaxy are scrutinising arrivals and departures for the escaped fugitives as well as providing additional security around our public offices. Should you see anyone acting suspiciously, call the police hotline immediately. Do not, I

repeat, do not approach them in any way as these fugitives are extremely dangerous.

“Based on eyewitness accounts and security footage, we believe this boy Pasha projects his powers over great distances through the minds of telepaths, so those of you with telepathic ability should practise mind-shielding when in public places.”

This time Piper stopped the play-out. “Pip, was the boy projecting that dolphin apparition through you?”

“No, but I felt the same hollowness I sensed back in that village, only within it this time was something else, something akin to the Black Dolphin essence I carry as Emissary.”

“Are you saying that essence was projecting itself out from elsewhere?” Loraine asked.

“Yes, it came from you.”

“Me? How? I’m not telepathic.”

“I know, even though as Lorina’s daughter you ought to be. I, um, I sensed that you were its conduit, that’s all.”

“But surely I’d have known, have felt something if that was happening.”

Pip shook his head. “I have no answer to that, but I suspect when we return to that village we’ll find out.”

“Do you think this thing has captured Joel, Hamati and Willy?”

“I don’t know what to think; only that it was helping us so perhaps it’s benevolent.”

Loraine sighed. “If it’s benevolent, why did it free those evil Tivinel overlords? We have to go back to that village.”

Piper nodded. “Before we do, I’d better find out what Walker’s up to with his deployment as we don’t want to bump heads with the fleet. Pip, can I use one of your terminals?”

“Of course.”

Pulling up a chair, Piper attempted to log into the *Special Operations* command portal.

Access denied.

He tried again.

Access denied.

“What the hell is this?”

“Let me try, sir,” Gallagher said, activating another terminal and logging in.

Access denied.

“Is there a problem with the ultranet?” Cam asked.

“No, bloody Walker’s locked us out.”

“Let me try the police operations site,” Superintendent Davies said, grabbing a chair in front of another terminal and keying in his credentials.

Access denied.

“Damn, they’ve locked me out too.”

“So it really is us against the galaxy now,” Loraine said. “We need to find Joel and Hamati.”

“Yes we do,” Piper said, “but that might be a bit tricky. Walker’s no doubt put a trace on my ship so he’ll know we’re here and will be watching to see where we go.”

“Can’t you deactivate it?” Cam asked.

“No,” Gallagher said, “because then he’ll know that we know.”

“But what do we know?”

“That he knows.”

Cam moaned, covering his face, much to David’s amusement.

“What about my shuttle?” Pip asked.

Piper shook his head. “It has a civilian transponder so it’s the same problem only worse; any damn idiot will either know where it is or, if it’s deactivated, know we’re being sneaky.”

David grinned. “Could we pull it out and leave it sitting on the ground transponding while we fly off to wherever?”

“Isn’t that illegal?” Cam asked.

“No more illegal than breaking me out of that hospital.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right, Davo.”

“We can go one better,” Piper said. “Gallagher can take my ship off somewhere else as a decoy.”

Gallagher grimaced. “But what if they decide to nuke me?”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to use your tact and diplomacy to convince them not to.”

“Take it to the Delphinidae Temple on Bluehaven,” Loraine said. “The military wouldn’t dare attack that.”

“You civilians are so naïve,” Gallagher said. “No, but I’ve thought of a better place.”

“Where?”

“Best we not know,” Piper said. “Do it, Gallagher.”

“Yes, sir.” Gallagher saluted as he turned and marched from the room.

“He’s such a show-off,” Piper said, sighing. “Now let’s get to work on Pip’s shuttle.”

* * *

General Walker looked up as his aide knocked and entered his office. “What is it, Jefferson?”

“Sir, General Piper’s ship has left Huntress and is headed for Ignus.”

“Ignus?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What do you make of that?” Walker asked the black-hooded man in the corner. “Why Ignus?”

“You’re right, Robert, it’s an unexpected move, unless, well, unless we have the whole thing arse-about. What if the boy’s mother is one of the Tivinel peasants there?”

“Then who’s the father?”

“Either a Barungi male we know nothing of or –”

“Not Hamati? You don’t think, surely –”

“I’m not paid to think, Robert, but following Roly’s death he was custodian of the Black Delphinidae creed so it’s possible there could be a family connection.”

Walker shook his head. “I’m not liking this, Charon, not one little bit. Jefferson, have the strike force and those Tivinel overlords ready on my ship for immediate departure.”

“*Your* ship, sir?”

“Yes, I want to see first-hand what we’re up against.”

“Is that wise?”

“No, but with some of my most trusted officers having apparently switched sides, it’s high time I got out from behind this desk.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir, Piper’s ship is on the ground at the Lake Placid mine,” Jefferson said as they emerged from subspace into the Ignus transfer orbit. “I’m hailing him but there’s no response.”

Walker grimaced. “Take us down.”

“Wait, sir, it looks like the planetary defence shield has been reactivated.”

“What?”

“If we drop below the transfer orbit we’ll be zapped by the ground-based infrared lasers.”

“I know how it works, Jefferson, but it was supposed to have been decommissioned after that fiasco with the mining companies.”

“Supposed to or not, it’s operational now, sir.”

Walker picked up the microphone. “Ignus Control, this is *Star Force One*.”

“Control here, go ahead Star Force One.”

“This is General Walker requesting, no, demanding clearance to land at Lake Placid.”

“I’m sorry, General, but no-one’s allowed in or out just now.”

“What? On whose authority?”

There was a slight pause. *“Mine.”*

“Turn off the damned shield.”

“With all due respect, General, I can’t do that.”

“Very well, have it your way.” Walker turned to Jefferson. “Do we have coordinates for the lasers?”

“I believe so, sir, but it’s classified.”

“Jefferson, I’m head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top brass’s top brass; to me, *nothing’s* classified! Use my security clearance override; it’s that little red button in the top right-hand corner.”

“Oh, right, sir, I didn’t think.”

Walker shook his head. “That’s the trouble with the military today; nobody thinks, well nobody except perhaps Piper and now look at the mess he’s created. Jefferson, do you have those coordinates or not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Bomb them.”

“Huh? I mean huh, sir?”

“Just do it, please.”

“Gosh!”

Resisting the urge to strangle him, Walker instead turned to the window, watching with Charon as explosions flashed across the planet's surface.

"Is that all of them, Jefferson?"

"I think so, although the information in our database is rather old."

"Ahem," Charon said. "Is there any way to be certain? I'm not yet ready to be escorting *myself* across the River Styx."

"I could send Jefferson down in a shuttle –"

"What? Sir?"

"– but no, I think a drone might suffice for now."

"Thank you, sir. Where should I aim it?"

"Lake Placid; if it makes it to the surface I'd like a peek at what's going on down there. Oh, and Jefferson, what's the status of Ingle's shuttle? Has it gone anywhere?"

Jefferson checked his screen. "No sir, it's still sitting on the ground at the seminary on Huntress."

"I see."

* * *

Cam peered out the window as Pip circled his shuttle over the sports field, thinking the old west-coast village looked far less sinister on this clear sunny morning than it had during the storm. In amongst the group of people watching from the far corner he could make out Hamati and Willy, but there was no sign of Joel. He gave Loraine a nervous glance.

"Look, there he is!" she said, pointing further up the road to where Joel emerged from behind a building with a Barungi woman and a young boy.

As soon as Pip had landed and opened the hatch, Loraine dashed out, running towards Joel as he ran towards her. Almost knocking each other over, they embraced, hugging as tight as they could.

"Joel, are you okay? I was so worried –"

"I'm fine, really. What about you? In the time cusp you were, were –"

"Time cusp? What time cusp?"

Joel shook his head, deciding it was best not to worry her about what might have been. “Nothing, never mind. How’s David? Is he okay?”

“Yes, he’s fine, but Gallagher dislocated Cam’s shoulder as part of the diversion and he’s still a bit sore.”

Joel turned pale. “That sounds horrible. I’m glad I wasn’t there; I’d have probably keeled over just watching it.”

“Yes, you would have, I’m sure. I was afraid you’d been taken captive by that new Pasha everyone’s talking about, the one who intervened when the police tried to, um, stop us. Pip said it was using me as a conduit but, but I don’t understand how –”

“That was my doing, I think. Caleb used me to locate you and focus his powers.”

“Caleb?”

“Yes, this is him,” Joel said as the boy sauntered down towards them. “Caleb, this is my wife, Loraine.”

Caleb bowed, grinning. “Hello, Loraine; you’re as beautiful in real life as you are in Joel’s mind.”

Loraine blushed. “Thank you. Are you; but, but I imagined someone much more, well, *bigger*, I suppose.”

Caleb thrust out his chest. “I’m a beautiful *little* bundle of joy!”

Joel laughed. “That sums him up pretty well, I think.”

Loraine’s expression darkened. “Everyone’s saying you’re going to be like Drago, particularly after you freed those overlords from the prison on Meridian.”

Caleb gave Joel a puzzled look.

Joel shrugged. “Huh? What overlords?”

“Michael Chandler said that, after freeing David, the boy Pasha used his powers to befuddle the prison guards into releasing those Tivinel overlords who’d been kidnapping people for the Ignus mines.”

Joel looked at Caleb who shook his head, tears now starting to form in his eyes. “I didn’t do anything like that, truly. It couldn’t have been me, I wouldn’t know how to, not without someone like Joel I could focus through.”

Loraine crouched down, wrapping her arms around him. “I believe you, Caleb; I’m sorry. Mr Chandler must have been mistaken, I’m sure.”

“Or lying,” General Piper said, stepping up to them. “I’m starting to think he *wanted* those overlords freed.”

“But, but isn’t Michael one of the good guys?”

“I’m sure he still thinks he is, but the idea of a new Pasha taking over governance of the galaxy has him rattled.”

“But why would he lie about those prisoners?”

“Maybe he isn’t lying,” Scott said. “Those prisoners might have taken advantage of the situation, using their own telepathic powers to coerce the guards into releasing them, and Michael is just putting two and two together.”

“Whatever the case,” Piper said, “we’re now outlaws as far as the government, the police and the military are concerned, and we have to assume the worst. Those overlords would be a formidable force to resist.”

“This village is well protected,” Esmeralda said, placing her hands around Caleb’s shoulders. “To outsiders, this is just another uninhabited settlement destroyed by Drago’s apocalypse. No-one knows we’re here.”

“That might have been true up until now but we can’t count on it for much longer, particularly with shuttles coming and going and phone calls having been made from here.” Piper glanced around. “Those mountains behind us make it difficult to defend; we need to find somewhere with a clear view in all directions.”

“Come join us for breakfast and we can discuss such matters afterwards.”

Esmeralda led everyone across the road and into what looked like a derelict building, with crumbling stonework, damaged roof slates and cracked opaque windows. Cobwebs adorned the dim and dusty entrance hall, but around the corner it opened onto a bright and clean dining hall and smorgasbord.

“This is amazing,” Loraine said. “I see what you mean now about your village being camouflaged.”

“All our occupied houses and buildings are like this; as I said, we’re well hidden from view.”

“To a casual observer, yes,” Piper said, “but aerial or satellite infrared imaging would see through your disguise.”

Esmeralda grunted as she grabbed a plate and began filling it with fruit and cereal. “Help yourselves; we have plenty to share.”

* * *

“There’s Piper’s ship,” Jefferson said as he guided the drone down over the Lake Placid mine, “but there’s no sign of anyone in the vicinity.”

“Can you access its telemetry?”

“Yes, sir; everything on board is powered down and secured.”

Walker sighed. “I guess we have no choice but to go down there and find him.”

“Um, yes, sir, but if we didn’t destroy all those laser beams —”

“Life in the military is all about taking calculated risks, Jefferson. Just do it, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jefferson activated the retro-thrusters, letting out the breath he’d been holding as they entered the troposphere’s cloud banks without being vaporised.

“Park us next to Piper’s ship,” Walker said, “but keep an eye out for any interceptors or ground-based missiles.”

“Yes, sir, nothing so far.”

Walker scratched his chin. “Just what are you playing at, Piper? Call him again on both the subspace and real space channels.”

“Yes, sir.” Jefferson picked up the microphone. “General Piper, this is *Star Force One*. Acknowledge, over.”

Silence was the only response.

“I guess we’d better go and find him,” Walker said, sighing. “Charon, tell the leader of the Tivinel overlords to join us.”

Charon nodded before leaving the bridge.

“I don’t know if you’ve been properly introduced,” Charon said as they gathered outside the hatch. “General Walker, this is Doctor Glamming.”

Piper shook his offered hand. “Are you a medical man, Glamming?”

“No, I ran a subspace research facility in the days before Drago’s apocalypse and only returned with my colleagues from our refuge in Sheol a few decades ago.”

“Really? I suppose then that you’re familiar with the telepathic aura of a Pasha.”

“Very much so, General; it’s something one doesn’t forget.”

“Can you sense anything of the boy here?”

Glamming closed his eyes. “No, nothing; if he’s on this planet he’s nowhere close.”

Walker sighed again as he started walking towards the administrative building. “We’d better find Piper then.”

The woman at the reception desk looked up as they entered. “You must be General Walker; your associate said you’d likely be coming.”

“Um, yes. Could you tell him I’m here?”

“I’m sorry but he and the mine supervisor went off to the company headquarters in Obsidian. He said to tell you to catch up with him there.”

“I don’t know why he couldn’t have just told me himself but never mind; thanks for your help.”

“A pleasure, General.”

“Where’s this *Obsidian*?” Walker asked as they returned outside.

“About five hundred kilometres west of here,” Glamming said. “It’s the main population centre on the planet.”

“You point and I’ll fly.”

Walker was about to board his ship but paused, instead going over to Piper’s vessel and opening the access control panel.

“What are you doing, sir?” Jefferson asked.

“Locking it so Piper can’t go anywhere. If he wants to leave this planet he’ll have to hitch a ride.”

Jefferson tried unsuccessfully to suppress a chuckle.

“Come on, let’s go.”

The woman stood at the door of the administrative building, watching Walker’s ship depart before returning to her desk and picking up the phone. “Gallagher, it’s me. Walker’s on his way to you

but get this; he's with one of those escaped Tivinel overlords and a creepy-looking man in a hooded black cassock."

* * *

General Piper's field telephone rang.

"It's Gallagher here, sir, just letting you know Walker's taken the bait."

"Excellent. How long do you think you can hold him off?"

"An hour or two at most, I reckon."

"That'll have to do, I suppose. Thanks."

"You should know he has what sounds like Charon and at least one of the Tivinel overlords with him."

"I can't say I'm surprised, but that does put a darker complexion on things."

"Dark business seems to be becoming our specialty. You can buy me a drink or three when this is over."

"Of course."

He closed the call before turning to Loraine. "I can now allay any lingering doubts you might have had about the release of those Tivinel overlords."

"Why? What's happened?"

"I don't know whether he arranged the breakout, but General Walker is now in league with them."

"You can't be serious," Scott said, shaking his head.

"As serious as I ever am, but it gets worse."

"How?"

"Charon is also working with them."

Loraine grimaced. "What can we do?"

"Gallagher reckons he can keep the military off our backs for an hour or two so we need to find somewhere defensible to hole up in."

"There are caves high in the mountains," Esmeralda said.

"No, it'd be too easy for them to trap us there."

"There many uninhabited islands in equatorial archipelago," Hamati said.

“The isolation would be good but it’d be difficult without existing buildings and infrastructure and we won’t have time to start from scratch.”

Joel looked around at the others before raising his hand. “Um, I know it might sound too obvious, but what about the Pasha’s island?”

Loraine gulped. “You mean the place where Drago took over David’s body and did all those horrible things eight years ago?”

David ran his hands through his hair. “While Drago possessed me I had access to his memories of that place. I was only a child then but now, looking back, it’s a defender’s dream. After staging his own coup against Roly he wasn’t about to let anyone do the same to him.”

Piper stroked his beard. “Can you be more specific?”

“There are defensive shields, hidden passageways, bunkers, laser turrets and even booby traps on the outside entrances should anyone get through all that. There’s more, too, stuff I couldn’t comprehend at the time but will probably become clear when we get there.”

“Joel’s right, though,” Loraine said. “It’s so obvious that –”

Cam chuckled loudly enough to interrupt her. “Sorry, but perhaps it’s so obvious that Walker and his cronies will think we’d never go there.”

Loraine scowled but David grinned. “Cam’s right; look, I’m sure they’ll eventually twig but by then we should be able to defend ourselves against anything they throw at us and, as a last resort, there’s a passage into Sheol from deep inside the building that we could use if we have to flee.”

“We can’t all go there though,” Pip said, “not if we want to keep them guessing for as long as possible. Cloe and I need to return to the seminary before they figure out what we did to my transponder and Hamati should return to his people on the east coast.”

Scott Davies looked at General Piper. “What about us?”

Piper stroked his beard again. “Do you have any trusted officers who’d be willing to put their jobs on the line to support you rather than the establishment?”

“I believe so.”

“Excellent. There’s an abandoned base on Pulper that we can repurpose as headquarters for our Resistance and I’m sure Captain

Harrison will be able to persuade enough enlisted men to make it work.”

Esmeralda looked around at the others. “What about me? I should stay with Caleb but, well, if Charon’s with them, he knows me from the time of the apocalypse and may have already figured out I’m Caleb’s mother. If that’s the case, I’d be drawing him in like a magnet.”

“Come with me,” Hamati said. “Charon know we once lovers.”

“But I can’t leave Caleb alone to fend for himself!”

Caleb started to sob. “W-why do we have to go away? Why can’t I stay here with Mum? I haven’t done anything bad, truly I haven’t.”

“Of course you haven’t,” Loraine said, crouching down in front of him, “but there are some people who don’t know that and we need time to sort it all out.”

“W-what about the man in the black coat?”

“What man?”

“It’s a nightmare he keeps having,” Esmeralda said. “A man in a black coat takes me away from him, but it’s only a dream, sweetheart, only a bad dream.”

“It’ll just be for a little while, Caleb,” Loraine said, “and Joel and I will take good care of you, I promise.”

Caleb wiped his eyes. “And Willy too?”

Willy smiled. “Yes, of course.”

“And me too,” Cam said, “although I don’t know what use I’d be in a fight.”

Esmeralda wrapped Caleb in a hug. “I want you to be a good boy and do everything Joel and Loraine tell you to do, okay?”

“Yes, Mum, I will.”

“Be brave, my beautiful little bundle of joy, and I’ll see you again soon, I promise.”

The Pasha's Island

Cam stepped from the boat onto the platform extending out in front of the island palace's grand forecourt.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it?" David said.

"Uh huh."

Tiled with polished marble, the forecourt looked to be at least half the size of a football field. At its far end broad steps led up to the palace where heavy gold-plated doors, some four metres high and six across, secured the main entrance to the building. The portico, like the rest of the building, was finished in a glistening white stone with high cylindrical towers on each of the front corners. Atop them were metal poles that must once have held banners but were now bare.

"The servants' entry is around the side," David said as the Barungi townsfolk began unloading food stocks and other supplies from the boat. "Come on, Cam, we'd better go open up for them."

Dashing around the corner of the building, they entered a small alcove on the side. Pulling on the latch, David opened the door, giving them entry into the basement store rooms and kitchen.

"I thought it'd be locked," Cam said.

"No, it'd been an archaeological site prior to the day Drago's spirit took over my body and was immediately abandoned after that."

Cam looked around, taking in the room's fittings and fixtures. "This can't be three million years old, surely."

"It's not. The archaeologists needed feeding and storage for their supplies so they rebuilt this section. The subspace-powered cooktops and refrigerators should still be working."

Just inside the door he found the electrical switchboard. The room filled with light and the soft hum of motors as he turned on the main breaker.

Joel pushed a trolley laden with boxes into the room. “Where do you want this?”

“The perishables can go in the fridge and just leave everything else in the larder on the left. We can sort it all out later.”

Cam and David helped with the unloading, finishing just as Willy pushed another full trolley through the doorway. Close behind came Loraine and Caleb with a third.

A cloud passed over the sun just as the Barungi’s boat pulled away from the dock, causing the cold dread that had been growing inside Cam to erupt in a shiver.

“What’s wrong?” David asked.

“Everything; no matter how this all plays out, Davo, it’s not going to end well. Even if we can hold the military off for weeks or months, eventually our supplies will run out or they’ll just nuke us or something. I, I can’t see any light at the end of the tunnel.”

Cam turned to face his best friend, his soulmate or whatever fancy term might or might not describe their relationship, expecting the usual grin and quick quip that’d put everything right, but it didn’t happen.

“No, you’re right, Cam, this won’t end well. Even if Caleb uses his powers and charm to subdue our opponents, at the end of the day we’ll still have a new omniscient Pasha ruling over us. At best it’ll be like it was while I was growing up and my dad was Supreme Councillor; everyone thought they were happy as Larry and there was practically no crime or disharmony, but all that was an illusion emanating from Drago’s presence growing inside me. The whole galaxy lost its free will.”

“What about long ago, way back before Drago seized power and that other one, Roly, was in charge? Weren’t they good times?”

“You were there, Cam; surely you saw the looks on people’s faces when Roly was making his New Year’s speech. They were all just going through the motions, each day the same as yesterday. That society had stagnated to the point of collapse, which was why Roly wanted Drago to succeed; he knew if he lingered on for much longer they’d all just fade away into oblivion.”

“Oh, I see, but could we, um, could we escape to your home galaxy?”

“Perhaps; there’s been no historical precedent to test whether a Pasha’s influence extends across intergalactic space, but whether we’d have the means or even the willpower to do that is unclear.”

“So we’re doomed then.”

“Yep, I guess so. All we can do now is go along for the ride and enjoy what we can.”

Cam tried to smile but couldn’t. “I, um, I suppose at least we’re both still alive and together, which is more than I could’ve hoped for a few days ago.”

David wrapped him in a hug as Cam’s emotional roller-coaster ride overwhelmed him. So much had happened since his arrival at his parents’ house, so much: David’s arrest, Cam’s flight from Hazler, his dislocated shoulder in the hospital breakout, the policeman holding a gun to his head, their escape to Huntress and now into exile on this island with the boy Pasha who’d saved them. He tried to push those overlapping images from his mind, focusing instead on the warm embrace of the only person who’d ever loved and accepted him for what he was. Love, pure and innocent love, that’s all that mattered, all that could save him from the abyss. Something alien yet benevolent brushed his mind, speaking to him of *sunshine, warm seas and love, of a simple life lost long ago but perhaps even now still redeemable*. He snapped his eyes open, staring at David as he wondered if that essence had come from him.

“Let them be,” Joel said as Loraine started striding towards David and Cam who’d been standing entwined for what seemed an age. “They’ve both been through hell and need some time out.”

Loraine sighed. “And we haven’t?”

“David’s your twin brother,” Caleb said.

“Yes.”

“You’d never know by looking at them,” Joel said.

“He was once like me, wasn’t he?”

“Yes,” Loraine said, “he was the vessel for Drago’s spirit to return, but Pip saved him and he’s just an ordinary boy now, well apart from never wearing any clothes.”

"I can sense it like empty echoes of something very powerful. Whatever he was hasn't completely gone away."

"His Pasha DNA was switched off, not destroyed," Joel said.

"Could my Pasha DNA be switched off to make me just an ordinary boy?"

"I don't know, Caleb. Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

Loraine crouched down in front of him. "We don't know much about how that Pasha DNA works or why David's switched off when Drago's spirit died. It mightn't be possible to turn yours off without killing your spirit."

"Oh, I see, but that's okay, I can just keep being a *beautiful little bundle of joy*."

"That you can; we'll make sure of it."

Joel gave her a nervous glance but she shushed him before he could say anything.

"Hey, guys!" Willy called out from the top of the steps. "Come and see if you can help me figure out how to open the front door of this place."

Joel dashed up the grand marble steps to where Willy stood pulling on the door handle.

"It won't budge."

"Let me try," Joel said, pulling, pushing and jiggling to no avail. "Is there a keyhole anywhere?"

"Nope; maybe it can only be opened from the inside."

"So why's there a handle out here?"

Willy shrugged. "To confuse people?"

"Well it's certainly working then," Loraine said as she joined them. "Is there a way inside from that larder where we left our supplies?"

"Yes," Willy said, "but it's locked too."

"Damn. So what do we do? We can't stay outside."

"There's enough room to sleep on the floor of the larder; it won't be too comfortable but at least we'll be out of the weather."

"Some palace this is."

"What's wrong?" David asked, stepping up to join them with Cam close behind.

“The damn door’s locked on the inside.”

“Have you tried knocking?”

“What?”

David thumped five times on a panel just below the handle. Something clunked inside and when he pulled on it, the door swung effortlessly open.

Loraine glared at him. “How’d you know to do that?”

“I didn’t, at least not until you asked. I think it’s a memory I shared from Drago; his equivalent of putting a key under the mat, I suppose.”

Caleb went to run inside but Joel held him back. “Careful; there may be booby traps. I think David should go first.”

David shrugged. “Come on Cam; if we’re going to be boobies we might as well be boobies together.”

Joel held his breath as they stepped inside, gasping when interior lights suddenly came on, but nothing else happened.

“I’m pretty sure it’s safe,” David yelled back from the far end of the entry hall. “The last people in here were the politicians at that ill-fated ceremony eight years ago.”

“I don’t trust politicians,” Willy said.

“Nor do I,” Joel said, “but we can’t just stand out here wondering.”

With Caleb holding Joel’s and Loraine’s hands, they stepped forward, looking around in wonder at the opulent hall.

Down each side, forming a guard of honour, stood golden sculptures of dragons, their tongues protruding and wings raised as if about to take flight, while on the walls behind hung portraits of Tivinel and Barungi dignities. Joel studied each one, wondering if Hamati or Charon might have been amongst them, but they weren’t. One, though, he thought was probably Hamati’s father Jarred.

Joel remembered being escorted from the passage on the left by the attendant he’d nicknamed *The Count*. Down along there somewhere was the portal room into Sheol, the place they’d all called the *Dark Cave* back then; he wondered if it had survived the three million years since his last visit here. He’d know soon enough, he supposed.

At the far end of the foyer, David pulled open another large gold-plated door and bowed. “*Madame et Messieurs*, I bid thee welcome to the Pasha’s throne room and court.”

Joel looked around, his mouth gaping as he tried to correlate what he was seeing now with what this room had looked like when he’d visited Roly three million years ago. Back then it’d been a hive of activity with groups huddled around conference tables down either side and servants dashing back and forth carrying sheafs of documents, decanters of wine and fruit platters. Now it was empty, save for the golden throne atop the raised dais at the front and, behind that, a portrait of the ten-year-old Drago with his jet-black skin and thatch of bright red hair.

It suddenly struck him that, his hair colour aside, the boy in the portrait looked to be David’s twin. In another jolt, he remembered hearing that, prior to David’s tenth birthday when Drago’s spirit had taken possession of him, his hair had indeed been red and had only turned black afterwards.

“This is a bad place,” Loraine whispered, squeezing his hand.

“It used to be Roly’s palace, though. On the wall there was –”

He gasped as he turned to see that the wall was now painted sooty grey and covered with motifs of winged lizards and dragons.

“There, there used to be beautiful pictures of corals and sea grasses with a black dolphin hiding amongst them, but – did Drago do this?”

“He must have, I suppose, but look, over in the back corner the paint’s come away and there’s something underneath.”

Joel followed her across to where a small patch of Roly’s original artwork could be seen. “Yes, that’s it; both side walls were painted like this when I came here that time.”

“It’s beautiful, Joel.”

Caleb stepped over to join them. “Look! There’s a black dolphin in there!”

“Where?” Loraine asked. “I can’t see it.”

“I saw it once when I was here before,” Joel said, “but now, um –” He turned his head to the side. “There! I just saw it out the corner of my eye, but now that I look back it’s gone.”

She turned back to the wall, staring at the fresco. “That’s impossible; paintings of dolphins can’t magically appear and disappear like that.”

“It’s all a matter of perception,” David said, stepping over to join them with Cam at his side. “People see faces or animals in clouds; is this really any different? Our brains are very good at detecting patterns in the noise – it’s a survival skill from when that shape in the long grass could’ve been a predator – but with that comes an increased likelihood of false positives.”

“He means we can sometimes see things that aren’t really there,” Cam said, “but skilled artists can twist that around and hide things inside pictures that can only be seen when you don’t look at them.”

“You’re both as balmy as each other,” Loraine said after giving the wall another glance. “David, you said earlier that this place had defensive facilities.”

“Yes, it does, or at least it did, but I don’t know how much of it still works. It’s all controlled from Drago’s bunker.”

“Lead on.”

Caleb turned back to wave at the dolphin in the wall before following the others from the hall.

“How do we get in?” Loraine asked, standing in front of the door at the far end of the corridor. It had no knob, handle or even a keyhole, and this time knocking didn’t do anything either.

David furrowed his brow. “Drago spent a lot of time here during the war between the Tivinel and Barungi but I can’t remember how he got in.”

“Do you think the door might have been a later addition?”

“No, I’m sure it was always there, but –”

Cam stepped forward, staring at the door as he moved his head from side to side. “I know what it is! It’s a trick.”

Loraine glared at him again. “What do you mean a *trick*?”

“I saw something like this at an amusement park on Hazler; they called it a *no-door*.”

“What do you mean? The door is real, the door is solid and it won’t – bloody – open.” She banged on it again with her fist to emphasise her point.

“No, the trick isn’t the door; it’s the frame and wall on the far side of it. It’s an optical illusion with the angles and stuff.”

“Angles? Stuff?”

He walked past the door and turned into the wall. For a moment Loraine felt like she’d gone cross-eyed as Cam vanished from sight.

“I see how it works!” Joel said, dashing forward and also disappearing. Caleb grinned while following him.

“After you,” David said to Loraine.

“But I still don’t see how –”

As she passed the edge of the door, the frame and wall seemed to bend away, with a narrow gap opening between them. Squeezing through, she found herself inside a darkened room cluttered with consoles and monitor screens. She turned back to see David emerging through what, on this side, was an obvious angled section of wall.

“It’s all coming back to me now,” he said. “In the heat of a battle, confusing your enemy for even just a few seconds can be crucial.”

Cam scratched his head. “So how’d it end up in an amusement park on Hazler?”

“What does all this stuff do?” Loraine asked.

David scratched his head for a moment before stepping over to a panel on the wall in the far corner. “It’ll probably help if I turn on the main switch.”

A multitude of indicator lights flashed across the control panels, accompanied by a cacophony of beeping as each of the subsystems awoke from three million years of slumber.

He stepped in front of a large display screen which now showed a map of the island and surrounding ocean. “This is the main surveillance system; it’ll detect anything approaching the island either by air or on the water.”

“What about submarines?” Joel asked.

David shook his head. “I don’t think they had those in Drago’s day.”

“We’d better hope General Walker doesn’t have any either,” Loraine said, scowling.

“Don’t blame me; I only work here.”

Loraine poked out her tongue. “So what do we do if it detects anything?”

“I’m glad you asked.” He turned to the console behind him. “This is our main weapons system comprising six independent banks of high-power infrared lasers. They can be either manually fired or set to automatically destroy anything approaching us.”

Joel nodded. “I guess they wouldn’t work on submarines anyway.”

“Good point.”

“Can we test them?” Cam asked.

“Sure. Go grab one of the sea kayaks around the back, paddle out a kilometre or two from the island and we’ll try vaporising you.”

“Um, that’s not quite what I had in mind. Are there any, like, diagnostic tests you can run?”

David again scratched his head. “I think if I do this –”

He pressed a button and selected an option from the menu on the screen.

“Oh, that’s not good.”

“What’s wrong?”

“The lasers themselves are fine but the mechanical azimuth and elevation drives have seized up.”

“Can we fix them?”

David shrugged. “They’re up on the roof if you want to take a look.”

“This is your show,” Loraine said. “Lead on.”

“Cam, can you dash out to the larder and grab the tool kit Pip left for us?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“The rest of you follow me.” He pulled back a recessed panel on the far wall, revealing a set of rungs leading up to another panel in the ceiling.

“Can you manage, Caleb?” Loraine asked before climbing.

“Yeah, sure; this is easy.” He dashed up the rungs ahead of her. “See?”

“I should’ve known.” She followed him up with Joel close behind.

Joel looked around, taking in the rooftop view of the island. To the west and south were craggy rocks against which the ocean’s

prevailing swell sent up occasional sprays of foam. On the eastern side, the one closest to the mainland, a sandy beach adjoined the forecourt and podium extending out over the water. From there, a broad flagstone walkway wound around the northern side of the palace to a small breakwater and boat ramp; he realised with a start that this was where he and the others had stood with Roly back in that distant past. *You alone can do this, Joel*, Roly had said, *that much I can foresee, but how it happens I cannot tell, only that you won't be alone*. He rubbed his hands over his face, now with no idea at all of what he was supposed to do.

Back then it'd been simple, comparatively speaking; just stop Tristan from saving Roly from Drago's dart and all would be well. It wasn't, though, not by a long shot. There were Roly's and Drago's hair samples he'd brought back to the present, ostensibly to prevent the birth of another Pasha, but by then it was too late as Caleb had been born years earlier and, in any case, he now felt compelled to *protect* the boy at all costs.

He turned to where Caleb stood between Loraine and David as they examined the laser turrets. From the moment he'd glimpsed his face on that stormy afternoon, he'd known with absolute certainty that he was the boy's guardian; it was written into his DNA both figuratively and literally in those strings of letters – T, A, C and G – that had led him here.

He remembered the flash of understanding he'd had in the depths of the Black Delphinidae catacombs. *He was a singleton; across all time lines there could only ever be one of him. It had to be, it was the only way it could work*. For a moment it had all made sense, but now he could grasp only his memory of that moment, not its insight. *It was the only way what could work?* He closed his eyes, rubbing his hands over his face as he tried to make some sense, just *any* sense even, of what had been happening of late.

“What's wrong, Joel?”

Joel opened his eyes to see Caleb looking up at him. “Sorry, just trying to get the cobwebs out of my head but not having much luck.”

“Everything happens for a reason, Joel, even if we don't know what that is.”

Joel gulped, thinking that was pretty profound for an eight-year-old to say.

“My mum told me that. I hope she’s okay.”

“I, um, I’m sure she’s fine. Hamati’s a good man.”

“Yes, I know.”

With a clattering thump, a large toolbox appeared next to the hatch onto the roof, followed a moment later by Cam’s head and, with a grunt, the rest of him. Caleb ran across to help him lug it over to where David and Loraine were standing alongside the laser turret. Joel joined them, his head still feeling full of cobwebs.

David flashed a grin at Cam before opening the toolbox and rummaging through its contents for a screwdriver and adjustable wrench. He set to work removing the side panels, handing Cam each bolt he removed for safekeeping.

“It’s all pretty simple, just stepper motors and worm drives for the azimuth and elevation,” he said, trying to turn a shaft, “but it’s all jammed up tight.”

“Can I have a look?” Caleb asked. “Everyone says I’m good with machinery.”

“Yeah, sure, but mind your fingers; there might be sharp edges.”

“Thank you.”

David gave Joel an inquisitive glance but Joel just shrugged.

“All the gears and bearings are good,” Caleb said, his hands and head deep inside the mounting, “but the lubricant has set hard like glue.”

Loraine looked at David. “Is there anything we can use to soften it?”

“I don’t know. Cam, what’s good for softening gummed-up lubricant?”

“Alcohol, I suppose but, um, I don’t think there’s any in our supplies.”

“I guess Pip wasn’t expecting us to be doing much partying, but, well, Drago knew how to keep the Tivinel and Barungi dignitaries lubricated and had a well-stocked cellar. I don’t know if any of it would still be usable though.”

“How about you go and check,” Loraine said.

“Okay. Come on, Cam, you can help.”

Joel watched them scamper back to the hatch. "I hope they don't get sozzled testing it."

Loraine sighed.

"What's *sozzled*?" Willy asked.

David and Cam returned a few minutes later, each carrying a black bottle.

"Those archaeologists working here ten years ago were a thirsty lot," David said, "but we found a couple of bottles of Benton whiskey they must have missed."

Loraine frowned. "Is it any good?"

"Drago kept it in reserve for manipulating high-ranking Tivinel dignitaries, although he never drank any himself."

"Perhaps he wasn't as stupid as everyone makes out."

"Drago was anything but stupid."

Joel scratched his head. "Do you think it'll dissolve the gunk in the gears?"

"Man, this stuff will dissolve *anything*."

Cam pulled a couple of small brushes from his pocket. "Davo thought these might help apply it."

Loraine glared at him. "Well we'd better hope your whiskey doesn't dissolve *them*."

David turned to her. "Just go easy on him, okay? I don't know why you have to be so snarky towards him all the time."

Loraine muttered something under her breath.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that."

"Good."

Joel gave Cam a confused look, forcing half a smile from him as Loraine snatched the brushes.

"Open a bottle, David, there's a good brother."

He did, releasing a pungent aroma that caused Joel to hold his nose. "Gosh! That smells like it could strip paint at twenty paces. Did those Tivinel actually drink it?"

"Like fish to water; they couldn't get enough of it. Drago, of course, exploited that weakness to the fullest extent."

"What an encyclopaedia of knowledge you've suddenly become," Loraine said.

David scratched his head. "It's being here, I guess; Drago's memories are all coming back to me."

Loraine dipped the brush into the bottle. "Who wants to do the honours?"

"I can do it," Caleb said. "I know where it has to go."

"Really? How?"

"I don't know, I just do, but everyone says I'm good with machinery."

"All right, but be careful you don't cut your fingers on any of the gears."

"You sound just like my mum, but I won't, don't worry."

Caleb crawled inside the turret, going to work with his brush while Loraine dipped the other one into the bottle ready to pass to him.

"The gears are turning freely now," Caleb said as he backed out of the turret. "Do you want to test it again?"

David dashed over to the hatch, but turned just before descending. "Best if you all stand back a bit in case something goes wrong."

"You mean in case something *more* goes wrong," Loraine said, taking hold of Caleb's hand and leading him well away from the turret.

"Someone really got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning, didn't they?"

Before Loraine could respond, David disappeared through the hatch.

Cam and Willy both looked at Joel in confusion.

"It's an Earth saying; it means –"

"I'm sure they can figure out what it means, Joel," Loraine said, "and for the record, no, I didn't."

Joel opened his mouth to say something more but, deciding it might be prudent not to, closed it again.

Motors whirled as the turret began to turn, with the laser barrels swinging up and down between horizontal and vertical.

"Don't point it at us, you idiot!" Loraine shouted as it swung towards them.

"Sorry," echoed David's voice from below.

The turret stopped and turned back the other way before settling in line with a tall tree growing on the far side of the island. With a loud hum from inside the mechanism, the top of the tree burst into flame.

"The laser works too," David shouted.

"Fine, can you stop playing now?"

"All right."

A moment later, David reappeared through the hatch. "All the diagnostics are green and everything's looking good now. Cam, could you screw the cover back on the turret?"

"I'll help," Willy said as Cam sauntered over to pick up the screwdriver.

Loraine ushered Caleb and Joel ahead of her into the hatch, following David back down. "Can you turn all this off now?"

"I was going to leave it on to dry any moisture out."

"I'd rather you didn't; this stuff gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"All right."

He pulled down the main breaker switch in the corner, causing a few of the consoles to beep in distress before falling silent. "I'll show you the sleeping quarters once Cam and Willy have finished."

"Good."

David led them back along the corridor to a flight of stairs descending underground, where they emerged into a common room furnished with lounge chairs and coffee tables. A decade-old coffee machine occupied a bench in the corner.

"I guess the archaeologists made good use of this area too," Cam said, taking a look to see if the machine still worked. It didn't.

"The bedrooms and bathrooms are through here," David said, pushing open a wide door on the far side of the room.

Down each side of a long corridor were a dozen or more doors. He opened one, revealing a double bed and a bench fitted with cupboards and a sink. A side door led into an ensuite.

"Are all the rooms the same?" Loraine asked.

"Yes, well they were in Drago's time. This bed is new, though, courtesy of the archaeologists, I suppose."

"Joel and I will sleep here," she said, sitting on the corner of the bed.

“Fine, whatever makes you happy.”

“Caleb, do you want a room of your own or do you want to sleep with us?”

“A room of my own would be great!”

“Come on then and I’ll find you one,” David said, “and you too, Willy.”

“What about me?” Cam asked.

“I’m sure we can string up a hammock for you somewhere outside.”

“Good idea,” Loraine said, earning a glare from Joel.

“You two make yourselves comfortable,” David said, “and we’ll gather back in the hall upstairs for dinner in about an hour, okay?”

He led Cam, Willy and Caleb back out into the corridor.

“Willy, you can have this room here, and Caleb the next one along. Cam, you come with me.”

Leaving Willy and Caleb to explore their abodes, he led Cam back upstairs and into the main hall. To the left of the dais was a small alcove and, through another door, the regal suite.

“Gosh!” Cam said, looking around at the gold-plated opulence.

“Drago liked his trinkets.”

Behind a screen emblazoned with a red dragon stood a four-poster king-sized bed made of polished obsidian.

“We’re in luck; the archaeologists replaced the mattress and pillows in here too.”

He climbed on, bouncing up and down a couple of times before stretching out.

“Not bad, although Drago preferred a harder mattress. Come and see what you think.”

“What, you mean we’re both sleeping here; I thought I was – you were joking about the hammock, right?”

“Oh, Cam, honestly, what am I going to do with you?”

Cam climbed onto the bed alongside him. “Yeah, this is nice, but, um, I can’t help thinking I’m more a burden than a help.”

“Don’t let Loraine get to you; she’s like that with all my friends.”

“Really?”

“Well, except for Joel, I suppose, but even then there are times when I think she might strangle him.”

“I hope not; I like Joel. But no, I’m used to people not liking me.”

David ruffled his hair. “Well you shouldn’t be.”

Cam grimaced, feeling an invisible noose tightening around his neck. “Hold me, Davo; I’m scared again.”

“All right but don’t get too comfortable; you’re cooking dinner for us tonight.”

“Me? Yeah, okay, I can do that, I suppose.”

“Of course you can.”

Joel turned to Loraine as soon as the others had left their room. “Um, I was just wondering why it is you, um, you don’t like Cam?”

Loraine sighed. “You mean apart from him almost getting my brother killed and then dragging us into this mess?”

“Well, um, yeah. I thought maybe you didn’t approve of his relationship with David.”

“No, it’s nothing like that, at least not what you’re thinking, but I mean, really, he’s a Hazzle.”

“A hassle? What makes you say that? He seems pretty quiet and cooperative with everyone.”

Loraine laughed. “No, a Hazzle, not hassle; someone from Hazler.”

“Oh, right, but, um, why is that bad?”

“They’re greedy, selfish and arrogant. Is that enough or do you want me to go on?”

“What, all of them?”

“Well, um –”

Joel ran his hands over his face. “Remember Mary Anderson, the librarian at school?”

“Of course I do; she’s Aaron’s mum.”

“Yeah, that’s her. She told me that when she first came to Earth, she was attacked by a serial rapist and for years afterwards, everyone on Bluehaven thought all Earthlings were like that. But we’re not, are we?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

Loraine sighed again. “You’re trying to paint me as xenophobic, aren’t you?”

“No, well I don’t even know what that means, but no, I just don’t think it’s fair to paint everyone on a planet with the same brush. There are good and bad people everywhere, that’s all.”

“But everyone on Bluehaven says that Hazzles are – oh, yeah, I see what you mean. So you reckon Cam might just be a good Hazzle?”

“I’m sure there are lots of good Hazzles, just as there are lots of good people on all the planets. I know his parents are rich and by all accounts not very nice –”

“His mother wants to kill both him and David.”

“Yeah, but, well he told me when we were flying back to Earth the first time that he’s cut from a different cloth, which is why he’s an astrophysics student instead of a businessman, and when he learnt David was Lorina’s son, he feared life in the college would be one long boring Delphinidae sermon.”

Loraine laughed. “That fear was certainly baseless. David, a preacher; hah!”

“See? We’re all different; you can’t take even a common trait and expect it to apply to everyone.”

“I suppose not.”

“So will you like him now?”

“Be careful what you wish for, Joel. I might fall in love with him and we’ll run off together, leaving you shattered and broken.”

“David would kill you if you did, and anyway, I don’t think Cam’s attracted to women.”

She kissed him. “Then you have nothing to worry about.”

Joel, deciding this was Loraine’s polite way of terminating the conversation, chose not to pursue it further.

“He’s still a hassle though,” she whispered as she started pulling Joel’s and her own clothing off.

* * *

“I must say that was delicious, Cam,” Loraine said. “Maybe Joel was right and I’ve been too quick to judge you.”

Cam and Joel both blushed, while David grinned and Willy and Caleb exchanged confused looks.

“There’s something else I want to show you all before we call it a night,” David said.

Loraine frowned while casting a worried glance at Caleb. “It’s not another weapon, is it?”

“No, nothing like that. Follow me.”

He led them down a narrow flight of stairs, going deeper under the palace than they’d previously been, the walls transitioning from finely hewn masonry to rough-cut rock. Below they could hear an echoing sound of sloshing water.

At the bottom, the stairs turned and opened into the back of a sea cave, with subdued lighting coming on as they entered. David climbed on top of a rock at the water’s edge.

“This was Drago’s favourite place. The dolphins, the ones he called his children, would come into the cave to swim with him and later on he learnt to project his mind into theirs.”

“So this is where it all began,” Loraine said, trying to suppress a shiver.

“Yes, three million years of our galaxy’s history began in this cave.”

Caleb ran down to the water’s edge, letting the small waves wash over his feet before taking a couple more steps forward.

“Don’t go in any further,” Loraine said. “Not tonight, anyway; it could be dangerous in the dark. We can come down here in the morning if you want.”

He stood staring at the water, making Loraine wonder whether he’d heard her, before suddenly turning back. “Okay. This is a special place, a good place.”

“Sunshine, warm seas and love,” Cam said.

David stared at him. “Huh?”

“Sorry, something that just came to me, that’s all. I think Caleb’s right.”

“Roly came down here too,” Joel said. “I can feel it.”

“You’re all going bonkers,” Loraine said with a snort as she turned back to the stairs.

In the darkness near the mouth of the cave, something splashed.

The Price of Allegiance

General Walker grabbed the microphone off Jefferson. “With all due respect, sir, I’m not asking for your *permission* to land in your park, I’m merely informing you of my intention to do so. Have I made myself clear?”

“*You have no right, General, no right,*” the Obsidian city warden replied.

“Rights mean nothing to me, sir, but if anyone tries to hinder me I’ll unleash a wave of destruction on your city that’ll make your concept of rights somewhat moot.”

“*The Supreme Councillor will hear about this.*”

“Good, because my mission has his full backing and I doubt he’ll take kindly to some petty town minion whining about his crushed petunias.”

The radio remained silent for several long seconds.

“What do I do, sir?” Jefferson asked.

“Take us down and land in the park, of course. Bloody civilians!”

“*You haven’t heard the last of this, General, I assure –*”

Walker switched off the radio.

“You have such wonderful tact and diplomacy, Robert,” Charon said.

“So people keep telling me – watch out for that tree, Jefferson!”

Jefferson pulled the ship hard to the left. “Sorry, sir.”

Walker breathed a sigh of relief as the ship touched down without hitting anything.

“Charon, you can come with me, and Glamming –”

“It’s Doctor Glamming.”

“Glamming, you and your people can go for a wander through the city to see if you can sense anything of the boy, but be back here in an hour.”

“And if we’re not?”

“I’ll bring in a couple of battalions with orders to shoot on sight.”

Glamming grumbled something under his breath.

“Are there any questions?” Walker asked. “Good, let’s go.”

Ignoring the gawking crowd of onlookers that had gathered around the park, Walker led Charon across the road to the mining company headquarters, a five-storey sandstone and marble monolith.

“Can I help you?” the blond-headed Tivinel man behind the counter asked.

“I understand the Lake Placid mine manager came here earlier today with one of my colleagues.”

“Oh, yes, you must be General Walker; he told us you might be coming.”

“Did he really?”

The man looked confused. “Um, yes, he did; I’m not making it up. Why would I do that?”

“Sorry; could you let them know I’m here?”

“Of course; just take a seat over there.”

“Thank you.”

Charon followed Walker over to the lounge chairs in the corner. “If that’s an example of what my race has become, Robert, maybe they deserve to be ruled by an omniscient boy Pasha.”

“We have to take the good with the bad, Charon; the clever with the dull-witted. I’m sure he serves a purpose.”

“You’re always the optimist, Robert.”

“I have to be in my job.”

Charon closed his eyes. “The good, the bad, the clever and the dull-witted; in the end it matters not when they come to ride my ferry.”

The dull-witted man walked over to them. “They said for you to go straight up. Take the stairs over there to the second floor and it’s the first door on your right.”

“Thank you,” Walker said, standing. “Come on, Charon, before you start scaring the natives.”

“Who, me? Anyone would think I was the Grim Reaper.”

“You mean you’re not?”

“No, but I can tell you who is.”

“I’d rather not know if it’s all the same to you.”

“As you wish, Robert.”

Walker opened the door at the top of the stairs to see Colonel Gallagher and another man poring over maps. “Gallagher, what are you doing here?”

“Following orders, sir.”

“Where’s Piper?”

Gallagher looked around the room and under the table. “He’s not here, sir.”

Walker sighed. “So where is he? Is he in this building?”

“No, sir.”

“This city?”

“No, sir.”

“All right, is he on this damned planet?”

“No, sir.”

“So why are you here?”

“As I said, sir, I’m just following orders.”

“All right; perhaps you can tell me what those orders are.”

“No, sir, I can’t, as doing so would break the chain of command. Regulation 13.7.4 specifically says –”

“Don’t start quoting regulations at me, Gallagher; I wrote the damn things.”

“Indeed you did, sir, and in your prelude you said that the chain of command is the keystone to an efficient and well-disciplined military, and, if I may quote you, *circumventing that chain is the slippery slope into chaos.*”

Walker sighed again.

“I can pull the information you want from his mind,” Charon said, “but it might do permanent damage.”

“No, that won’t be necessary; not yet. I know what game he’s playing and the price he’s asking.”

Gallagher looked at him like an expectant puppy.

“I thought so. Gallagher, suppose for a moment that I were to restore your former rank of General. Would that loosen your tongue?”

Gallagher grinned. “If that would make you my immediate commanding officer, then yes, I suppose it would.”

Walker shook his head. “You’re a bastard, Gallagher, you know that?”

“Yes, sir, you’re not the first one to tell me that. Now make it official.”

“Huh?”

“I know you can access the command database from your field telephone; I’ve seen you do it. Make it official.”

“Very well.” Walker pulled out his phone, turning away from the others while he accessed the secure site. “You’ll have confirmation in a few moments.”

Gallagher pulled out his phone as it beeped, nodding as he read the incoming message congratulating him on his promotion. “Thank you, sir. There’s just one other thing; I believe you have a vacancy for the head of Special Operations following Piper’s, um, indiscretion.”

Walker sighed before tapping away at his phone again. “All right, but don’t make me regret this.”

“Of course I won’t, sir.”

“So then, General Gallagher, head of Special Operations, why did Piper send you here?”

“To create a diversion, sir.”

“You mean the boy isn’t on Ignus.”

“No, sir, he’s not; he’s still on Huntress as far as I know.”

“Where on Huntress?”

“That I don’t know, honestly, sir; Piper sent me off before they’d decided what they were doing.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Charon said.

“Of course he is; he already has his pound of flesh.”

“We must go to Huntress.”

“No, wait,” Gallagher said. “I have a better idea.”

Walker nodded for him to proceed.

“The mine manager here was showing me places on Ignus that someone might use to conceal a boy Pasha and, had you not arrived when you did, I was going to leave a trail leading you on a merry chase from one to the next. What I suggest is you take that bait and make out that you’re going to be spending weeks searching this planet, while I return to Piper, find out where they’ve really hidden the boy and devise a plan to neutralise him.”

Walker smiled. "That sounds like the General Gallagher of old, but you mustn't let slip any hint to Piper that you've changed sides."

"No, of course not. With all due respect, sir, I'm not stupid."

"No, Gallagher, you're lots of things but stupid isn't one of them."

Gallagher turned to leave. "Thank you, sir."

"Wait, there's something more." Walker pulled out his notebook, jotting down a series of numbers before tearing out the page and handing it to Gallagher. "You'll need this code to unlock your ship."

Damon looked up to the sound of heavy boots pounding along the corridor. "Colonel Gallagher, what are you doing back?"

"Walker's taken the bait I planted hook, line and sinker and will be out of our hair for three or four weeks, so I guess my mission has been accomplished. Is Piper about?"

"That's great news, but no, he went off to a secret base somewhere to prepare his resistance forces."

"Do you know where?"

"No, but nobody tells me anything. Pip will know, I'm sure."

Gallagher started walking towards Pip's office but Damon called him back.

"Pip's not here; he's with Hamati and Esmeralda over in Kurramurra, that's the Barungi village just upriver from Sandpiper Bay."

"Yes, I know where it is. Thanks, Damon."

"Always a pleasure, Colonel, I'm sure."

For a moment, Damon caught something odd in both Gallagher's expression and his residual telepathic aura, but then it was gone. Shrugging, he turned back to his work.

Gallagher paused as he stepped onto his ship, taking in the fine sunny day with its cooling sea breeze, and decided to walk down to Kurramurra instead of flying. With no time pressure yet, there were things he could better assess on foot than from the air.

Once outside the seminary gate, he turned from the road, heading cross-country through low scrub up towards the ridgeline surrounding the valley. To the south stretched a series of terraced cliffs dotted with large wind-eroded caves, while northwards it formed a

narrowing spur descending to the junction of the valley with the Benton River.

Walking back and forth along the ridgetop, he mentally noted lines of sight while letting his imagination play out the many possible siege or defence strategies. He wasn't sure yet which it would be; a lot depended on what Piper was up to, but he expected at the end of the day it'd be one or the other.

Satisfied, he climbed to the top of the ridge, sitting at a vantage point overlooking the vast inland flood plain to the north. Through his contacts with the former fringe-dwellers and more recently from Black Delphinidae publications, he'd learnt of the battles fought over this land between the ancient Tivinel and Barungi forces, paying special attention to the strategies each had employed, some successful, some not.

Since joining the military under Morgoth's rule and rising through the ranks following the Farley massacre, he'd had one overarching ambition, a longing that was now tantalisingly within reach. He'd have to meticulously plan each step and be constantly on his guard, but if he succeeded, and he had no doubt he would, by the time the dust had settled on these lands, there'd no longer be anyone in the military he'd need address as *sir*.

Gallagher returned to the road, following its twists and turns through the valley as it descended to the old fringe-dwellers' village. Few of the original residents had returned following the restoration of Huntress, with many of the stone houses still boarded up, as they'd found new lives on Cornipus and elsewhere, but the dwelling he turned to was still occupied.

"Edwin, Val, it's good to see you both. Are you keeping well?"

"General Gallagher, what a surprise!" Val said, wrapping him in a hug. "Although, um, sorry, I heard you were demoted a few years back."

"That's all right, the military has its ups and downs, but General Piper is a good CO and being a colonel means I can get up to things generals shouldn't be doing."

"Can I get you a drink?" Edwin asked, changing the subject, "or are you on duty?"

“Just water will be fine; I have a long day ahead of me.”

“So what brings you here?” Val asked as they walked through to the kitchen. “Or is that top secret?”

Edwin handed Gallagher a glass of water. “It’s about that new Pasha, isn’t it?”

“Yes; I’m sussing out possible military options and want to ask you about the old prison colony in that crater south of here.”

“Too many questions,” Val said. “We don’t want to get involved.”

“Nor do I want to involve either of you, but I understand it was heavily fortified and was wondering if you know if any of those fortifications remain in place.”

“The surveillance towers are still standing,” Edwin said, “but were decommissioned when the prison closed. It’s now a memorial to those who suffered and died there.”

“What of the quartz mines?”

“They’re closed too, but there’s been some talk recently of a Barungi company wanting to reopen them.”

“Can I get in?”

Edwin dashed from the room, returning a few moments later with a ring of keys. “Bring them back when you’re finished, okay?”

Gallagher chuckled as he accepted them. “Good to know my intelligence source is still reliable.”

Val covered her mouth. “But how – no, never mind, I don’t want to know.”

Gallagher smiled, pocketing the keys as he turned and left the house.

At the eastern edge of the village, the road took Gallagher past a pond where a huge pummel tree grew on its central island. Once essential to the survival of the fringe-dwellers in Huntress’s toxic atmosphere, the pummel fruit was now mostly a curiosity, with the tree becoming a tourist attraction for visitors having an historical interest.

Giving the plaque a passing glance, he continued on, the road following the stream downhill past orchards and farmlands to its mouth on the north-western corner of the bay. A bridge on the right led across to the beachside village and shops, now a haven for those

off-world visitors still intrigued by the novelty of a holiday on Huntress, but Gallagher continued straight ahead, walking out onto the headland separating the stream from the Benton River flowing down from the north.

Across the water, a larger headland divided Sandpiper Bay from the ocean. Gallagher compared the two, quickly deciding that where he stood would be the better defensive position due to the protection offered by the outer headland. For any vessels entering the bay from the north, the element of surprise outweighed the lower height and range, while in an attack from the south, neither headland offered much of an advantage over the other.

Satisfied, he returned to the road, heading north along the deepening Benton River gully until crossing over an old stone bridge, recently restored, and descending into Kurramurra. The Barungi masons had been hard at work here, too, restoring most of the ruined stone cottages to their former glory. As he descended the hill, faint sounds of music drifted on the breeze from the riverside taverns and, expecting this would be where he'd find Pip and Hamati, he headed that way.

His hunch confirmed at the first tavern he approached, he waved, grabbing a beer from the bar before coming over to join them at their table.

"Back so soon, Colonel?" Pip asked.

"Yes, Walker's fully occupied chasing wild geese on Ignus so I needed to check in with Piper, but Damon told me he's no longer here."

"That's right, he and Scott Davies have gone off to a secret base on Pulper to organise the resistance force."

Gallagher flicked his fingers. "That's right; he used to be with the Pulper Seventeenth Squadron before he joined Special Operations. Do you know where his base is?"

"I have no idea."

"Can you contact him?"

"No, but he calls me occasionally via an encrypted relay so I can pass on a message from you."

"Just tell him we should have at least three weeks to prepare our defences and I'm starting work on that now."

“Defences?”

“Yes, when Walker eventually twigs that we’re here, this area will most likely be the first place he’ll hit. I want to be ready for that.”

“Of course.”

Gallagher turned to Esmeralda. “I’m sorry; we haven’t been introduced.”

“This Esmeralda,” Hamati said, standing and bowing. “She Caleb’s mother.”

“Caleb? Is he the boy Pasha?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I take it he’s here with you then, but is that wise?”

“No, Joel and Lorraine have taken him into hiding on –”

Pip interrupted her. “It’s best you not say; with those Tivinel mind-readers on the loose, the less people who know, the better.”

“Oh yes, of course. I hope you don’t mind, Colonel.”

“No, Pip’s right and there’s no need for me to know, not yet at any rate.” Gallagher grinned. “If the boy’s far away, that’s even more reason to fortify this area so Walker will think he’s here. If we can put up a good-enough show to force a truce, we may yet be able to reach a negotiated settlement everyone can live with.”

Pip nodded. “That sounds like a good plan, Colonel.”

Gallagher drained his beer. “I’d best get to it then. Call me when you hear from Piper.”

“How do I do that?”

He pulled a card from a pocket in his uniform. “This number is a direct line to my field telephone.”

“Thanks.”

Esmeralda leaned over to Hamati and Pip once Gallagher had gone. “Did either of you sense anything odd about him?”

“Yes,” Hamati said. “His mind flinch when anyone call him *Colonel*.”

“Perhaps he still resents his demotion,” Pip said.

“That six years ago.”

“Some people can hold grudges for a long time but, given his history, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he was up to something.”

“Gallagher’s up to something,” Jefferson said, staring at the screen in front of him.

Walker scratched his chin. “Of course he is, but what? He’s been walking around on Huntress for hours now.”

“That was a stroke of genius installing the tracking worm into his phone with that message confirming his promotion.”

“Don’t tell anyone, but it’s standard procedure in situations like this.”

“So what do we do?” Glamming asked.

“For now, we go along with his plan and see what happens.”

“Give him enough rope and he’ll hang himself,” Charon said.

“Yes, exactly, but I’m thinking I might send you to Huntress on a civilian craft to do a bit of snooping of your own.”

“As you wish, Robert.”

“What about us?” Glamming asked.

“You and your people are to remain with me while we go through the charade of following Gallagher’s wild goose trail. As soon as he’s located the boy, we’ll make a bee-line to Huntress for a full-on assault.”

“And afterwards?”

“You can all just disperse wherever you want as far as I’m concerned. Catching escaped criminals isn’t the military’s responsibility.”

“Thank you, General.”

* * *

Gallagher landed his ship in the crater that was once Huntress’s prison colony. Pulling the key ring from his pocket, he walked over to the gate blocking entry to the administrative buildings and cells.

Stepping through, he followed the paved road into the compound to what used to be an airlock isolating the building’s interior from the planet’s previously toxic atmosphere. With both doors of the lock now open, he stepped through into what was once the prisoners’ dining hall.

A thick layer of dust now covered the tables and benches where the galaxy’s undesirables had received their rations prior to each

day's labour in the quartz mines. From all accounts it'd been a gruelling experience, with most dying long before their sentences had been served.

Casting aside those thoughts, he unlocked the door into the administrative section, seeking out the defensive control station which he found at the end of a long corridor. Inside, he immediately recognised the console desks as the same brand and model used in many military installations.

After turning on the main switch and waiting for each subsystem to boot, he opened the central control screen and entered the master password, amused and thankful the prison administrators hadn't changed it from the manufacturer's default.

Initiating a full diagnostic check, he strolled around the room, checking the other display screens while waiting for the tests to complete. In addition to cameras monitoring the secure area outside the building and the various mine sites, there was also a radar facility scanning for approaching air and spacecraft. He made a mental note to launch a test drone later to confirm its operational status and coverage area.

With the diagnostics completed and no faults reported, he opened the auto-targeting system, only to be prompted for a level ten authorisation code, as issued to those of rank general or its civilian equivalent. He was about to enter his own newly-issued code but paused as an idea began to take form, one that, if it succeeded, would eliminate all his obstacles in one fell stroke. He'd need a lure, that much was clear, but he was sure something would present itself at the time and, if not, well, improvisation was something he'd always excelled at.

Nodding to himself as all the details slipped neatly into place, he shut everything down and locked the door before heading back along the corridor to the cell blocks.

At first he was confused, as all the cell doors were open with no apparent means of locking them, but he quickly realised there was no need for locks here as, with the toxic atmosphere outside, this was a prison from which there was no escape; or at least that's what everyone thought until Frank Halliday had gone over the crater wall and proved them wrong.

No matter, the doors looked solid enough, the high windows were too narrow for even a child to crawl through and he was sure he could obtain enough padlocks and clasps without arousing suspicion.

Returning to the dining hall, he checked in the kitchen to make sure the refrigerators and cooktops were still functional and that running water remained on tap. With the drawers and cupboards revealing a full set of cutlery and crockery, he visited the bathroom to inspect the plumbing before returning to his ship.

Once airborne and back over the bay, he reaffirmed his earlier assessment of each headland's defensive merits before booking a landing spot at the spaceport and accommodation at one of the bayside tourist resorts. His long wait was just beginning and he might as well enjoy himself.

Awakenings

Cam woke in the early hours of the morning, suddenly aware of the empty space beside him on the bed.

“Davo?”

He turned on the bed light when there was no response. The room was empty.

Putting his hands behind his head, Cam waited, thinking he must have gone to the bathroom or to the kitchen for a glass of water, but he didn't return.

Unable to fend off the growing sense of dread any longer, Cam stood, passing out from behind the screen into the living area.

“Davo?”

He checked on the sofa, under the table, behind the kitchen workbench and was about to look in the cupboard under the sink but stopped himself. *Don't be stupid, Cam.* After a few moments of indecision, he looked anyway.

Next he checked the ensuite, feeling a cold clamminess envelope him as he slid open the door, fully expecting to find David's dead body slumped beside the toilet seat, but no, it wasn't.

With nothing in the bath tub or shower recess, he moved on to the ante-room, giving it a thorough search before passing through into the palace's main hall.

Illuminated only by starlight through the high domed ceiling, it took several agonising minutes before his eyes had fully adjusted, allowing him to see hazy black outlines of the furniture and walls. Moving along the side, he reached the door leading out onto the paved walkway, thinking David might have gone out for some sea air or to look at the stars, but it was latched on the inside.

Sighing as his panic began to morph into frustration and an undercurrent of anger, he edged his way along to the back of the hall,

pausing where the old fresco of corals and sea grasses seemed to glimmer in the starlight. From the side of his vision, something dark flashed across the scene but when he turned to look at it, it had gone.

Behind him came a soft snort, like someone on the verge of snoring. With goosebumps rising all over him, he spun around.

On the dais at the far end of the hall, the golden throne glimmered in the starlight, with Drago's portrait above it reduced to monochrome and barely visible. A dark shape, the source of the snorting, filled the centre of the throne.

"*Bring the hostage out,*" it whispered in a voice Cam both recognised and didn't.

"Davo?"

"*Yes, Pedro, everything's sweet.*"

Cam tried to dash towards the dais but his feet, frozen in fear, wouldn't move, causing him to almost fall flat on his face.

By sheer force of will he edged forward, creeping along the wall before turning and climbing onto the dais where David sat upon the throne, staring out across the empty hall.

"*And so it all begins.*"

"Davo," Cam whispered. "What are you doing?"

Without turning his head, David began to slump forward. Cam dashed over, catching him before he hit the floor.

"Davo, are you okay?"

There was no response from him other than the slow steady breathing of deep sleep. Trying not to wake him, Cam cradled him into his arms before lifting him and carrying him back to the bedroom.

With him safely on the bed and still in deep sleep, Cam stretched out beside him, placing a protective arm over him while trying to make sense of what he'd witnessed. *Sunshine, warm seas and love*, that soothing voice deep inside his head whispered as sleep finally claimed him.

Cam woke again, this time to bright daylight on his eyelids. He opened them to see David staring at him. "Huh?"

"It's nice to feel wanted, Cam, but you can let go of me now."

He removed his arm from around David's torso. "Sorry, but I didn't want any repeat performances."

"Repeat performances of what?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"You went sleepwalking out into the hall and were sitting on the throne mumbling something about a hostage."

David grimaced for a moment.

"So you do remember."

"No, it's just something about *hostage* that made me shiver, but I can't remember why and it's gone now."

"In all the time I've known you, you've never gone sleepwalking. You scared me, Davo."

"To the best of my knowledge, I've never gone sleepwalking, period. I'm the one who should be scared."

"Are you?"

"Um, yeah." David pulled Cam's arm back over him. "But not while I have you protecting me."

Cam pushed his other arm underneath him and locked his hands together. "I won't let the bogeyman take you."

"I don't think it's bogeymen we have to worry about."

"What is it then?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be so worried."

"Oh."

David sat up, pulling Cam up with him. "Come on, we'd better go get some breakfast. All that sleepwalking has made me ravenous."

"But you only, no, never mind."

David ruffled Cam's shaggy hair into an even shaggier tangle.

Loraine scowled as they entered the kitchen. "Look at the pair of you; anyone would think you've just crawled out of bed."

David grinned. "We have."

"No, don't tell me; I don't want to know. Would it be too much to ask for either of you to put some clothes on?"

"Yes."

"I thought so."

Caleb giggled.

“Don’t you go getting ideas, little man.”

“Can we go back down to that cave now that it’s daytime?” he asked.

“Yes, once everyone’s finished breakfast.” She turned back to David and Cam. “Do you want eggs or cereal?”

David looked at Cam, who shrugged. “Yes please.”

Loraine sighed while breaking another two eggs into the frying pan. “I don’t even know why I bothered asking. The cereal’s over on the bench; you can help yourselves.”

“Thanks, sis.”

“Don’t call me *sis*.”

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

Cam turned to David. “Are you and Loraine always like this?”

“Yep; it used to drive our mother mad.”

“My sister and I never talked much, well we didn’t have anything in common, but when we did it was usually amicable. She was the only one to wish me well when I went off to begin my studies on Cornipus.”

“It’s time to put all that behind you, Cam,” Joel said. “The chances are you’ll never go anywhere near Hazler again and dwelling on it won’t do anyone any good.”

Cam forced a smile. “Thanks.”

Once again that voice spoke up inside his head. *Sunshine, warm seas and love; a simple life, lost long ago but perhaps even now still redeemable.* He turned to see Caleb looking at him.

“Here’s your egg,” Loraine said. “I hope you like it.”

“Thanks; I’m sure I will.”

Joel held Caleb’s hand as they descended the stairs to the sea cave, with the others following behind. Once at the bottom, Caleb whipped off his shorts before Loraine could say anything and dashed naked into the water. After a moment’s hesitation, Joel followed his lead, with Cam and Willy close behind.

Loraine, realising she was outnumbered, also stripped off before entering the water and swimming across to Joel and Caleb. David,

though, climbed onto the rock, where he sat staring out through the cave mouth to the open sea beyond.

Cam looked up at him. "Davo, aren't you coming in?"

David didn't respond.

"Let him be," Willy said. "I expect he'll come in when he's good and ready."

"Okay, but it's not like Davo to be the only one not in the water. Usually it's a struggle to get him out."

Willy swam over to where Joel was examining the rock to the right of the cave's entrance. Cam gave David another puzzled glance before following.

"See where the waves have fractured the rock here, Willy?" Joel asked.

"Yes, do you think, um, do you think it might be –"

"I can't tell for sure without an ultraviolet light, but it sure looks like that high-grade fractal ore we found on Ignus."

"Could that be why the Pashas lived on this island?"

Cam felt a cold shiver run through him. "Davo's been acting oddly ever since we got here. Could this rock be doing something to him?"

"I suppose it's possible, Cam, but we don't know enough to even speculate. As Joel said, without an ultraviolet light we really can't tell whether this is fractal ore or just plain granite."

"Willy's right," Joel said, "but it's something to keep in mind if we see more strangeness here."

No sooner had he spoken than something broke the water surface near the cave entrance.

"Caleb, get back into the shallows. I think something's in here!"

"No, it's all right," David said, suddenly dashing down into the water. "They're friendly."

As he swam out to the centre of the cave, two dolphins surfaced beside him.

"Caleb, no, wait!" Loraine shouted as the boy turned to join them.

"It's all right, they're calling me."

As the others watched on, the dolphins swam around David and Caleb, leaping out of the water and splashing back in beside them.

"They want us to ride them," David said as both dolphins dived below the surface.

“Yes, I know.”

David and Caleb each took hold of a dorsal fin as the dolphins gently surfaced between their legs. With their passengers mounted, they headed out through the cave entrance and into the open sea.

Loraine turned as Joel, Willy and Cam swam over to her. “Why didn’t you three stop them?”

Joel looked at Willy and Cam. “How?”

Realising he had a point, she sighed. “How am I going to explain this to Caleb’s mother, or to *my* mother for that matter?”

Cam looked around. “Is there a boat anywhere we could use to go after them?”

“If there is, only David would know where to find it. What was he thinking? Who knows where they’ll end up?”

“Do you think the dolphins mean to kill them?”

Willy placed a hand on Cam’s shoulder. “No, that’s unlikely, I mean, why would they? Dolphins eat fish, not people.”

“No,” Loraine said, “but they could take them out to sea and just leave them there when the novelty of having people on their backs wears off. Why did I have to get an idiot for a brother? If he comes back alive I’ll kill him, I swear.”

Cam gulped. “I’d rather you didn’t. Maybe, um, maybe we could at least look for a boat. This is an island; surely there must be one somewhere.”

“All right, but where?”

Joel flicked his fingers. “When we were on the roof, I noticed a breakwater and boat ramp at the back end of that walkway running along the northern side of the main hall. If there’s a boat ramp, there ought to be boats.”

Loraine shrugged. “I suppose that makes as much sense as anything.”

Without waiting for any further discussion, she turned and dashed up the stairs. Joel looked at Cam and Willy before following.

Joel caught up with her at the door onto the terrace.

“This way,” he said, dashing towards the back of the palace.

Around a slight bend in the wall, a flight of steps led down to a gravel path along the shore behind the breakwater, with the boat ramp

crossing it some fifty metres on. Opposite, a rectangular hole in the palace wall opened into a store room with a small boat sitting on the floor.

“Found it!” Joel yelled back to the others who were still making their way down the steps. “Come and help me carry it out.”

Loraine grabbed the corner opposite Joel at the stern while Willy and Cam lifted each side of the bow. With a grunt, they dragged the boat out and onto the top of the ramp.

“I don’t think this’ll work,” Cam said.

Loraine glared at him. “Of course, you’d know all about boats, Ensign Cam. *Why* won’t it work?”

“I don’t know anything about boats, the only one I’ve ever been on was a harbour ferry, but I’m pretty sure they won’t float for long with a hole in the bottom.”

“A what?”

“Look.”

He pointed to the front of the boat, just to the right of the bow, where the hull had split.

“It looks like it might have hit a rock,” Joel said.

“I don’t care what it hit,” Loraine said. “Is there any way to fix it?”

“We could if we had some fibreglass or epoxy resin, but it’d take a few days to cure properly and even then I don’t think I’d trust it in the open sea.”

Loraine looked around the room, hoping there might be another boat lurking in the shadows, but there wasn’t. “A fat lot of good this is, then. What else can we do?”

“What’s wrong, sis?” a voice said from just outside the door.

Loraine jumped around to see David and Caleb standing on the ramp. She dashed out, thumping David repeatedly on the chest. “You idiot! You good-for-nothing stupid idiot!”

David stood calmly watching her until her blows ran out of oomph. “Now that’s out of your system, perhaps you could tell me what’s wrong.”

“What were you thinking going off with Caleb on those dolphins? They could have left you floundering out at sea.”

“No they wouldn’t,” Caleb said. “They’re our friends.”

“He’s right,” David said before Loraine could interject. “They were welcoming us and showing us around their home.”

“You, what, spoke to them telepathically? I thought they all lost that ability when Drago died.”

“Yes, they did, but it was just what we sensed and felt.”

“The girl dolphin is going to have a baby,” Caleb said.

Loraine sighed. “This is going way beyond anything I can comprehend. Just don’t do it again, okay?”

David grinned. “All right, if it makes you happy, sis.”

“Don’t call me sis, bro.”

“Touché. So what are you all doing out here?”

“We were trying to find a boat to go out and rescue you, but the only one is this piece of junk with a hole in the bottom.”

“Oh, right. Maybe we should fix it; a boat might come in handy.”

“With what?”

David walked over to a set of shelves on the back wall of the boat room, searching along them before grabbing a mallet, a large can and a roll of thick tape. “This should work.” He handed them to Cam. “Just follow the instructions.”

Cam furrowed his brow as he looked at the side of the can. “I can’t read this language.”

“I can,” Caleb said.

“Great, that’s sorted then,” David said, “you can do it after lunch. Come on back inside; there’s something else I need to show you.”

Loraine glared at him but followed as he led everyone around to the front door.

“This is the portal room,” Joel said, immediately recognising it as the one containing the portal into Sheol, having been brought through there by Hamati in the distant past. Back then, they’d been greeted by Roly’s assistant whom Joel had nicknamed *The Count*, on account of his resemblance to an actor performing in some great dramatic work, but there was no greeter here now. The rectangular portal embedded in the floor was still there, only now it looked to be just a dull metal plate instead of the shimmering opening he remembered.

“It’s closed,” Cam said. “Do you know how to open it, Davo?”

“I think you need one of those dolphin amulets,” Joel said, pointing to the round socket in the wall alongside it. “I don’t suppose Drago left any spares lying around, did he?”

“Perhaps,” David said, “but we mightn’t need that. Granddad Jason could open these by thought power.”

Loraine glared at him again. “In case you haven’t noticed, *bro*, Granddad isn’t here.”

“I know that, but long ago he taught me how to do it and I used that trick when Pip was escorting Drago’s spirit through the City of Towers. That was before my Pasha genes turned off, though, so I don’t know if I can still do it.”

“Go on; give it a try if you must.”

David placed a hand on each side of the plate, closing his eyes and grimacing in concentration. Nothing happened.

“I might be a bit rusty; let me try again.”

This time a shimmer of light appeared in the centre of the plate, spreading outwards until completely consuming it.

“Well done, Davo,” Cam said. “How long will it stay open?”

“That’s a good question.” David stepped away from the portal. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Some ten seconds later, just when Joel thought it was going to stay open indefinitely, the shimmering light suddenly winked out, with the portal becoming just a dull plate again.

“There’s your answer,” David said. “Long enough for us all to get through if we need to escape into Sheol, I guess.”

“Let me try,” Caleb said, stepping over to the portal and placing a hand on each side. A moment later the shimmering light reappeared as it opened.

“How’d you do that?” Loraine asked.

“I just sensed what David had done and did the same thing.”

“You mean you read his mind?”

“No, nothing like that, it was just a feeling of what he was doing.”

“Caleb may be young,” David said, “but don’t forget he’s a Pasha. Never underestimate a Pasha.”

Caleb gave him a worried look.

“That’s something that’s been bugging me,” Loraine said. “If the Pashas were such great telepaths that they could see all possible

future outcomes, why'd they need the defensive lasers and this escape portal? If they could foresee any future attack, surely they could have killed or imprisoned the attackers long before the plot could unfold."

David laughed. "That was Drago's great secret, and Roly's too, I imagine. While certainly a strong telepath, the Pasha by himself couldn't see the future; he needed his seneschal to do that."

"Seneschal?"

"Yes, his valet. For Roly, it was that one who looked like a Shakespearean actor, but Drago's was more like a prison guard, someone you definitely wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. They were singletons."

Joel gasped. "Singlets? You mean like me?"

"Yes, Joel, singlets just like you. The Pasha would open a telepathic connection to the seneschal and use that person's ability to peruse all possible outcomes. I think that's what Tristan wanted Joel for, but because Tristan wasn't a proper Pasha, he couldn't make it work without Joel's cooperation."

Joel felt again that flash of insight he'd had back in the Black Delphinidae catacombs, only this time it was a lot stronger. *He was a singleton; across all time lines there could only ever be one of him. It had to be, it was the only way it could work. That's why he had to find Caleb.* He remembered now how Caleb had touched his mind, using him as a conduit to Loraine to thwart the Hazler police when they'd been about to shoot everyone. *It was the only way it could work; the only way.*

"Caleb, I think, well, I'm pretty sure, I'm your seneschal."

Caleb nodded. "Yes; I don't know the word or what it means, but you are, Joel, I knew that from the first moment I saw you."

Joel wrapped the boy in a spontaneous hug. "And somehow I knew that too from the moment I first saw you, Caleb."

David looked at Cam, as if about to say something, but didn't.

* * *

"How did you learn to read this ancient writing?" Cam asked Caleb as they set to work on the boat."

“My mum and the others in the village taught me. They all lived in the olden days before the sun went out.”

“Oh, right. So, um, what’s it like being a Pasha? Is it daunting?”

“I’m not sure what that means, but it’s how I’ve always been so I don’t know any different. My mum told me that it’s rude to touch people’s minds without their permission, so I don’t. It’s as simple as that.”

“Yes, I see, and the future-telling stuff, well we now know you need a singleton to do that, so for a good person like you it wouldn’t be a problem. I wonder why the government and military have their knickers in such a knot over you.”

Caleb laughed. “I’m glad I don’t wear knotty knickers.”

“Me too. It’s just, well, if we could make everyone understand what you just told me, we might be able to stop anyone from getting hurt.”

“I hope you can. I don’t want to cause anyone any hurt.”

Cam nodded, picking up the mallet. “Let’s get to work, shall we? What does it say to do first?”

“Use the mallet to flatten out each side of the crack and bring the edges together, then apply a coat of adhesive to each side and let it dry. After that, stick the tape to the adhesive.”

“That sounds pretty easy. Willy and I will hold the boat so the crack’s against the ground and you can do the hammering.”

They set to work and, an hour later, the boat was fixed.

* * *

Cam emerged from the shower, still rubbing his hair with a towel, to see David sitting on the bed studying something in his hands.

“What you got there, Davo?”

“It’s Drago’s blowpipe and dart that he used to kill Roly. I found them in a hidden compartment at the back of one of the drawers.”

Cam gulped. “Is, is that the dart that almost killed me?”

“Yeah, it would be, wouldn’t it?”

“Be careful you don’t prick yourself on it; there’s unlikely to be any antidote here.”

“I doubt it’d still be toxic after three million years, but I’ll be careful.”

“A lot of the other old stuff seems remarkably well preserved.”

“Yes, this palace was on the dark side of the planet when it stopped rotating and everything was deep frozen for much of that time. I wonder –”

“What?”

“Long ago, back in the days before Drago, there’d be a challenge of the Pasha, a ritualised contest of physical and psychic ability in which an existing Pasha and a new challenger would fight to the death. Drago cheated that with this dart and I was just wondering, well, what with all this fuss and threat of war over Caleb being a Pasha, perhaps –” He touched the blowpipe to his lips. “Perhaps this might be a solution.”

“No, Davo, you can’t, you can’t seriously be thinking of killing him with that, can you?”

David shook his head, a puzzled look crossing his face. “No, of course not; I don’t know what put that idea into my head. Sorry, Cam, I’ve clearly upset you and I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Can you put that, that *thing* back where you found it?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Climbing off the bed, he strode over to the closet and pulled out one of the drawers.

“There now, it’s safely tucked away and I promise not to touch it again.” He stepped over to Cam, giving him a hug. “I’m sorry to have reminded you of what Tristan did to you; I hope I haven’t given you nightmares.”

“That’s all right, but it’s not that, it’s just that you’ve been acting strangely ever since we got here and then what you were saying about – oh Davo, no, it can’t be!”

“What?”

Cam ran his fingers through David’s hair. “Your roots, they, they’re turning red!”

“What?”

“Your hair’s turning red, Davo, just like, like Drago’s in that painting.”

David dashed over to the bathroom mirror. “Damn, I can’t see my own roots in this. Pull out a hair, Cam, one that has a red root.”

Cam again ran his fingers through David’s thick locks, picking out a likely candidate.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry.”

“Let me see it.”

David stared at the strand, black for all its length except for the last couple of millimetres which were bright red.

“This isn’t possible, it just isn’t possible.”

“I think maybe it is, Davo; there must be something in this palace, maybe in those rocks Joel and Willy were looking at in the cave, or maybe not, I don’t know, but I think something’s switching your Pasha genes back on.”

David stared again at the strand. “I can’t be turning into Drago, Cam, I just can’t! Please, tell me it can’t happen.”

Cam wrapped his arms around him, tears now running down his cheeks. “I don’t know what to think, Davo, I really don’t.”

“Whatever you do,” David said, his voice now wavering, “whatever you do, don’t tell Loraine.”

Confrontation

“Come for a walk, Esmeralda,” Hamati said.

“Where to?”

“You’ll see.”

Passing out through the front gate, he led her up the gentle hill to the east along a quiet tree-lined street. If Kurramurra had a dress circle, this would be it, but the Barungi were still few in number and their society remained largely egalitarian.

Esmeralda pointed up a side street to the left. “Didn’t your researchers have their laboratories over there? What were their names? One was Brody, I’m sure, but who was the other?”

“You have a good memory. The other one was Kyle.”

“Yes, of course. What became of them?”

“They were amongst the Barungi who fled with me into Sheol and are still here, in fact are still working in that building up there. They helped devise the Pasha screening test that’s caused such a ruckus.”

“Really? The more I see of this place, the more I think nothing’s changed from before.”

“One thing has changed,” Hamati said, leading her onto a flight of stairs ascending the forested ridge at the end of the street. “There’s no longer any law confining us to the lowlands.”

Esmeralda laughed. “Now I know where you’re taking me. This is the original track across the ridge to Honeydew Cove, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed.”

At the top of the steps, a fenced vantage point overlooked Kurramurra and the river gorge to the west. Beyond, in the early morning haze, they could just make out the higher mountains behind Benton that had once been the Tivinel heartland.

“This is such an amazing place,” Esmeralda said. “I could happily spend the rest of my days here.”

“I was hoping you might say that.” Hamati reached into his pocket, pulling out a small felt-lined box containing a gold ring. “Will you marry me?”

Esmeralda held the offered ring in her hand. “These are troubled times, Hamati, with my son at the centre of the storm. If you take me, you must take him as well, at least until he’s old enough to find his own way in life.”

“Yes, of course.”

She put the ring back in its box. “In that case I accept, but we must keep this a secret until these troubles are resolved. If we all come out of this alive, then I’ll happily become your fiancée.”

Hamati looked momentarily crestfallen but quickly smiled. “That sounds fine to me, really. If we don’t survive, the whole thing will be moot anyway.”

“That’s one way to put it, I suppose.”

She went to hand the box back to him but he shook his head. “You keep it, even if you can’t yet wear it.”

She kissed him. “Thank you.”

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand, “we’re nearly at the top of the ridge now and there’s another amazing lookout just ahead.”

Passing across a saddle point, the track weaved around a rocky outcrop before emerging atop a cliff offering breathtaking views of Honeydew Cove and the sparkling ocean beyond.

“Look!” Esmeralda said, pointing south. “Down at the end of the beach is that sea cave we almost drowned in.”

“Yes, it’s still there even after all this time. When the planet stopped spinning and the ocean disappeared, this region was in the twilight zone and there was very little erosion. Hardly any of the landforms have changed.”

“That’s amazing. The west coast was buried under hundreds of metres of ice and glacial movement changed a lot of the landscape. As you saw, my village escaped mostly unscathed but we were lucky; elsewhere, entire mountains have been flattened.”

Hamati took her hand. “Perhaps we shouldn’t dwell too much on the past. Come, let’s go down to the beach for a swim.”

More steps descended through switchbacks along a series of ledges in the cliff face, eventually bringing them out onto the sand close to the waterfall and a reconstructed picnic table.

"You can't tell me this is original, Hamati!"

"No, the villagers rebuilt it once the track was cleared and made safe."

"They did a wonderful job; it looks exactly as I remember it."

Hamati pulled off his clothes, prompting Esmeralda to do the same. "Come on in, the water's beautiful!"

"This is freezing!" she shouted, coming to an abrupt halt as the first wave splashed over her.

"You'll soon get used to it."

"If you insist."

"I do."

She slowly made her way further out, letting each small wave wet a little more of her body until she was fully immersed.

Hamati dived under an incoming set. "Let's just forget about the galaxy's troubles for a while, okay?"

She swam over to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Okay."



Brushing the sand from themselves at the end of their love-making, they stood, picking up their discarded clothing, but the box containing the ring fell from Esmeralda's pocket. She opened it, looking at its golden shine in the sunlight before carefully placing it on her finger.

"Bugger the galaxy, Hamati; I'm proud to be your betrothed."

Hamati grinned.

Wrapping her arms around him, she tried pulling him back onto the sand for some more love-making, but he resisted.

"My cook is preparing a celebratory lunch for us back at the house and we'd better not be late or she'll throw a rolling pin at me."

Esmeralda laughed. "That was taking a bit of a risk, wasn't it? What if I'd turned down your proposal?"

"I'd have thought of something else to celebrate."

She kissed him again. “You’re always the optimist, Hamati.”
“I have to be in my job.”

* * *

Joel suddenly woke in the twilight before dawn, the dream voice calling his name from afar still echoing in his mind. He turned his head to see Caleb standing in the doorway.

Making sure not to disturb Loraine, he climbed off the bed and followed him out to the common room. “What’s wrong?”

“I had that dream again about the hooded man taking my mum away, only this time it was much stronger, much closer to real life.”

Joel put his arms around the boy. “It was still just a dream, Caleb, and dreams can’t hurt you, you know that.”

“Yes, I know, but, um, just to be sure, could I touch your mind and look into the future?”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“Do you?”

Joel sighed. “My singlet powers have saved the ones I love on several occasions, so very well, Caleb, as long as you promise to break off the moment you see anything bad. The future’s not set in stone and lots of bad things that *can* happen never do.”

“I understand, Joel.”

Joel closed his eyes as Caleb took hold of his hands, not knowing quite what to expect. Images flashed across his mind’s eye, most too fleeting to comprehend, but amongst them was darkness, bright light, a smell of grapes and a cry of pain. Caleb didn’t let go, though, for he had a message to send, then he was running through a forest to where people were talking, their voices too muffled to understand, and saw a spaceship flying, a flash of light, and water, water everywhere with not a drop to drink. He saw men on a boat and an old lady throwing a punch. *Sunshine, warm seas and love*, a tiny voice said, speaking of *a simple life lost long ago but now renewed, thanks to you*. Water splashed with laughter as Caleb released his hands and the images vanished.

He opened his eyes to see that they’d been joined by David and Cam.

“What’s happening?” David whispered.

“There’s a pathway to happiness,” Caleb said, “but, but I can’t –” He covered his face as tears began to flow.

“Let me see,” David said, taking Joel’s hands.

Joel gave him a puzzled look. “I didn’t know you could –”

“I couldn’t, but it seems I’m now a Pasha too.”

“But how? Is that possible? And even if it is, can two Pashas share a singlet?”

Cam covered his mouth to stop himself laughing. “It’d want to be a pretty big singlet.”

“Sharing a singleton is *not* like sharing a needle, Joel,” David said. “I won’t catch anything.”

Sighing again, Joel held out his hands and closed his eyes, watching the same sequence of images and sensations flash through him in a repeat performance. Once again that tiny voice spoke of *sunshine, warm seas and love, of a simple life lost long ago but now renewed, thanks to you both*. With laughter and a splash of water, David released his hands.

“Caleb’s right,” David said, “right on both counts. He has to, but I don’t think he can.”

“Yes, I have to,” Caleb said, now wiping his eyes and standing erect, “it’s what I’m here for, my destiny’s path, but I’ll need your help, David.”

“Yes, I know. You’re a brave boy, Caleb, a very brave boy.”

Joel and Cam exchanged confused glances.

“What was it like, Davo?” Cam asked. “Did you see every possible way the universe can unfold?”

“No, nothing like that. I don’t know whether that’s all a singleton can do or if Joel’s especially bad at his job, but all I saw were critical moments from which timelines diverged to vastly different outcomes and even then, they were just glimpses, or impressions like muffled sounds or smells. While I know what each outcome needs to be, I don’t know what has to be done to achieve them.”

“Oh, I see.”

“No you don’t, not yet. There’s only one path through those critical points that doesn’t end in calamity.”

Caleb nodded. "It's the only path; my destiny's path. We have to go up to that portal room, Joel."

"The portal room? Why?"

"Don't ask questions," David said. "If he has to explain anything he'll probably lose his nerve; I know I would."

"All right."

They followed him up the stairs and along the corridor to what Joel still thought of as the Count's room. Caleb placed his hands on each side of the plate in the corner, watching as the shimmering glow filled its surface.

"Do you want me to come with you?" David asked, crouching beside him.

"No, you have to remain here for when –"

"Yes, I understand."

"Can you open your mind to me so we can communicate when the time comes?"

"I already have."

Caleb leant forward and was about to climb into the portal when Loraine appeared in the doorway.

"What's going on here?"

David turned to her. "Can you trust me, Loraine? Just this once, can you trust me?"

She looked to Joel, who nodded. "Trust him, Loraine. He'll explain later, I'm sure, but if I understand correctly, the fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance right now."

"Joel's right," Caleb said. "My destiny's path lies through here."

Before Loraine could say anything more, Caleb dropped forwards into the portal, disappearing through the shimmering light. A few seconds later it reverted to being just a dull metal plate.

"This had better be good," Loraine said, turning to David and crossing her arms over her chest as Willy came up behind her.

* * *

Gallagher's field telephone rang. He pulled it out, puzzled to see *Unknown/Encrypted* on the caller ID screen, as numbers in the military network were supposed to be blocked to telemarketers.

“Gallagher; this had better be good.”

“It’s Piper here; I received your message from Pip, great work!”

“Ah, thank you, sir. I expect my little chase will keep Walker and his goons occupied for two or three weeks. In the meantime I’m setting up defences around Kurramurra and Sandpiper Bay, both to protect our interests and draw Walker’s attention here when he finally figures out my ruse.”

“That’s good thinking, Gallagher, just don’t go overboard, okay? We want to force Walker to the negotiating table, not blow him away.”

“Trust me, sir; I have it all under control. I assume the boy is still on the west coast, is that right?”

“Don’t take offence, Gallagher, but with those Tivinel mind-readers on the loose, I’m limiting those who know to the bare minimum.”

“No offence taken; that’s a wise strategy, sir.”

“Scott Davies’ informants in Interplanetary Customs have told him that someone has lodged a flight plan for a civilian rental cruiser from Ignus to Huntress. If I have my time zones correct, it’s due to arrive there in about an hour so you might want to see who it is.”

“It’s probably just some oddball tourist but I’ll go and check it out. Can I call you back when I do?”

“I’m texting you a number now, but use it sparingly as I don’t know how secure this civilian relay is.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Gallagher closed the call, wondering if Walker had sent someone to spy on him. *There’s only one way to find out*, he said to himself as he left his room and headed for the spaceport.

Gallagher watched from the viewing lounge as the civilian craft touched down outside, with a familiar figure in a black hooded cassock stepping from the hatch. Now certain Walker had sent Charon to spy on him, he hurried down to the arrivals area, finding a seat in the corner where he could watch those emerging from customs without being seen.

He followed Charon out of the terminal building, surprised when he set off on foot down the road rather than collect a rental vehicle.

Dashing back to his own vehicle, Gallagher grabbed his small day pack before setting off in pursuit of his quarry.

At the main road along Sandpiper Bay, Charon turned north, going past the strip of tourist resorts and hotels and through the shopping centre to the bridge. Here Gallagher expected him to turn west towards the Black Delphinidae seminary, but again he was proved wrong as Charon instead continued north towards Kurramurra.

At the southern edge of the village, Charon headed along the riverfront, passing the bars, taverns and ferry wharf before heading up a short incline to a large two-storey building on a corner block. At the front gate he paused, turning and looking back as Gallagher ducked out of sight.

“Come on Gallagher, show yourself; I know you’ve been following me since I left the spaceport. You might prove useful in dealing with Hamati.”

Not having any other choice, other than perhaps running away, Gallagher stepped out and walked up to him. “What are you doing here, Charon?”

“The same as you; trying to locate that boy Pasha. Since Hamati is in the thick of this business, I thought I should speak to him first. Have you done so yet?”

“Briefly, but he thinks I’m still on his side so I had to tread carefully.”

“And are you, Stuart?”

Gallagher was momentarily taken aback as this was the first time in decades anyone had used his first name. *This was a dangerous man, far more dangerous than he had ever imagined.* “I’m just following orders, Charon.”

“Yes, but whose orders I wonder?”

“My loyalty is to the military.”

Charon grinned, causing an icy chill to run up and down Gallagher’s spine. “Yes, it is, Stuart. Don’t worry; I have no interest in the petty power games you and Robert are playing, I just want to rid the universe of Pashas once and for all.”

“Thank you.”

“Come, let’s go in and see if our collective efforts can convince Hamati to divulge that troublesome boy’s location.”

The gate opened onto a lush manicured lawn bisected by a path of stepping stones leading to the house's white portico entrance. On the left stood a tiled pergola covered by flowering vines, where Hamati and Esmeralda sat with the remains of a meal and several bottles of wine on the table.

Hamati stood, looking a little wobbly. "Charon, Colonel Gallagher, come join us for drink to celebrate our engagement!"

* * *

Caleb tumbled out onto the floor of Sheol, surprised by the sudden rotation in gravity and total darkness enveloping him. Yet it wasn't entirely dark, his own body glowed brightly even though it cast no light onto his surroundings. *That's right*, David's voice said inside his head, *telepaths glow in Sheol. If you ever meet Peter Thorpe, he can explain it.*

But everything else is dark; how do I find my way?

Focus your mind on what you saw of your destination through Joel and just start walking. You'll know when you get there.

None of that made any sense to him but he started walking anyway, concentrating on the smell of grapes and letting his nose lead him on. Soon he reached a place where the smell seemed to be coming straight from the wall.

Reaching towards it with his hands, he could vaguely see what looked like a metal plate, but as he touched the wall on either side, it vanished into the darkness.

The portals look black from in there when they're open, David's voice said. *Go on through.*

He lunged forward, fully expecting to bang his head on the wall, but instead, with another ninety degree rotation in gravity, he tumbled out onto the floor of a dimly lit basement. After waiting a few moments for his nerves to settle, he stood, taking in the shelves, benches and filing cabinets surrounding him, but oddly, he thought, the smell of grapes had vanished. To his right was a small window and a door to the outside, but he turned instead to the staircase in the other corner.

Stepping quietly on only the balls of his feet, he reached the top where a doorway led into an open-plan living area. Through the French windows opposite he could hear voices coming from the pergola outside. Not daring to peek, he squeezed in behind a lounge chair, waiting and listening for his next cue.

* * *

Charon threw back his hood, revealing a shock of wavy grey hair poking out around his head like a demonic halo.

“You!” he said, pointing an accusing finger at Esmeralda. “You’re not telling me you’re engaged to this witch queen, are you Hamati?”

“Mind your tongue, Charon,” Hamati said.

“This whore was responsible for the death of my wife – your sister, Hamati – as well as my daughter and her betrothed, or have you forgotten? I can assure you I have not.”

“Responsible? How? Last Hamati heard, they die when Drago’s star dimmer break.”

“Elsa and Pedro were indentured to you, making their well-being your responsibility, but no, instead you went off with this floozy, leaving them easy prey for the Unity League thugs. But did you go after them? Once again no, Hamati, instead you stayed with your whore, letting Matera go off into the west alone where she died trying to rescue them.”

“Hamati have lived with guilt ever since, but wasn’t Esmeralda’s fault. She not know –”

“Don’t give me that crap, she knew perfectly well what she was doing, didn’t you, you conniving sycophant!”

Charon lunged towards Esmeralda but bumped the table, knocking over an almost full bottle of wine which fell and smashed on the tiles, giving off a strong aroma of fermented grapes as its contents formed a growing pool on the floor.

“Idiot!” Hamati shouted. “That wine expensive; if you must break bottles, break empty ones.”

Gallagher stepped forward. “Come on, Charon, I think we’d best leave. This isn’t furthering our cause.”

“Keep out of it, Stuart; this is between me and that witch.”

Esmeralda stood, taking a wobbly step towards Charon. “If you’d been half as good a husband to Matera as you claim to have been, you’d have gone west with her.”

“You know I was away in Hermitage overseeing the Gomerall uprising there. She’d already gone by the time I returned.”

Esmeralda laughed. “Now you’re the one making excuses, Charon. Come on, you high and mighty Tivinel thug; if you want to settle this with a fist fight, go ahead and hit me if you dare.”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, my dear.”

“Fair warning, Charon; you asked for this,” Esmeralda said, stumbling forward, but as she stepped in the pool of spilt wine, her foot slipped out from under her on the smooth tiles.

With a grunt and a cry of pain, she fell flat on her back, but something crunched under her as she hit the ground. Her eyes glazed in shock, she coughed out a mouthful of blood as Hamati dropped beside her, rolling her onto her side to reveal a large shard of the broken bottle protruding from her back.

“Mum, no!” Caleb cried, dashing out from his hiding place towards her, but Charon grabbed him by the shoulders before he could reach her.

“Caleb, don’t –” Esmeralda tried to say as she coughed up more blood.

“Let go of me! Can’t you see she’s dying?”

Charon lifted him, turning him away from the grisly scene before him. “Stuart, take this boy out of here, now!”

Gallagher took the squirming child and dashed out the gate, not quite believing his luck.

“Keep still, Caleb,” Gallagher said, putting him down against the stone wall, “or your mother *will* die, I promise you.”

Caleb slumped to the ground, closing his eyes and dropping his head onto his chest. “She’s already dead.”

Gallagher reached into his day pack, pulling out a small phial and jabbing it into Caleb’s arm.

“Ouch!” the boy cried as his world dissolved away into a watery blur.

Picking up the now unconscious child, Gallagher strode back along the waterfront and south to where he'd left his vehicle at the spaceport.

Ambush

David opened his eyes. "I've lost him."

"What!" Loraine said. "You mean he's dead?"

"No, I think Gallagher jabbed him with something to put him to sleep."

"So let me get this straight. When this all started we were trying to make sure there could never be another Pasha and now we have two of them."

"That's pretty much it, sis."

"And you reckon you're not Drago reincarnated."

"No, at first I was worried that might have been happening but it's not like before; there's no other spirit taking control of my body this time, it's just that I now have a whole lot of powers that I didn't used to have."

"As well as red hair," Cam said.

"That too."

"So what do we do now?" Joel asked.

"Sit tight and wait for Caleb to wake up, I suppose. If he sticks to the path, there'll come a time when he'll have a vital message to give me."

"Do you know what it's about?"

"No idea; your singleton future-gazing doesn't provide that sort of detail, I just know that lives will depend on it."

"Oh."

"There's one thing I will do, however; now that Caleb's out in the open, the military will no doubt come poking their noses around so I'll turn on our active defences."

Loraine sighed. "If you must, I suppose."

* * *

“Piper, there’s been an incident here,” Gallagher said into his field telephone. “Charon, our mysterious tourist, had an altercation with Hamati that ended in Esmeralda’s death.”

“Good grief, that’s the last thing we need right now.”

“Wait, it gets worse. They had that Pasha boy hiding in Hamati’s house.”

“What? He was supposed to be on an island off the west coast.”

“Whatever the reason, he witnessed the incident, but I sedated him and have him with me now.”

“Where are you?”

“Do you know the old prison colony in the crater south of the settlements?”

“Yes. I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you for cleaning up what could’ve been a very dire situation. Pip and Hamati will have a lot of explaining to do.”

“They will indeed.”

Closing the call, Gallagher checked on the locked cell where he’d secured the still-unconscious Caleb, before picking up another of the padlocks he’d purchased and stepping over to the next cell. Designed to prevent idiot civilians from locking themselves in or out of the thing they were securing, after closing the shackle it required the key to be fully rotated to lock the mechanism. In what was a design oversight by the manufacturer, it still looked locked if this step wasn’t performed but could easily be opened with a quick tug. This shortcoming had been well exploited by the burglary profession, leading to a design revision in later models, but for his purpose it was just what he wanted.

Rehearsing the process of ‘locking’ the cell without securing it until he was sure it looked convincing, he returned to the dining hall, pulling a snack from his day pack as he awaited Piper’s arrival.

Gallagher stood just outside the airlock as the civilian shuttle settled onto the courtyard in a cloud of raised dust. A moment later, General Piper and Captain Harrison emerged from the hatch.

“Thanks for coming, sir.”

Piper looked around. "This is a good defensible spot you've found, Gallagher. Where's Caleb? Is he okay?"

"He's fine, well physically, but it was quite a shock seeing his mother die like that so I've sedated him."

"I still don't understand what he was doing in Hamati's house."

Gallagher shrugged. "Come inside; there's something I need your help with."

They followed him through the lock and down the corridor to the defensive control station.

"I want to activate the auto-targeting system but it requires a level ten authorisation."

"Show me."

Gallagher opened the configuration menu, turning away while Piper entered his code.

"You'll need to white-list our ships' transponder registration numbers. We don't want to go shooting ourselves down."

"Yes, I'm familiar with the procedure, Gallagher. I'll white-list Pip's and Damon's ships as well in case they come visiting."

"Good thinking, sir."

"Is there anyone else you can think of that we don't want to kill?"

"No sir; that pretty much covers it."

Piper clicked on the *Activate* button. "Is there anything else? I'd really like to check on Caleb."

"That's it, sir; I'll take you to him now."

They followed Gallagher back along the corridor and around to the cell block. Pulling a key from his pocket, he unlocked the cell where Caleb lay stretched out on the bunk, still unconscious.

"The poor little devil," Piper said, crouching beside the bunk and placing a hand on Caleb's shoulder. "He's going to need a lot of nurturing when he wakes up; it might be a good idea to take him back to Joel and Loraine once we have Walker out of our hair."

"Indeed, sir, but perhaps I have a better idea."

Bumping Piper aside, Gallagher grabbed Caleb, holding his torso with one arm while wrapping his other around the boy's neck.

"Just do exactly what I say and no-one will be hurt, I promise," he said, skirting around them to the cell door. "Harrison, stand back in the corner there with Piper, okay?"

Piper stood. “What the hell are you playing at, Gallagher?”

“Don’t worry, sir, I have everything under control.” Kicking the cell door closed, Gallagher made sure his prisoners were well back before releasing Caleb’s neck and closing the padlock, taking care not to turn the key before removing it. “I just need some breathing space, that’s all, sir.”

“You’ve sold out to Walker, haven’t you?” Piper shouted.

“Actually no, sir, I haven’t.”

Without waiting for any response, Gallagher dashed back through the dining hall and out the airlock, using the external control panel to close and secure the doors.

“Too easy!” he said to the unconscious boy while carrying him onto the civilian shuttle, leaving behind Piper’s military ship that he’d been using until now as further incriminating evidence. Checking the transponder readout to make sure the auto-targeting system had cleared him, he took to the sky, turning north towards the headland overlooking the bay.

Once on the ground, he pulled out his field telephone, placing a call to General Walker. “Sir, I’ve located the boy and have him in custody.”

“Well done, Gallagher.”

“I suggest you bring the fleet to Huntress as quick as you can as I don’t want to fight off Piper single-handed.”

“Will do, Gallagher; I’ll call you as soon as we’re in orbit.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Caleb’s dreams of muffled voices and shadows slowly morphed into the sound of a man speaking and dappled sunlight on his eyelids. Unsure if he was really awake or this was just another dream, he opened his eyes, blinking at first as his watery vision slowly resolved into a rocky hilltop, a spacecraft and, alongside it, a man in military dress speaking into an oversized phone. With a shock, the sight of the man’s uniform brought back memories of where he’d been and what had happened to his mother. He almost cried out when the man turned towards him, but instead closed his eyes and pretended he was still asleep.

With his telepathic mind, he sensed the man sitting down beside him, looking at him, and, without meaning to, found himself probing the man's thoughts. *It's rude to touch someone's mind without their permission*, his mother had often admonished him, but his mother wasn't here anymore; this man and his friend, the hooded one, had killed her.

The man appeared preoccupied and, as gently as possible, Caleb peeked in on those thoughts, his heart almost freezing in fear as he saw what they were. Realising this was another critical moment in his destiny's path, he withdrew his touch, instead seeking out his connection to David.

For one terrifying moment he couldn't sense him anywhere, but then that familiar mind link formed.

Good to have you back, Caleb. I thought for a while I'd lost you.

There's no time to explain, I need you to pass a vital message.

Yes, I've been expecting this.

Trying to remember all the details he'd seen in the man's thoughts without jumbling them up too much, he did the best he could to keep his destiny's path alive.

Gallagher's field telephone rang.

"The fleet and I are in orbit now, Gallagher. Where are you?"

"I'm on the headland at the northern end of Sandpiper Bay but things are a bit tricky down here, sir."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Best for now if just you and those Tivinel overlords come down; take a fix on my phone and you'll see a clear landing spot just west of me. Approach from the south as there are armed hostiles in Kurramurra."

"Jefferson is plotting a course now. Do you still have the boy?"

Gallagher glanced across at Caleb who remained stretched out unconscious on the ground. "Yes sir."

"Excellent, I'll see you there in a few minutes."

Closing the call, Gallagher perched himself on a rock looking south over the bay.

Minutes later, a tiny speck on the horizon resolved itself into the approaching ship. He held his breath, hoping he hadn't overlooked anything in his plan.

* * *

Captain Harrison sat on the bunk, watching Piper pacing up and down the cell. "If you keep that up you'll wear a hole in the floor."

"Good; maybe we'll find a way out through the basement."

"What do you think Gallagher's up to?"

Before Piper could reply, an amplified electronic voice echoed down the corridor. *"Approaching vessel detected and targeted. Destruction in thirty seconds."*

"Holy cow, it's my authorisation code in that damn computer. He's shooting someone down and leaving us holding the can!"

"But who?"

"No, he wouldn't, he couldn't, oh crap, oh shit!"

"Approaching vessel detected and targeted. Destruction in twenty seconds."

Piper leapt to the front of the cell, rattling the bars of the door. "Damn him! He hasn't sold out to Walker, he's killing him!"

In frustration he tugged on the padlock, only to have it pop open in his hand. Pulling it out of the hasp, he flung the door open and bolted down the corridor, with Harrison hot on his heels.

Reaching the dining hall, his feet almost slipped out from under him as he rounded the bend into the administrative corridor.

"Approaching vessel detected and targeted. Destruction in ten seconds."

Swinging himself into the defensive control room, he looked around for a way to shut it down, eventually spying the main circuit breaker. With a leap across to the wall, he just about reached it when the room reverberated with a loud hum.

"Approaching vessel destroyed."

"Bugger."

* * *

As Gallagher watched, a red glow appeared around the ship, turning to orange and yellow moments before it exploded in a blinding flash of white. Seconds later, the air shook with a rolling thunderclap reverberating off the surrounding hills and mountains.

His phone immediately rang.

“General, it’s the fleet commander here. We’ve lost contact with Walker’s ship. What’s happening down there?”

“I, I can’t believe what I just saw, Commander. A laser blast, I think it came from that old prison crater to the south, but the ship’s gone; exploded in mid-air, no, no chance of survivors.”

“I’m sorry, sir, it’s a tragic loss, just tragic. Imaging and telemetry here has confirmed the blast came from that colony; what would you have us do?”

“Send an armoured strike force down; I want those responsible taken alive if possible.”

“Yes sir, and don’t worry, we’ll get them.”

Caleb almost jumped with fright as the explosion’s shock wave hit but, sensing the man was distracted and looking away from him, seized his chance to escape. Taking a deep breath, he jumped up, sprinting as fast as he could through the boulders and low scrub towards the forested slope below.

Relieved to reach the cover of the trees, he chanced a look back but there was no sign the man had even realised he’d gone. Finding the head of a gully, he scrambled his way down the dry watercourse into the valley.

Scratched, sore and with a throbbing headache he thought was an after-effect of the sleeping drug, he reached a creek at the mouth of the bay. Heading upstream, the scrub was even thicker but at least the ground was now level, reducing the chance of injuring himself in a fall.

Just when he thought he was too tired to go much further, the stream emerged from the forest into cleared farmland with a grassy path along the bank. Hoping the water wasn’t contaminated, he leant over, taking copious mouthfuls to quench his growing thirst. His headache began to subside.

Still not sensing any pursuit, he pushed on, sprinting at first before slowing to a fast walk. Ahead he could see greenhouses and, beyond those, the outskirts of a village.

With night falling, he reached a broad paved area around a large pool with an island in the middle. On the far side, a road led uphill between stone houses, most dark and uninviting, but around the first bend a light shone in one of the windows and, as he approached, he could smell the rich aroma of home cooking.

At the open doorway, a man dressed in light-brown coveralls and big woolly boots looked out at him and smiled. "Caleb, we've been expecting you. I'm Edwin and this is my wife Val; welcome to our home."

* * *

With the light now failing, Gallagher abandoned his search for Caleb. As the boy's mother was Barungi, he assumed he'd have relatives in Kurramurra and had fled there so, not liking his chances of finding anywhere closer to the village where he could land his ship, he set off on foot.

As he should have expected, the whole village was in a flap over Esmeralda's death, with much talk of a town meeting that night and likely secession from the galactic union. Charon had been imprisoned and would likely be executed, the townsfolk had been keen to tell him, but no-one knew anything of a lost child or even cared for that matter.

Leaving the shuttle on the headland, he returned on foot to his lodgings in the beachfront resort to await the phone call he'd longed for all his life. It came just as he was starting dinner.

"Gallagher, it's Michael Chandler here; I hope I'm not disturbing you. A terrible turn of events, so terrible; I understand Walker had been your commanding officer for many years, is that right?"

"Yes, fifteen at least, I'm sure. I still can't believe he's gone."

"In case you haven't already heard, Piper was caught red-handed at the prison colony and is now being held by the military police pending charges of treason. His authorisation code was used to

activate the old weapons system so it's likely to be a quick hearing and a one-way trip to the firing squad."

"Thanks, no, the news hasn't reached me yet but I'm pleased with the outcome."

"I know you'll likely be busy sorting out the aftermath, so I'll get straight to the point. After consultation with the other joint chiefs of staff, I've been authorised to offer you Walker's position on the board, should you be interested."

Gallagher tried to control his emotions, wishing he'd had the forethought to prepare a response for this moment. "What can I say? It's an enormous responsibility and I'll be filling the boots of a great man, a great soldier, but it's one's duty to step forward when the opportunity, err, responsibility arises, no matter how tragic the circumstances."

"If that's a yes, Gallagher, then excellent! The other chiefs of staff will brief you in due course, but for now we have a rather pressing situation. Do you still have the boy Pasha in custody?"

"No, I'm afraid in the turmoil he escaped on foot and I believe is now holed up with the Barungi in Kurramurra, but I'm sure we can flush him out in the next day or two."

"There may be no need for that, given what's likely to unfold. Were you aware that, after the star dimmer crisis eight years ago, Walker put together a team of military scientists to unravel the mysteries of those devices?"

"No, I wasn't, but that doesn't surprise me."

"They'd made some progress, apparently, but it turned out that one of those Tivinel overlords, the one called Glamming, was the original scientist behind the project back in Drago's time and, in exchange for his freedom, agreed to assist with their work."

"Now that is interesting."

"As was long suspected, the dimmers have an additional mode of operation in which, instead of deflecting the solar radiation across the subspace fold, they reflect it back into the star, causing a stellar implosion."

"I see, yes, the ultimate weapon of mass destruction. But how does this relate to the boy Pasha?"

“If, as expected, the Barungi vote tonight to secede from the union, we’ll no longer be obliged to protect their world and, hypothetically, would be free to attack should the need arise to protect our interests.”

Gallagher smiled. “I see where this is leading now.”

“The star dimmer opposite Huntress’s sun was deactivated thirteen years ago but is still technically functional. With one press of a button, we could eliminate the boy Pasha and any relatives he might have who could produce another, as well as the potentially hostile Barungi and the meddlesome Black Delphinidae.”

“That would be a bold move on your part, I must say.”

“Dangerous times require fell deeds, as you of all people must know. Consider it an option at this stage as no decision’s been made, and of course our hands are tied until such time as the Barungi formally secede, but I think when the time comes the Council can be persuaded of its merits.”

“I’ll make sure we’re ready to move the moment authority is given.”

“I mustn’t keep you as I’m sure you have lots to do, but on behalf of the Council, thank you for accepting your new post and I’m sure we can work closely together for many years to come.”

“Thank you and I look forward to serving in my new capacity.”

Gallagher jumped to his feet, startling his fellow diners. “Woohoo!”

* * *

Hamati raised his hands, silencing the chattering crowd before him in the Kurramurra town square.

“As I’m sure you all know by now, a terrible tragedy has struck in our midst, brought about by a thoughtless and unprovoked attack by the Tivinel Charon, once our ferryman and well-respected friend of our community. On top of that, we now have the military, an organisation once sworn to protect us, taking pot-shots at each other in our skies with no regard for the safety of our people and visitors.”

“Hear! Hear!”

“I say enough is enough! Eight years ago I signed an accord with the then Supreme Councillor, Mark the Bewildered, granting us full autonomy over our planet, but it’s now clear the present government has no interest in honouring that agreement. Therefore, tonight I move that we, the Barungi of Huntress, secede from the galactic union and, furthermore, that our world be declared off-limits to all Tivinel and their direct descendants.”

Someone in the crowd raised his hand. “What about the Black Delphinidae and the fringe-dwellers?”

“You raise a good point, Tori. Both those communities are long-term dwellers on this world, dating back to before the apocalypse, and have always been close friends of the Barungi, so of course they will be welcome to stay.”

Another in the front row stepped forward. “What about the Gomeral holiday resorts along Sandpiper Bay?”

“They present a more challenging problem for us as they’re purely a commercial operation run by off-world interests. For now I would recommend suspending them until our relationships with the other worlds stabilise and appropriate agreements and memoranda of understanding are put in place.”

“Thank you, Hamati; that sounds fair and reasonable.”

A woman at the back raised her hand. “What will happen to Charon?”

“He’s being held in custody facing a charge of aggravated manslaughter and it’ll be up to the judicial processes to determine his fate. As I was closely involved and present at the time, I can’t make any further comment.”

“Well I can; I say string him up and feed him to the carrion pigeons!”

“Hear! Hear!”

Hamati raised his hands again to silence the chatter. “Charon’s fate can wait, but right now we have just one matter to decide. Does anyone else have a question about the secession motion?”

He looked around the crowd but everyone remained silent.

“Right, I now put it to the vote. All those in favour raise your left hand.”

Almost everyone did.

“I think that’s near enough to unanimous, but just for the record, does anyone want to vote against the motion?”

Tori raised his hand. “I think in the long term this will cause more hurt than good, but that’s just my opinion.”

“Thanks, Tori, your opinion is noted. I declare the motion carried and thank you for your attendance tonight. Drinks at the waterfront tavern are on me!”

The crowd erupted in cheering and applause as Hamati stepped down and slipped away into the darkness.

Part Four

Destiny's Path



Needle in a Haystack

Pedro snapped awake, surprised but also glad to have fallen into a deep sleep. Strapped into the seat beside him, Elsa remained unconscious, her chest barely rising and falling with her slow steady breathing.

“Steve? Jim? Are you still here?”

“*We’re right here, Peter,*” Steve’s spirit spoke inside Pedro’s head.

“How long was I out for?”

“*About twelve hours; you were pretty exhausted, I reckon.*”

“Are we there yet?”

“*No, not yet.*”

“Are we close?”

“*I don’t know. We’re ghosts, Peter, not gods, and are as limited as you in trying to figure anything out at the speed we’re travelling. No-one has ever tried to go between galaxies in real space before.*”

“That’s comforting to know.”

“*How so?*”

“Better that than being told someone *had* tried before but failed.”

Unbuckling himself, Pedro floated over to the life-support panel, checking the various readouts. “We’re not doing too badly for a ship designed for only short-haul flights; the water recycler is working well, oxygen levels are good and I can go without food for a week or two, but the carbon dioxide scrubber is almost depleted.”

“*Keep a close eye on it, Peter, because if it fails while you’re asleep you might never wake up.*”

“Perhaps, if it comes to that, that mightn’t be such a bad outcome.”

“*No negative thoughts, Pedro,*” Jim said.

Pedro floated to the back of the ship, rummaging through the storage cupboards built into the hull.

“Aha, the gods are smiling on me!” He pulled out a box of CO₂ scrubber cartridges. “Now I just need to figure out how to fit them.”

Floating back to the helm, he pulled out the thick binder comprising the ship’s technical documentation, going through it page by page until finding the information he needed.

“This should be easy,” he said, pulling open the access hatch in the ship’s floor and climbing inside with the binder in one hand and a replacement cartridge in the other.

Finding the scrubber unit, he released the latches top and bottom and, using his feet against the sides to give him leverage in the zero gravity environment, pulled out the exhausted cartridge. A loud alarm immediately began beeping, causing him to almost knock himself out on the side of the hatch.

“Ouch!”

He pushed in the replacement cartridge and latched it into position, silencing the alarm.

“What’s that noise, Daddy?” Elsa said from the cabin above. “Is there a burglar?”

Pedro again banged his head on the side of the hatch before propelling himself out and up to her seat. “Elsa?”

She turned to face him, her eyes blinking in confusion. “Who are you?”

“I’m Pedro. Don’t you remember me?”

“No, I, um, I don’t remember anything. Where am I?”

Pedro ran his hand over her hair. “You’re safe for now, just relax, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Would you like some water?”

“Yes please.”

Pedro filled a plastic bladder from the water recycler. “Put the straw in your mouth and suck, but be careful as there’s no gravity here.”

“Are we on a spaceship?”

“Yes.”

“Cool; that makes sense. Thank you.”

After a couple of false starts in which she coughed droplets of water onto the front window, she soon mastered the art of zero gravity drinking.

"That was nice." She looked around the cabin. "Before I woke up, I could hear you talking to someone but I can't see anyone else here."

"Oh, they were my invisible friends."

She nodded. "I once had an invisible friend named Pedro."

"That's me, but I'm not invisible."

She turned to look at him. "Hey, you're right, I can see you now."

Not knowing what else to do, Pedro smiled.

"Where are we going?"

"To my home planet, a place called Earth."

"Is it far?"

"Yes, very far, but I hope it won't take us too much longer."

A blue light flashed outside the ship, accompanied by a cacophony of beeping and flashing displays on the consoles. Forgetting there was no gravity, Pedro leaned forward only to tumble up onto the ceiling. "Oops."

Manoeuvring himself back down, he scrolled through the readouts. "We're back in subspace so I guess that means we've arrived at the Milky Way galaxy."

"I'd like some milk if you have any, Pedro."

"I'm afraid not, there's only water for now, but we should be home soon so I'll get you some then."

"Okay, thanks."

"You need to reduce your subspace velocity to zero then drop back to real space," Steve said.

"Yes, I know."

Elsa gave him a puzzled look. "What is it you know?"

"Sorry, I was just talking to my invisible friend again."

"Oh right. Say hello to him for me."

"Steve, Elsa says hello."

"Yes, I heard her. Hi, Elsa!"

"Steve says hi."

Elsa smiled. "I'd like to meet him sometime."

“Perhaps you will, depending on what year we end up in. Now I just need to concentrate for a few minutes to make sure I do our real space transition correctly.”

With Elsa watching on, Pedro worked his way through the subspace navigation menus, pleased to see that it had already aligned itself with the Milky Way’s core and axis. At the final keystroke, the space outside the window flashed blue again, revealing a magnificent vista of the Milky Way’s brilliant core and gossamer spiral arms hanging directly in front of them.

“Oh, that’s beautiful!” Elsa said. “Is this a movie?”

“No, it’s really out there. My home is orbiting one of those stars.”

“Which one?”

Pedro gulped in the sudden realisation that there were roughly a hundred billion stars in that galaxy, with no idea of how to find the right one.

“Any suggestions, Steve?”

“You’re the astronomer, Peter. Think back on what you know.”

Elsa chuckled. “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch young Pedro by the toe.”

She grabbed one of his toes, causing him to tumble back onto the ceiling.

“That’s probably not a good idea until we have some gravity.”

“Sorry.”

Pedro pulled himself back into his chair, securing the straps before staring out again at the galaxy. “Oh gosh! I’m trying to remember now what I learnt about the sun’s place in there.” He ran his hands over his face. “Was it the, um, the Orion spur?”

“I can’t help you, Peter,” Steve said. *“I was into palaeontology, not stars.”*

“And I was just an Eridanian bureaucrat,” Jim said.

“This is hopeless.”

“My uncle says that even in the darkest of times, there’s always hope,” Elsa said.

“Is that Hamati?”

“Yes; do you know him?”

“I do.”

“That’s amazing; it’s such a small world!”

“Yes, it is; now if only the Milky Way was a small galaxy.”

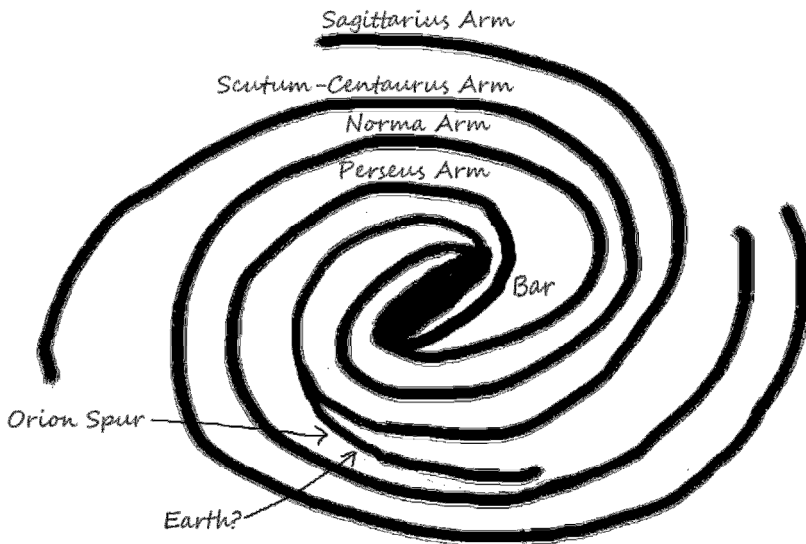
Pedro closed his eyes, trying to think back to his days as Peter Thorpe and the summer nights spent outside studying the sky with his father. “We used to play name-that-star competitions. I usually won, but Mum reckoned it was just because I had better eyes. Dad always wore glasses on account of his astigmatism.”

“My dad drives a ferry boat,” Elsa said.

“Uh huh.”

Pedro pulled open the drawer in front of him, rummaging through it for a sheet of paper and something to draw with, and chuckling to himself as he found both a thick notepad and a box of pencils. Turning away from the window, he furrowed his brow, trying to sketch from memory the galaxy’s hub and spiral arms.

“No, that’s not right,” he said to himself, tearing off the page, screwing it up into a ball and sending it floating off towards the back of the cabin. He ran his hands over his face, trying to remember the diagrams he’d once pored over with the boundless enthusiasm of an astronomy-addicted kid. On his fourth attempt he nodded, deciding that was as good as he was going to manage.



Turning back to the window, he rotated the page both ways, trying to match the galaxy's structure with his sketch but not succeeding.

"Nothing really lines up; I'm not even sure now we're in the right galaxy."

"Let me see," Elsa said.

He handed her the page.

"Oh, you silly billy, you've drawn it backwards!"

"What do you mean?"

"The lines on your drawing spiral clockwise into the centre but on the galaxy out there they go the other way."

Pedro slapped his forehead. "Duh, I was concentrating so hard on the layout of the arms I didn't see the big picture. It looks like we're on the opposite side of the galactic plane to where all the cartographers imagine themselves sitting."

Grabbing a pencil, he released his straps, allowing himself to float up to the ceiling where he held the page over one of the light panels, using the illumination to trace through the paper.

That done, he floated back down to the window, holding the drawing at various angles as he tried to line up the image with the galaxy. Not satisfied, he turned himself upside down, using his toes to steady himself against the overhead instrument panel.

"Aha, I have it now; the proportions in my drawing are a little out, but I can line enough of it up to see where we have to go."

Pushing himself back down with his legs, he opened the navigation menu on the main console, selecting the camera screen and placing a marker on the Orion Spur as close as he could judge to where he thought Earth should be. Plotting a course, he returned to his seat and secured his strap before executing the subspace jump.

"It'll take us four hours to get there so maybe we should try a bit more sleep."

"Okay," Elsa said, closing her eyes. Moments later her breathing slowed as she drifted off, but too much was going on inside Pedro's head for him to doze.

In frustration, he eventually unclipped his straps and floated to the back of the cabin where he rummaged through the storage compartments, looking for anything else that might be useful.

A flash of blue light outside the ship heralded their arrival in the Orion Spur. With Elsa still asleep, Pedro checked the navigation screen, confirming as best he could that they were in the right place.

Looking outside, he saw a milky band stretching across space, looking similar in size to the band of stars he'd admired so often on Earth, but the restricted viewing angle of the ship's window made it difficult to spot any familiar features or constellations.

He was tempted to take a spacewalk, but in Elsa's current state, he didn't want to risk her waking up and finding the cabin empty, so instead he squeezed himself as close to the glass as he could, trying to peer around the corners of the opening.

He'd hoped his estimate might have put them within a hundred light years or so of Earth, at which range there should have been at least some recognisable constellations, but no, none of the star patterns rang any bells.

Activating the real space thrusters, he rotated the ship to a different viewing angle, but the result wasn't any better.

He kicked himself back into his seat, covering his face with his hands as he tried not to cry out in despair. From their previous position on the edge of the galaxy, he'd at least had some reference points, but here, all he'd done was reduce the odds from one in a hundred billion to about one in a billion, with nothing to tell one star from another or where he was in his quest. His tears now freely flowing, he let the hopelessness of his predicament finally overwhelm him.

If you're lost, make for higher ground, he remembered his father telling him when he'd gone hiking as a kid with his best friends, Steve and Danny. *There'll be less undergrowth and you're likely to find a road or track along the ridgetop. Use your map and compass to identify any prominent landmarks you can use as reference points.* All well and good if you're on a planet with ridgetops where a compass works and there are plenty of maps, but out here? *Nup, your goose is well and truly cooked, Pedro.*

Gritting his teeth and casting all rational thought to the wind, he stared back out at that band of stars crossing the sky. *Eeny, meeny,*

miny, moe, he thought, picking one at random and plotting a subspace course to it.

Within twenty minutes he was there, but the subspace Doppler reflectometer showed only three planets and none were the correct distance from the star to be Earth.

“One down and 999,999,999 to go,” he said out loud while picking another star at random and executing the subspace jump. This one didn’t have any planets.

“Two down and 999,999,998 to go.”

“*Peter, what are you doing?*” Steve asked.

“Trying to find Earth, of course; now leave me alone.”

“*Stop it, Pedro!*” Jim said. “*If you keep going like this you’ll just end up killing yourself and Elsa.*”

“So what? In a galaxy this big we’re just specks of dust anyway. Who cares if we’re dead?”

“*We do, Peter, as does a young boy who’s lost in the wilderness trying to find his destiny’s path.*”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Elsa stirred. “What’s wrong? Why are you shouting?”

“Sorry, I was talking to Steve and things got a bit heated.”

“What about? Is there a problem?”

“Um, yes; we’re lost.”

“Lost? Can’t you just ask someone for directions?”

“Um, no; there’s nobody home at this star.”

She looked out the window. “What about that pretty red one over there?”

“Where?”

“See where I’m pointing?”

“No, but let me get in behind you; oh right, that one.”

He stared at the star, one of the brightest visible and with a distinctive reddish hue. *Surely there can’t be that many red supergiants in this part of the galaxy.* “Maybe I’m clutching at straws, but I’d put money on it being Betelgeuse.”

“Beetle juice? That sounds yucky; I don’t want to go there.”

“No, it’s not a nice place to visit but, if I’m right, it gives us a point of reference. I ought to be able to see at least some of the other stars in the Orion constellation, though.”

He switched off the cabin lighting, letting his eyes adjust to the total darkness.

“That bright one just to the right might be Rigel, but nothing else lines –”

He paused, moving himself closer to the glass and staring at a small smudge of light.

“Damn, if I had some binoculars I’d know for sure, but I reckon that might just be the Orion nebula.”

He moved over to the navigation screen, putting markers on those three objects before switching on the light and grabbing his paper and pencil. Trying to recall as best he could those long summer nights watching the heavens, he sketched his southern hemisphere upside-down view of Orion the Hunter.

Returning to the window, he twisted himself around, trying to line it up with the stars outside. “It’s close but not right; it’s almost as if we’re looking at it from the wrong –”

Elsa stared at him as he paused mid-sentence. “Are we on the wrong side again?”

“No, I was going to say the wrong angle, but of course, I just remembered the sun isn’t on the galactic plane, it’s some sixty light years to one side. We need to go up, not across.”

“Up, down, all around,” Elsa started to sing as Pedro returned to the navigation console.

After another subspace jump, Pedro again compared his sketch with the pattern of stars. “That’s a lot closer now to what I remember, but some of them still don’t look quite right.”

Elsa pointed out to the left of Orion. “What’s that little group of stars? It looks spooky.”

Pedro switched off the cabin lights before floating around behind her to see where she was pointing.

“Hey, that’s the Pleiades; another reference point!” He scratched his head. “It looks a bit bigger and further from Orion than I remember, though, which means we’re probably too close to it.”

Activating the real space thrusters, he turned the ship around to look in the opposite direction.

“Woohoo! There’s the Southern Cross, except one of the pointers, Alpha Centauri, is missing.”

Looking to the right of where it was meant to be, he spotted a pair of bright stars. “One of those is probably it, but what’s the other one next to it? It’s too far away to be Proxima Centauri and I don’t remember having ever seen one near –”

He again stopped mid-sentence, staring at that rogue star, not daring to believe what he was thinking. He pointed out the window. “Elsa, Earth’s sun is only four and a half light years from Alpha Centauri, and I reckon, well I’m hoping, wishing, even clutching at a straw perhaps, but I’m thinking one of those two stars might just be the one we’re looking for.”

With one eye out the window and the other on the console’s camera image, he placed markers on them, plotting a course for the one closest to the Cross.

“Now for the longest wait of my life,” he said as they jumped to subspace.

Pedro held his breath as the space outside flashed blue, but what he saw when they re-entered real space was an anticlimax. Directly in front was a very bright star, bright enough for him to avoid looking directly at it, but there was nothing else, no merry-go-round of planets circling it.

After a moment’s hesitation he slapped his forehead. “Of course, unless we happened to come out right on top of a planet, we wouldn’t see them in the glare of the sun and even if we could, they’d just be tiny points of light indistinguishable from the background stars. Let me turn us around and take another look at the constellations.”

He switched off the lights after rotating the ship, letting his eyes readjust to the darkness.

“There, that’s Orion and it looks exactly as I remember!”

“Well done, Pedro. Can we get out now?”

“Not quite, I still have to find Earth itself and land this thing.”

“Oh, all right.”

He turned the ship back facing the sun, plotting a subspace micro-jump to take them into an orbit some two hundred million kilometres from it; far enough away from Earth’s orbit to avoid bumping into it but close enough to see the planet if it was really there.

Arriving a few seconds later, he held his hand out to shield the sun, hardly daring to look.

“What is it you’re looking for?” Elsa asked.

“It’ll probably just be a tiny blue dot.”

“You mean like that one there?” She pointed out to the left of where Pedro had been looking.

“You beauty!” he yelled, leaning over to kiss her. “You found it!”

Plotting what he hoped would be his last subspace micro-jump, he headed into orbit around that dot.

A moment later, they saw below them the oceans, clouds and continents of what was unmistakably Earth.

“Oh shit,” he said, realising with a jolt that, although he’d beaten the incredible odds to find the right place in space, he had no idea where they were in time. “This might well be Earth, but it could be prehistoric, medieval or even millennia into the future.”

The sun blinked out as their orbit carried them over the night side of the planet. Pedro held his breath as his eyes once again adjusted to the dark.

“Look, there are city lights down there, lots of them! We’re at least in the twentieth century.”

Elsa stared at the vista. “Which light is your home?”

Pedro studied the patterns of light, deciding he must be looking at Europe. “I think Australia’s on the sunlit side so let’s go down and see, okay?”

“Yay!”

Activating the retro-thrusters, he began their descent into the atmosphere.

Sweeping south along the east coast of New South Wales, Pedro levelled out at about five thousand metres, slowing as he passed above the Hunter Valley and Central Coast.

“What are you looking at?” Elsa asked.

“The motorway, trying to see how far the construction has progressed so I can pin down what year we’re in. It ends in Beresfield so they haven’t yet built the link to Raymond Terrace, and look, they’re still working on that missing section at Ourimbah so that makes it 1997. Perfect!”

Relying on what he could recall from Peter's journals, Pedro turned the ship west, climbing as he crossed the Great Dividing Range. Below, the forested ridges gave way to the farmland of the Liverpool Plains as he searched for a creek in the Pilliga forest south of Narrabri and east of the Newell Highway.

He dropped to about a hundred metres, seeking a place to land near where the creek cut through a shallow gully. Manoeuvring around a few tall trees, he put them down in the dry watercourse close to a large pile of boulders.

"In behind those rocks is a cave containing a doorway into Elko's home."

"Is he a cave man?"

"No, he's one of the ancient Barefooters; his home is suspended in subspace between Earth and its twin across the fold. He and his people can fix your head injury and help get your memories back."

"Does he have any food? I'm hungry."

"Yes, I'm sure he has lots of food."

"Let's go then!"

Releasing her seat straps, Pedro led her over to the airlock in the back corner of the cabin.

"I feel dizzy," she said, staggering a little.

"Just hold onto me, okay? I won't let you fall."

"Thanks."

He eased her out of the ship, relishing the touch of sand and pebbles beneath his soles while taking a deep breath of the clean forest air.

"It's just over here behind these boulders. Can you manage?"

"Yes, I think so."

Through a crevice in the gully wall, a narrow passageway led gently down into the hillside.

"It's dark in here," Elsa said as they rounded the first bend.

"Yes, but we don't have to go too far. Keep hold of my hand and you'll be fine."

The passageway was longer than Pedro expected, but after rounding another bend they reached a dull shimmering light.

"It's just through there; after you."

Pedro followed her into the light, still clasping her hand, sure at last that everything would be fine and dandy. For a moment he glimpsed Elko's foyer, a brightly lit room with lounge chairs and a kitchenette, but, in a speckling spreading out from the centre of his vision, it dissolved away into blackness, with the touch of Elsa's hand suddenly becoming empty air.

All around him he could hear murmuring voices speaking too softly to understand, until one rose above the others.

"Sounds like another newbie, Maud."

Pedro moaned, realising he was now right back where he'd started in Sheol seventy-five years ago.

Prince Charming's Shorts

The sudden transition from darkness to the brightly lit room made Elsa feel dizzy again. She turned as Pedro followed her through the shimmering doorway, only to see the colour fade from his skin while the touch of his hand became hard like plaster. In what looked like a tiny whirlwind, he collapsed into a pile of dust and disappeared, the shorts he'd been wearing flopping down onto the floor.

An elderly dark-skinned man came running towards her, catching her as she fell in a dead faint.

She woke to find herself lying on a couch with the man sitting opposite her. He spoke in a language she couldn't comprehend.

"I'm sorry, I can't understand you."

He looked at her in puzzlement. "Can you understand me now?"

"Yes, thank you."

"You are indeed an enigma; you speak Eridanian, or something near enough to it, yet with your brown hair, tan complexion and the shape of your feet, you're clearly not from that world."

"What's Eridanian?"

"Eridani is a planet not far from here. I found your ship outside, which my people have now hidden, but it's of a design unknown to us."

"I don't know anything much; Pedro said I suffered a head injury that's wiped my memories."

"Pedro?"

"Yes, the young man I was with."

"You were the only one on that ship, except, well I did find a pair of shorts on the floor next to you."

"Something happened to him when we came through that doorway but, but I can't remember now."

“May I examine your head? I have healing skills that may be able to help.”

“You must be the cave man; Pedro said you were a healer.”

The man laughed. “I’m Elko, an Elder of my people, and this is my home.”

“I’m Elsa, I think – everything is so confusing – but if you can help, please do.”

Elko placed a hand on her forehead while closing his eyes. “Yes, you’ve suffered a bad head knock, but nothing I can’t fix. Just relax and let your mind go blank; you may experience some unpleasant flashbacks as I do this.”

Dreamlike images swirled through her mind of floodwaters, rivers, tunnels, forest trails, an island palace, spaceships, people shouting, screams, fighting with branches and sticks, and someone, someone she could no longer see, her friend, her companion, her lover. *Pedro. Where’s Pedro?*

Elko lifted his hand, using it to wipe his sweaty brow. “How does that feel?”

“I’m not sure; everything’s still vague but I feel better than I did.”

“Good. I’ve healed your physical injuries but memories can be fickle; sometimes they eventually return but sometimes not.”

“Thank you for what you’ve done; I’m most grateful, really, just still rather confused.”

“That’s perfectly understandable. Come with me now to the dining room, if you’re feeling up to it, and you can meet some of those who work with me here.”

Elsa pulled herself up, still a little unsteady on her feet. “Yes, I’m ravenous now that you mention it; I haven’t had anything to eat in ages.”

Elsa put down her cutlery. “That was delicious.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Elko said, stepping over to her with a young blond-headed man in tow. “I’d like you to meet Darian; he’s an Eridanian specialising in off-world languages.”

Elsa stood. “I’m pleased to meet you, Darian.”

“Thank you; Elko’s briefed me on your arrival here and we think, given your appearance, it’d be best to resettle you on Earth rather than Eridani.”

“I’m a complete stranger here and way out of my depth so I’m happy to go along with whatever you suggest.”

“Earth is unusual in that there are many languages spoken on that world, but the most prevalent one, at least amongst the technological people we’re likely to have contact with, is what they call English. Elko has asked me to be your teacher.”

“Thank you.”

“Its basic structure is similar to ours, so you shouldn’t find it too daunting, but there are a lot of subtle nuances you’ll need to be familiar with if you’re to fit into their society.”

“How long will it take?”

“It depends very much on the student, but usually three to six months is sufficient.”

Elsa turned to Elko. “I can’t thank you enough for doing this for me.”

“It’s a pleasure, I assure you.”

* * *

Three months had passed. Elko looked up as Elsa entered his office. “Thanks for coming to see me. Darian tells me he’s taught you all he can and it’s time now for you to start mingling with native English speakers.”

“Yes, I must admit I’m starting to feel a bit restless here; not that your hospitality is in any way lacking, it’s been wonderful, but I think it’s time for me to move on.”

“Did anything take your interest in those brochures I gave you?”

“Yes, the anthropology course at Armidale University looks appealing. Seeing the diversity of people here has sparked my interest.”

Elko smiled. “That’s been a popular choice amongst the people we’ve trained here and, as they cater for many non-English-speaking students, they also offer additional language tuition for those who could benefit from it.”

“When can I start?”

“Your timing is exquisite as their 1998 enrolments begin next Monday. I’ll arrange transport for you, so all you need do is to be ready to leave that morning.”

Elsa gave him a hug. “Thanks, thank you for everything.”

Darian joined Elsa at the shimmering doorway, having offered to help with her luggage. He handed her a large envelope. “We’ve created an identity for you as a Swedish national, as that language most closely resembles ours, at least to the ears of native English-speakers. Your birth certificate, passport and permanent residency visa are in there, along with your student enrolment confirmation letter, accommodation voucher and bank account details.”

“That’s great, thank you!”

“Are you ready to go? Have you said goodbye to everyone?”

“Yes and yes; I’m not sure whether I’m sad or excited, probably both.”

Darian picked up her suitcases, leading her through the shimmering doorway and into the dark passageway. After rounding the final bend, they emerged amongst the pile of boulders in the dry creek gully.

“Which way now?” Elsa asked.

“Upstream for three kilometres to a road bridge where someone will be waiting to meet you.”

Elsa followed along in the creek bed, enjoying the caress of the sand, pebbles and leaf litter underfoot while soaking up the forest sights, sounds and smells. “This is a beautiful place, so natural and unspoilt.”

The gully flattened out in a series of small cascades through which a small trickle of water still flowed, with the forest also thinning a little, allowing occasional glimpses of the hazy mountains to the east.

After almost an hour of walking they came to an old wooden bridge spanning the creek.

“Is this it?” Elsa asked. “I’d imagined something more substantial.”

As they climbed onto the decking, an elderly man in a business suit emerged from the vehicle parked nearby. After nodding to Darian, he turned to Elsa, smiling and offering his hand. “Elsa, welcome to Earth. I’m Frank Halliday.”

“Thank you, Frank. Will you be taking me all the way to Armidale?”

“Yes indeed.”

He opened the back of the car, helping Darian with the suitcases before taking Elsa’s backpack and putting it in on top.

Elsa turned to Darian, giving him a hug. “Thanks for all your help.”

“I hope everything goes well for you at the university and beyond, and please, come back and visit anytime you wish. You know where we are.”

“I will, I promise.”

Frank opened the passenger side door for her. “Let’s go before the day becomes any hotter.”

Elsa twisted around, waving to Darian as they drove off along the narrow dirt road through the eucalypt forest.

“Elko told me you’re something of an enigma,” Frank said as he turned onto the Newell Highway. “You speak Eridanian yet are clearly not from that world.”

“Yes, but I suffered a head injury just before arriving here and the only memories I have are from my early childhood and the few dream-like flashes I saw during Elko’s treatment.”

“Perhaps someday your memories will return.”

“It might be better if they didn’t; I think I was part of a battle and my arrival here was a last-ditch escape.”

“Well I’m sure your life now will be free of such strife. Armidale is a beautiful place.”

“So I’ve been told. It’s in the mountains, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s just below the top of the Great Dividing Range and can be quite cold during the winter, but the rest of the year is very pleasant by all accounts.”

Frank pulled up outside Oatley College on the Armidale University campus, escorting Elsa inside to the front desk. She rummaged through her backpack to find her accommodation voucher.

“Miss Elsa Färjkarlen, yes, welcome to Oatley,” the woman behind the desk said. “You’re Swedish, is that right?”

“Um, yes.”

“We don’t see many foreign students from mainland Europe; most are from Southeast Asia or the United States. Our chaplain is available at any time should you need help with the local customs or authorities.”

“Thank you.”

She pulled a key from the panel behind her. “We’ve put you in room 204 which is up the stairs and along to the right. There’s a bathroom at the end of the corridor and the common room’s on this floor down to the left.”

Frank helped carry Elsa’s suitcases up to her room. He pulled a card from the inside pocket of his coat. “If you ever need any help or advice, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Thank you so much. I can’t believe how kind everyone’s been towards me here.”

“You’ve been through a traumatic time, that much is clear even if you can’t remember it, and it’s the least we can do.”

She walked back down with him to his car, making sure she hadn’t left anything behind. After waving as he drove off, she headed along the footpath, deciding to explore the campus and grab some lunch at the same time.

* * *

Elsa turned the corner to the common room only to slam into another student going the other way.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he said, helping her up. “It was all my fault; I was deep in thought and not watching where I was going.”

“No, I’m as much to blame. I’ve had a few close calls here; maybe it needs traffic lights.”

“Or perhaps a roundabout; that’d be fun, don’t you think?”

“You mean like the things in children’s playgrounds?”

“Yep.”

Elsa laughed. “There’d be some students who’d spend all day playing on it and miss their classes.”

“I’d likely be one of them. I’m Butch, by the way, Butch Hardcastle.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

“Hardcastle? I think it’s Middle English originating around Yorkshire.”

“No, I mean Butch.”

Butch grinned. “Yes, I know; I’m asked so often I can’t help it. The story goes that, when I was born, my uncle reckoned I was a dead-ringer for the local butcher, casting doubt on my parentage. Mum thought it was a great joke and put *Butch* on the registry form before Dad could stop her.”

“You poor thing! I’m Elsa, Elsa Färjkarlen.”

“Now that really is an unusual name; your surname I mean.”

“Yes, it’s Swedish.”

“Really? I can’t detect any accent; were you born there or in Australia?”

“No, I came here when I was twenty but I don’t remember much about it. I suffered a nasty head injury at the time and all I have now are snatches of my early childhood. Even those are more dreamlike than actual memories.”

“That must be awful!”

“It was two years ago so I’ve become used to it. The doctor said my memories might return someday but so far none have.”

Butch looked at his watch. “I have a bit of time before my next class; can I buy you a coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She followed him into the common room, grabbing a table in the corner while he worked the coffee machine.

“What course are you doing, Butch?”

“Me? My older brother Matt is a lawyer and the younger one Richard wants to study law as well, but I’m the black sheep of the family and doing Animal Science.”

“Are you going to be a vet?”

“No, my interest is in wildlife management; you know, protecting native species and stuff.”

“That sounds fascinating and really important work.”

“Thanks. With a name like Butch, I couldn’t really cut it as a lawyer anyway. Can you imagine how that’d go down in a courtroom amongst all the silk and finery?”

“You never know, you might become famous, like, um, Butch Cassidy.”

“He was a criminal, not a lawyer, wasn’t he, but sometimes I wonder if there’s really much difference. So what are you doing, Elsa?”

“Anthropology; I’m particularly interested in interactions between different races and whether there are ways they can live in harmony or if conflict is ultimately inevitable.”

“I guess you’ll be doing a lot of travelling for that.”

“Much of it is theoretical, but yes, I expect there to be plenty of field work once I graduate.”

“Speaking of field work, I was wondering if, um, if you like bushwalking?”

“Yes, I do. I remember –”

Elsa paused, staring off into the distance.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, it’s just, well, weird. I think one of my lost memories just tried to come back, something about sliding down into a rock pool in a forest, but it’s gone now.”

“Maybe your doctor was right and those memories are returning.”

“Perhaps, yeah, they might.”

Butch looked into her eyes. “I was going to ask if you’d like to come with me on a walk to Wrights Lookout on Saturday. It’s not too far and is a beautiful spot on the remnants of an ancient volcano.”

“Yes, I’d love to.”

“That’s great; awesome! Let’s say I meet you here at nine o’clock.”

Elsa smiled. “I look forward to it.”

Pulling up at the parking area at the start of the walking track, Butch opened the back of his car, handing Elsa her pack before grabbing his own and pulling out his socks and hiking boots.

He looked down at Elsa's bare feet. "Hey, did you forget your shoes?"

"No, I never wear them. From what's left of my memories, I was always a barefoot child and, um, I guess I still am."

"I was always a barefoot kid as well; my brothers and I even went to an amazing school that encouraged its students to attend barefoot. I only started wearing shoes because I was afraid everyone would think I was weird." He laughed, throwing his boots back into the car. "It hasn't worked, though; everyone still thinks I'm weird so what the heck."

Hoisting her backpack while taking a deep breath of the crisp mountain air, Elsa followed him out along the dusty track.

Their path took them through ferny gullies and patches of subtropical rainforest before a final rock scramble onto the ancient plateau offering stunning views across the Bellinger River valley far below.

"This is amazing," Elsa said, catching her breath after the climb.

"Phew, that was hot work." Butch peeled off his tee shirt, pushing it into the bottom of his pack while digging out his lunch. "I have plenty of bread and salad if you want some."

"Thanks; I brought stacks of bananas, oranges and grapes so help yourself to those."

Finding a comfortable spot under a shady tree, they dug into their picnic lunch, finishing it off by throwing grapes into each other's mouth.

Elsa took hold of his hand. "It's been a wonderful day, Butch. Thanks so much for inviting me along."

"I'm so glad you could come; this has been one of the best days of my life."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Only one?"

He gave her a quick kiss on the lips and, when she didn't bite him or push him away, he made a more substantial effort while wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "Now this really is the very best day."

"You're all sweaty, Butch."

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m not complaining; not complaining at all.”

She hugged him tightly while kissing him again.

“Wait,” he said, reaching over to grab his backpack. “I came prepared.”

He pulled a small package from one of its deep pockets. Elsa stared at it, taking several embarrassingly long seconds to realise what it was.

She stiffened, releasing him so she could run her hands over her face.

“What’s wrong? I’m sorry if I –”

“No, it’s not you, it’s me and my stupid lost memories.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think, and it really is little more than a thought bubble, but I think back then I might have been engaged to someone, but I can’t remember anything about him, not his face or size or skin colour, nothing, but –”

“Perhaps, um, perhaps he’s just in your mind, or maybe he died and that’s why you can’t remember anything.”

“I’m sure you’re right and I’d be the first to say I’m imagining him except, well, I know you’re going to think this is way off the scale of weirdness, but I have a pair of shorts that I’m sure he was wearing when we came here.”

Butch almost laughed before deciding perhaps he shouldn’t. “Yep, that is weird. I take it you have no idea where he is now.”

“No, if he even exists at all. I mean, really, from a rational point of view, those shorts could be anyone’s but, um, there’s just something niggling away in the back of my mind, something I can’t quite reach.”

He pushed the condoms into his pocket before wrapping his arms back around her. “I’m sorry, Elsa, but really, I’m happy to wait, happy to just have you as a loving friend if you’re comfortable with that.”

She kissed him. “Thanks for being so understanding, Butch; it’s far more than I deserve.”

“Nonsense, you can take all the time in the world, Elsa; I’m delighted just having you with me.”

After packing away the remains of their lunch, they headed back down the track to the car, walking hand in hand whenever they could and exchanging silly grins at the slightest provocation.

“Come on up to my room,” Elsa said as they pulled into the college car park.

“Okay, thanks.”

Butch followed her up the stairs and in through the door. “This is really nice.”

“I think all the college rooms are like this.”

“No, I mean the way you’ve decorated it.” He studied the landscape paintings hanging on the walls. “Very nice.”

“Thank you.”

Elsa pulled open a drawer beside her bed, extracting a plastic bag containing some clothing. “These are the shorts I was telling you about.”

“So, um, this is all you have of your mysterious fiancé.”

“Yes, but really they could be anyone’s. I’m sure if he really existed or is still alive he’d have found me by now. With a name like mine that shouldn’t be difficult.”

Butch tried not to chuckle. “Perhaps, um, you could be like that fairytale, only now it’s Cinderella searching for her Prince Charming who fits the shorts.”

She held them out. “I imagine they’d fit most of the young men around here, maybe even you.”

“Do you want me to try them on?”

“Yes, go on; I won’t look.”

He pulled off his hiking shorts. “There’s not much to see anyway.”

“Do they fit?”

“Actually yes, they do.”

She opened her eyes, looking him up and down and checking the waistband. “A perfect fit; you must be my Prince Charming.”

Butch blushed as she kissed him.

Elsa took a step back, hoping she was making the right decision. “Do you still have those condoms with you?”

* * *

Elsa sat glued to the common room television, watching as reports, at first unconfirmed but rapidly gaining credence, emerged of contact with extra-terrestrials.

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

“I want to assure all of you that my government will not be rushing into any agreements with the Eridanians or their galactic community, and indeed the Eridanians have indicated that their delegation will be spending at least a year here to lay the groundwork for any possible treaties and joint ventures. We will not act until such time as we are fully convinced that it is in the best interests of Australia to do so.”

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

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

“Hey, I know that guy!” Butch said.

“Who, the Prime Minister?”

“No, that researcher, the Aboriginal one. Billy Collins was a school mate of my brother, Matt.”

“Wow, what a small world!”

“It sure is. I guess your work will take on a whole new dimension with these, um, what did he call them, Geraniums?”

“Eridanians, and yes, I suppose it will. I should at least think about an addendum to my thesis.”

Elsa turned her attention back to the television where the two researchers were being interviewed, but it wasn't the Aboriginal man she was focused on, it was the other, the one named Peter Thorpe.

“I, um, I almost think I know that guy on the right. There's something about him, something tingling one of my lost memories perhaps.”

“Do you think he might be the owner of those shorts?”

“No, but, no, it's gone now.”

Butch grabbed a newspaper off the shelf beside the television. “There was an article in here about their recent subspace discovery, I'm sure; yes, here it is. It says he was born in Brisbane but moved to Sydney at the age of fourteen. He obtained his doctorate in astrophysics at Sydney University last year before moving to Narrabri to join the radio astronomy team there.”

“It doesn't sound like he's ever been to Sweden and I've never been to Sydney or Narrabri so I doubt we've ever met. Maybe he has an evil twin somewhere.”

“Yes, maybe he does.”

Away from all such worldly matters in the darkness of Sheol, that evil twin Pedro's spirit slept as the years and decades rolled by.

Too Good to Refuse

Elsa opened her door to find Butch almost jumping up and down with excitement. "What's up?"

"Do you remember me saying that Billy Collins was my brother's school mate?"

"Yes."

"Matt just rang to tell me he and Peter Thorpe will be here in Armidale next week and would like us to join them for dinner."

"Us?"

Butch blushed. "Yes, I've been telling Matt about our bushwalks and he must have said something to Billy, I suppose."

"That's sounds great but, um, it's not somewhere posh, is it? I don't have any dressy clothes or shoes for that matter."

"No, Billy rarely even wears a shirt so they always pick somewhere casual with outdoor seating. You'll be beautiful just as you are."

She kissed him. "In that case I'll be delighted to come."

Once Butch had gone, she pulled out the scrapbook she'd been assembling of newspaper and magazine articles mentioning Peter Thorpe, looking through them again in the hope of teasing out why he looked so familiar to her, but nothing came. Sighing, she put it away and turned back to finishing her thesis.

"Welcome," the waiter said as Butch led Elsa into the restaurant. "Do you have a booking?"

"Yes, we're with Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe."

"Of course, you must be Mr Hardcastle and Miss Färjkarlen; follow me."

He led them to an outside table overlooking the river where an Aboriginal man sat nibbling on a stick of garlic bread.

Billy stood, grinning as they approached. “Butch, it’s great to see you again!”

“Hi, Billy, it’s good to see you too! This is Elsa.”

Billy shook Elsa’s offered hand. “Matt’s told me all about you, Elsa. Thanks for coming along tonight.”

Elsa looked around, now feeling a little confused. “Thanks, Billy; it’s an honour to meet you. Um, where’s Doctor Thorpe?”

“I’m sorry he can’t be with us tonight; it was literally a last-minute change of plans. Cory Matheson, his best friend from high school, announced his engagement yesterday and wants Peter to be best man, so he flew down to Sydney this afternoon to help with the arrangements.”

Elsa tried to hide her disappointment. “No, that’s fine. I hope the wedding’s a great success.”

“I’m sure it will be. Cory and his fiancée have been dating for years but now that the question’s been popped, everything has to happen at once. If you ever meet Cory, you’ll understand why.”

“You and Peter have certainly been grabbing the headlines,” Butch said. “Just about every newspaper I see has your photo in it.”

“Yes, it’s been a hectic time but everything’s going remarkably well. The United Nations general assembly was very receptive to our proposals, which surprised even the delegates we were working with.”

The waiter stepped over to their table. “Are you ready to order?”

Billy glanced at Butch and Elsa, who both nodded. “Yes. Elsa?”

“I’ll have the Moroccan lamb.”

“Me too,” Butch said.

“The grilled Barramundi for me,” Billy said, “with steamed vegetables.”

Butch turned to Billy as soon as the waiter had left. “I know you must be sick of people asking you this, but what are those Eridanians like?”

“No, not at all, Butch. They’re very much like us in appearance, except they all have blond hair and a rather pale complexion. They’ve had subspace technology for thousands of years so the ones we’ve been dealing with have had plenty of experience working with other worlds and have certainly done their homework.”

“What do you mean?” Elsa asked.

“They’re fluent in English and have a good understanding of how our systems of government work. I’m sure they’ve had operatives planted all over the planet preparing for this moment.”

“It sounds a bit scary when you put it like that.”

“No, they’re not wanting to invade or anything; they’re just very professional in the way they handle first contact and are as eager to learn from us as we are from them.”

“You must be thrilled to be at the forefront of it all.”

“I am; it’s a great honour, something I always dreamt of as a child. Now at last we have a chance to go out exploring the galaxy and learn from those hundreds of other civilisations out there, which brings me to the reason I wanted you here.”

Elsa gave him a puzzled look, but at that moment the waiter brought their meals to the table, silencing the conversation.

“This is delicious,” Butch said as he dug into his lamb. “Much better than the college fare.”

Billy nodded. “It was your brother who recommended this place; he said he often came here when he was tired of university food.”

“Matt and I rarely agree on much, but when it comes to food we eat with one voice.”

Elsa laughed, perhaps a little too loudly. “Eat with one voice, I like that. And yes, this really is good.”

“Just wait till they bring out the dessert,” Billy said.

They didn’t have long to wait, and for Elsa, the pavlova was love at first taste. “This is amazing; just, well, amazing!”

Butch stared at her. “You mean you’ve never had a pav before?”

“No, never.”

“What a sheltered life you’ve lived.”

“They just, um, didn’t have this in Sweden.”

Billy looked at her but said nothing, making her feel as if she had *alien imposter* tattooed across her forehead.

Butch chuckled. “Maybe I should forget about wildlife protection and instead start exporting pavlova to Europe. I reckon I’d make a killing if Elsa’s reaction is anything to go by.”

Billy caught the attention of a passing waiter. “Can we order coffees now?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Their orders placed, Billy again turned to Elsa, his expression now more serious. “It’s time I put my cards on the table. I didn’t invite you both here just to be sociable, even though it’s been a thoroughly enjoyable evening.”

“What do you mean?”

“I understand you’re about to graduate in anthropology, Elsa, is that right?”

“Yes, I just submitted my thesis and the final exams are next week. Why?”

“I have a job offer for you; there’s no rush, as we won’t be needing your services until at least the New Year, but I hope you might find this appealing.”

“Gosh!”

“You may have heard that the government is supporting an Earth-Eridani Scientific Exchange Foundation, but behind the scenes we’re also setting up a cultural exchange programme as the diverse range of Earth’s cultures is something the Eridanians haven’t encountered before. A mutual acquaintance recommended you as a likely candidate.”

“A mutual acquaintance? Who?”

“No less than the AusScience Director of Astrophysics, Frank Halliday.”

“Frank? But –”

“My word,” Butch said, grinning. “You do mix in high circles, Elsa.”

“No, um, Frank helped me a little when I first arrived in Australia, but –”

Billy raised his palms. “As I said, there’s no rush to make any decisions and we’re happy to wait until after Christmas for a formal reply but, just between us, would you be interested?”

“I’ll need to know what’s expected of me –”

“Yes, of course.” Billy pulled a thick envelope from the briefcase under his seat. “All the nitty-gritty’s in here, but at its core the position’s an open book and will be as much a learning experience for you as it is for the Eridanians. Your qualifications in anthropology

provide the foundation we're looking for and your background makes you eminently suited to this post."

Elsa blushed while Butch gave her a puzzled look.

"Where would I be based?"

"The foundations are being set up on Eridani and most of your work would be there. I understand their language is quite similar to Swedish so I don't think that'll be too much of a problem for you."

Again Billy gave her a look suggesting he knew more than he was letting on. *How much had Frank told him?*

The waiter returned with their coffees, giving Elsa some much-needed time-out.

"This coffee's very nice too," Butch said. "I'll definitely be coming here more often."

Billy asked the waiter to bring the bill.

"Thank you both for a delightful evening," he said, pulling a card from his wallet and handing it to Elsa. "If you have any questions just give me a call; with my hectic schedule you'll most likely be talking to an answering machine but I'll get back to you, I promise."

"Thanks, Billy. This really is an amazing offer, it's just you caught me completely off guard."

"Yes, I know and I apologise, but as I said, there's no hurry so take your time to think everything through and just call me when you've made your decision."

Butch turned to Elsa after they left the restaurant. "What did you make of all that?"

"It sounds like a wonderful offer, a dream come true, but, well, I'm gob-struck."

"I think you mean gobsmacked."

Elsa chuckled. "Yes, that's the phrase. The trouble is, I'd have to go to Eridani and don't want to leave you, Butch."

Butch wrapped his arms around her as her tears began to flow. "I think that's inevitable whatever happens: I mean, you'd have probably gone back to Sweden after graduating while I'll most likely end up in some wilderness area protecting endangered potoroos or something."

"But, but we've shared a bed, surely that has to mean something, doesn't it?"

“It does, of course, but nothing’s ever permanent and at our stage in life there’ll be changes aplenty. I like you very much, Elsa, and want to spend as much time with you as I can, but in the end we’ll have to go our separate ways until, well, maybe in sixty years’ time we’ll end up sharing a nursing home.”

Elsa straightened herself up. “Yes, I suppose you’re right, and Billy’s offer really does sound too good to refuse.”

“There’s one thing I don’t get, though. Why you? And how does that Frank person come into it? What was the AusScience Director of Astrophysics doing helping a Swedish student come to Australia to study anthropology? I may be dull-witted, but even for me something doesn’t add up here.”

Elsa sighed. “No, you’re not dull-witted, Butch, not by a long shot. I really should’ve told you this before now but I was so frightened you’d run away and I’d never see you again.”

Butch placed his arm around her shoulders. “You’re still you and I’ll still love you regardless of whatever great secret it is you’re hiding. Tell me, Elsa; I’m a big boy now and can cope with most things.”

“Sorry Butch, I should’ve trusted you right from the start. I’m not Swedish; I came from outer space.”

“You mean you’re one of those Eridanian operatives? But didn’t Billy say they all had blond hair and pale skin?”

“No, I’m not Eridanian yet somehow I speak their language; that’s why Billy wants me for this job, it’s perfect. But I don’t know where I’m from; my head injury is real and I have no idea of what happened or how I ended up on Earth, only I think the owner of those shorts might have been my ship’s pilot.”

“Gosh!”

“Is that all you can say?”

“No, but, well yes; now it’s my turn to be gob-struck.”

“I was taken in by a bunch of extra-terrestrials, mostly Eridanians I think although their leader looked Aboriginal but had telepathic healing skills, and Frank Halliday drove me from their secret place to here.”

“Gosh!”

“You’re not going to run away, are you?”

“No, of course not. I still love you, Elsa, perhaps even more now that I know your back-story, but you really have to accept Billy’s offer.”

Elsa ran her hands over her face. “I know, but I’ll miss you, Butch, I’ll miss you terribly.”

“And I’ll miss you too, but we can still keep in touch, can’t we, and maybe meet up when we have holidays or something, do you think?”

“Yes, that’d be nice.” She kissed him. “We still have a couple of months, though, so let’s make the most of that time together.”

“Yes, but only after your exams, okay? You don’t want to spoil everything by failing.”

“Okay.”

* * *

Cory Matheson grinned from ear to ear as Peter stepped through into the arrivals lounge at Sydney airport. “You made it!”

“I did indeed. This is all very sudden, Cory.”

“Yes, sorry, Peter, but I had another of those singleton things and needed to get you away from Armidale.”

“Me? Why?”

Cory grimaced. His Asperger’s trait made it impossible for him to tell an outright lie, but he needed to tread warily to avoid upsetting Peter and perhaps even destroying their friendship. “Someone spoke to me from the future, a boy named Caleb. He said he was a friend of my grandson, so I really needed to marry Ruth to make that happen, but he also said you and another person have a part to play in his destiny’s path, a vital part he said, and that wouldn’t work out right if you stayed in Armidale.”

Peter grinned. “I’ve known you long enough to have absolute faith in your singleton things, Cory, so thanks for saving me from whatever trap was awaiting me there. But you caused me to miss a dinner Billy was paying for, so you’ll have to make it up to me in kind.”

“Of course; Ruth’s found an amazing restaurant in Narrabeen that you’re going to love!”

“Just as long as you’re paying, right?”

“Too right!”

“That’s settled then. Oh and congratulations on your engagement too; it’s long overdue.”

“Thanks, Peter, thanks for everything.”

* * *

Elsa stepped from the subspace shuttle onto the tarmac where an Eridanian woman and an off-world young man were waiting.

“Elsa, welcome to Eridani. I’m Elissi Harrish and this is Todd Myers who’s leading the Scientific Exchange Foundation’s Earth delegation.”

Elsa shook her hand. “I’m pleased to meet you in person, Elissi.”

“And you, Elsa. Todd is also from Australia; perhaps you already know each other.”

“It’s a pretty big country,” Todd said, shaking Elsa’s hand. “I’m from Brisbane.”

“I’ve spent the last four years in Armidale so not that far away, I suppose, but not close enough to just lean over the fence and say *hi*.”

Elissi smiled. “I see I have much to learn about Earth, which of course is part of the reason you’re here, Elsa.”

“I’m not sure I really know all that much about Earth myself; I was only there for four years.”

“Yes, Elko told me of your unusual arrival. Have you recovered any of those lost memories yet?”

“No, not really; occasionally something will trigger a dream-like recollection but as soon as I try to focus on it, it’s gone. There’s one thing odd, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I seem to have some connection with Peter Thorpe, as every time I see his photo I feel a strong sense of intimacy with him, yet our paths could never have crossed.”

“I sort of know Peter,” Todd said. “I spent a few months helping with a summer undergraduate project at Sydney University and we’d often pass in the corridor, but we never had much of a chance to chat.”

“If he ever visits Eridani you’ll have to introduce me.”

“I will.”

Elissi led them into the terminal building and out through another door to the car park.

Elsa stopped, looking confused. “Um, shouldn’t I have gone through Customs and Immigration or something?”

“No, Eridani has an open-borders policy and our Customs people are only concerned with freight.”

“But what about criminals?”

“With boundless free energy from subspace and a provincial population with little interest in trinkets, there isn’t much to steal.”

“Oh.”

Elissi opened the door of her car. “Come and you can see for yourself how we live.”

After just a few blocks of freight terminals and industrial buildings, the road emerged into farmland before climbing up and over a nearby ridge.

“Welcome to Angust,” Elissi said as they descended towards a town spread along both banks of a broad river.

“Gosh, this is beautiful!” Elsa said. “I was expecting a big city.”

“Most Eridanian residential areas are like this; there are no big cities on the planet.”

She drove them across the bridge and into the town’s commercial district, pulling up outside a modern two-storey office building with parkland views along the river.

“This is where we’ll be working; I hope you like it.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Where’s the nearest beach?” Todd asked.

“The river meets the ocean a couple of kilometres downstream so you won’t have far to go.”

“Excellent!”

* * *

Ten years had passed, with Elsa’s work paving the way for convivial diplomatic relations between Eridani and most Earth governments. Her email correspondence with Butch had at first been frequent and full of enthusiastic reports of his wildlife protection job

in north-western Australia, but that flow had petered out to a trickle until finally came the one Elsa had been both dreading and expecting.

Hi, Elsa. I know I haven't sent you anything for ages; I meant to, I really did, but couldn't quite pluck up the courage, not until I was certain anyway. Our time together in Armidale will always be precious to me, as I'm sure it is to you, but we always knew our lives would take us in different directions. I've met someone, a ranger who's working with me in the Kimberley, and, well, we're engaged to be married. I hope this doesn't come as too much of a shock to you, but I thought you really ought to know. They say a first love always burns with the brightest flame, and so it is with me, but we have to take what life gives us and make the most of what we have. I hope we can remain friends but I can fully understand if that'd be too painful for you.

Elsa had cried, yelled at the furniture, cursed the name Butch Hardcastle and all his descendants, but had eventually calmed down enough to send off a cordial reply congratulating him on his engagement and wishing them both well for the future. She'd buried herself in her work, trying to put Butch out of her mind, but all the colour and enjoyment had drained from her existence, leaving her numb and listless.

But life goes on, they say, and as if in the form of a silver lining to her cloud of depression, a storm had erupted within the Eridanian government that had seen Elissi and Todd dashing off on a secret mission to the southern hemisphere desert.

The news reports, at first sketchy and often contradictory, spoke of a narrowly averted planet-wide catastrophe that had left two of Earth's premier subspace physicists either dead or comatose with horrendous injuries. Ultimately it was Todd who confirmed her worst fears as to the identity of those physicists, but reassured her that both Billy and Peter were now expected to make a full recovery.

"Elsa, I have some new work for you," Elissi said, bounding into her office with uncharacteristic zeal. "Fancy a trip to the southern hemisphere?"

A day later, Elsa found herself deep underground in a huge cavern. Lit with subspace-powered lights, it enclosed a central lake

surrounded by fields of crops and accommodation for about a thousand dark-skinned southern Eridanians.

“The southern hemisphere was once the industrial heartland of the planet,” their leader Abulla said, “but the loss of our ocean has reduced us to just a half dozen enclaves like this one.”

“You lost an ocean? A whole ocean?”

“Yes, there was once an ocean here similar to that in the north, but with a subspace tunnel at the pole linking it to a twin planet on the other side of the fold. Our idiot ancestors used matter imploders to mine that world, causing it to collapse into a mini black hole, and our ocean drained through after it. Fortunately, our engineers were able to plug the hole to prevent our atmosphere from disappearing too, and now thanks to those courageous off-world scientists, the tunnel has been permanently destroyed.”

“I’d caught fragments of the story from the recent news reports but never knew anything about the ocean or your people.”

“We’ve been Eridani’s best-kept secret for ten thousand years but now we’re keen to make a fresh start.”

“Yes; my job is to help reacquaint your people with those in the north, so to do that I’ll need to mingle with you for a while and learn as much of your culture and history as I can.”

“Of course; Elissi and I have been planning this for some time now.”

Elsa grinned. “More secrets.”

“There’s yet another secret you should know about; a group of scientists, led by Elissi’s nephew Norrie, are lobbying the government to fund a fleet of scoop ships to attempt recovery of our ocean which they say is orbiting that black hole as rings of ice crystals.”

“Gosh! How long will that take?”

“Many decades, they reckon, but we want to use that time to re-establish our old towns along the shoreline in readiness for the ocean’s return.”

Elsa nodded. “This will be an anthropologist’s dream project, I’m sure.”

Ships Passing in the Night

Elsa read the letter again, wondering if she should accept the invitation. It had been decades since she'd retired to the southern hemisphere's coastal town of Renwick, following Elissi's lead when she'd stepped down as Eridani's High Councillor, and since then her life had been mostly confined to her garden and giving advice to the southern Eridanian archaeologists who were still piecing together their race's history.

"I think you should go," Todd said. "A bit of travel will be good for you, I'm sure, and extra-terrestrial contact with indigenous cultures is right up your alley."

"Didn't you once say you thought you had a connection to Peter Thorpe?" Elissi asked. "It'll be a wonderful opportunity for you to finally put that mystery to bed."

"You have a good memory, Elissi, and yes, this is too good an opportunity to waste. Will you and Todd be going?"

"No, we've had our fill of such things, but you're welcome to take our shuttle; it still has full diplomatic clearances so you'll receive the VIP treatment at the spaceport."

"Thanks."

Elsa rummaged through her collection of bric-a-brac, eventually finding the scrapbook she'd once started of newspaper clippings mentioning Peter. Of course he'd be much older now, in his mid-nineties she thought, so probably would look nothing like those photos or that odd recollection that still caused a chill to run up and down her spine.

Eventually putting it away when no new memories could be teased out, she opened the symposium's ultranet page to register her attendance and book accommodation for the event and some sight-seeing afterwards.

Elsa entered the auditorium where what looked to be a teenage boy with long shaggy hair stood checking off registrations. Wearing only board shorts and a sleeveless top, she guessed he was the son of one of the organisers and had either just come from the beach or was about to head off there once proceedings began. Not seeing any sand on his bare feet, she decided it was probably the latter.

“Welcome to the symposium, Ms Färjkarlen,” he said, handing her a programme guide. “I hope you enjoy it.”

“Thank you.”

The boy smiled while making a note on his data pad.

She made her way inside, taking one of the empty seats in the centre of the front row. Although only about half the seats were occupied, she’d noticed a lot of people milling around outside nursing coffee cups so suspected it’d be close to a full house once proceedings began. Her suspicion soon proved to be correct.

The chattering stopped as the boy stepped up to the podium, causing Elsa to reconsider her earlier assessment of his position in the organisational hierarchy.

“Hi, everyone; I’m Joel Morison, your host for this morning’s session. Thank you all for coming, especially our visitors from other countries and even other worlds.

“It’s now seventy years since Earth’s first extra-terrestrial contact. For those of my generation, it’s inconceivable to think that, before then, the commonly-held belief was that we were alone in the universe. But two young physicists, Billy Collins and Peter Thorpe, proved that wrong when they discovered subspace and made first contact with the Eridanians. The rest, they say, is history, but in fact the history of extra-terrestrial contact with Earth goes back much further; even, as some now believe, all the way back to the dawn of civilisations on this planet. To bring us up to date on the latest research in this field, please welcome the one and only Peter Thorpe!”

The audience stood and applauded as an elderly but vigorous man stepped out of the wings. Elsa almost gasped out loud as that tingle of amorous recognition surged through her. With the photos it had been a sense of familiarity but, seeing him now, even through the veil of many decades, he was someone she was sure, absolutely sure, she’d intimately known. In her mind’s eye, his thinning hair turned from

silver grey into tangles of thick brown locks while his fine wrinkles melted away, becoming the strikingly handsome face of her forgotten lover.

“Thank you, Joel,” Peter said, giving the boy a grin as he scampered off the stage, “and thank you everyone for such a warm welcome. My work began ...”

As if the sight of him hadn’t been enough, the sound of his voice sent her into a spin, her mind spiralling inwards in search of those elusive memories locked away somewhere in the depths of her subconscious. Words and phrases came to her, fading in and out like the distant voices on a shortwave radio –

You are both young in body but wise in spirit; through your understanding, some of this world’s ills may be healed. All I ask is that you follow your hearts and be true.

Sometimes I think I’m just one of Peter’s thought bubbles that escaped.

I’ve just asked your father for permission to marry you.

Your, your uncle is selling me to G-Glamming. They finally figured out that subspace is a source of unlimited power, but Glamming thinks I’m the genius behind it and wants me on his team.

I won’t let you go, Pedro, I swear, I won’t let you go, not now, not ever, and especially not to any pompous old fart like Glamming.

What have you been up to?

Securing the future.

Pedro, are you okay?

Yes, everything’s sweet now. Everything’s sweet, everything’s sweet ...

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch young Pedro by the toe.

None of this made any sense. They were all just dreamlike creations of a fertile imagination trying to replace those missing memories of long ago, and yet –

Elsa opened her eyes, realising that Peter had just finished his address and was asking for questions. She had a million of those, maybe more, but this wasn’t the time or place. Instead she sat, mute and with folded arms, as Peter expertly fielded the questions posed to him.

The surfer boy stepped out from the wings, raising his palms as Peter looked towards the next questioner. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but the caterers have said that morning tea is now ready so we’ll have to finish up there. I’m sure Peter will be happy to continue discussions over a cuppa and a plate of nibblies.”

Peter grinned. “I will indeed. Thank you all for your interest today.”

Elsa stood, following the crowd out into the foyer where tables loaded with refreshments awaited the delegates. She grabbed a cup of tasteless conference coffee before joining the small group huddled around Peter.

In the moment she’d been awaiting for almost seventy years, he turned to face her.

“Doctor Thorpe?”

“Please call me Peter.”

Elsa took a deep breath, barely resisting the urge to hug him tightly and smother him in kisses. “Um, forgive my impertinence, but what if I was to call you *Pedro*?”

Peter looked into her eyes while weighing his response. “That’s an intriguing question, I must say, but Billy’s keynote address is about to start and I’d like a bit more time to discuss my answer with you. Can you join me for lunch?”

“Yes, of course, I’d be delighted to.”

Peter smiled. “Good, I’ll meet you out here after Billy’s session. From what he’s told me, this is going to be something special.”

After finishing the rest of her coffee, Elsa returned to the auditorium, looking through the handout and trying to focus her mind on Billy’s presentation.

Peter grinned as Elsa joined him in the foyer. “There’s a nice waterside restaurant not far from here.”

“That sounds fabulous; lead on.”

He glanced at the registration tag hanging around her neck. “Elsa F – I’m sorry, you’ll have to excuse my Swedish.”

Elsa laughed. “Actually I’m not Swedish; technically I’m now Eridanian but in truth I don’t know where I came from.”

“You’re not *that* Elsa, are you; the one who did all the work with the Southern Eridanians a few decades ago?”

“I suppose I must be.”

“I read a lot of your publications back then and had been hoping to meet you on my occasional visits to that world, but it never worked out.”

“It sounds like we’ve both been ships passing in the night; perhaps today we can make amends.”

The waiter at the restaurant escorted them to a table on a wooden pier suspended above the waters of Darling Harbour, taking their drinks order and returning a few moments later with a bottle of wine.

“This place is very nice,” Elsa said.

“The food’s good too. Now, Elsa, please tell me why you want to call me *Pedro*.”

Elsa took a sip, hoping the wine might settle her nerves. “As I said, I don’t know where I came from, only that I arrived on Earth in a subspace ship after having suffered a serious head injury which wiped my earlier memories. Occasionally I have dreamlike flashes, though, usually triggered by photos of you in newspapers and magazines.”

“Me?”

“Yes, except the name I get from those flashes is always Pedro.”

Peter put his hands behind his head. “Pedro is my twin brother, although I didn’t think he existed as a physical being outside of time cusps.”

He pulled out his phone, scanning through his photos before settling on one and showing it to her.

“Is this him?”

Elsa’s mouth dropped as she stared at the image of a sad fourteen-year-old boy with wavy brown hair. *Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch young Pedro by the toe*. “Y-yes, that’s him, I’m sure. I think he was my fiancé.”

“This is a very old photo of me, taken with my friends in Brisbane when I left there at fourteen years of age.”

She stared at it, rubbing her hands over her face while trying to grasp a memory bubbling close to the surface of her consciousness. “He, he was on my father’s boat. I’d bought clothes for him but the

shorts were too big and fell down around his ankles. He was so embarrassed; we'd only just met, I'm sure, and it was love at first sight for both of us."

Peter smiled, looking into her eyes. "Perhaps, just perhaps, that might be happening again."

Elsa nodded. "You may be right."

The waiter's return interrupted whatever might have been about to happen. "Are you ready to order now?"

"Yes, thank you."

Their orders placed, Elsa took another sip of wine. "You know I almost met you when I was just completing my studies at Armidale University. Billy Collins invited me to dinner to offer me the job on Eridani and you were supposed to be there too but were called away to be best man at someone's wedding."

"Yes, of course; that would've been Cory Matheson."

"Was the wedding a success?"

"Eventually, yes, but it didn't happen for another twenty years as Ruth and Cory were separated by their respective jobs soon after announcing their engagement. Cory died eight years ago but Ruth's still alive, although she's now in a nursing home and mightn't have much more time left."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Their grandson Joel is very much like Cory; you saw him this morning running the show at the symposium."

"The surfer boy?"

Peter laughed. "Yes, I suppose he does look as if he's about to hit the beach, but like his grandfather he can't stand dressing up; we had a hard enough time convincing him to wear that sleeveless shirt."

"I'm much the same myself; I can't stand dressy clothes and never wear shoes."

"That makes two of us."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. What you see before you is the epitome of my formal attire." He stuck out his foot. "And note; no shoes either. The last time I can remember wearing any was at my old high school in Brisbane, and only then under duress from the teachers."

The waiter returned with their meals. They ate in silence, occasionally glancing up at each other and grinning like love-struck teenagers.

“Thank you, Peter for a wonderful meal,” Elsa said, putting down her knife and fork, “and for giving me this opportunity to get to know you a little.”

“I’m glad to have met you too, Elsa; perhaps more glad than you might expect. I’m going to be very busy over the coming weeks, writing up the symposium proceedings and dealing with all the preparations for Joel’s wedding – did I tell you he’s marrying Billy’s great-granddaughter?”

“No, but that’s wonderful!”

“It’s been a romance many years in the making and I’m sure they’ll make a lovely couple, but as I was saying, once all that’s out of the way, I’d like to spend some time with you and get to know you better, if you’re agreeable of course.”

“I’m most agreeable, Peter, as agreeable as I can possibly be.”

They stood, hugging each other and kissing.

* * *

Elsa dashed inside to answer her phone before it diverted to voice-mail. “Hello?”

“Hi, Elsa, I’ve caught you at last! It’s Peter Thorpe here.”

“I’m sorry, Peter; things have been so hectic here for the last few months. I’d just returned from the symposium when a team of archaeologists made a significant find near the southern ocean and wanted my help analysing their discoveries. It now looks like there might have been some prehistoric extra-terrestrial activity on Eridani too.”

“That sounds great and I’ll look forward to reading the publications. Things have been hectic here too; I don’t know whether you heard, but Joel was kidnapped while on his honeymoon.”

“Gosh! I heard something about a kidnapping but hadn’t connected it to you or Joel. Is he okay?”

“He is now, but it’s been a torrid few months for all of us here. He and Loraine are back completing their walk through France and

Spain and the rest of the family are planning a surprise reception for them when they reach Santiago de Compostela, so I was wondering if you'd like to come along too."

"I'd love to, Peter."

"Their arrival date in Santiago is still uncertain so I was thinking maybe we could go a bit earlier and do some sightseeing through Europe."

"I'd enjoy that very much; Europe is a place I've always wanted to visit. With all the work here now completed, I can leave any time you want."

"Great! Allowing for the time zone differences, if I meet you at the Brisbane spaceport at noon on Saturday here, we can go from there and be in Paris for breakfast."

"I'll just need to make sure I can borrow Elissi's shuttle again, but that should be fine."

* * *

After checking into their hotel, Peter hailed a taxi, taking them to the *Arc de Triomphe*.

"This is amazing," Elsa said, "such fine buildings and so many people. Even what I saw in Sydney at the symposium couldn't have prepared me for this."

"I can imagine the culture shock for someone who's spent most of their life on Eridani. This archway commemorates France's victorious battles; note particularly the naked French youth dispatching their armoured German foes."

"Such brutality; I'm glad Earth is now a much more peaceful world."

"There's still plenty of strife if you know where to look; it just doesn't make the headlines on the intergalactic news channels."

"I suppose you're right. I used to think Eridani was the epitome of a peaceful society until I'd been living there for a few years and started to see what really goes on when they think nobody's looking."

"The best we can hope for anywhere is to keep conflict at a local level." Peter led her into Avenue Kléber. "There's a place just down here I'd like you to see."

“Lead on.”

After skirting a huge roundabout, they reached a stone building adorned with statues of robed figures.

“Is this – no, it can’t be, but I suppose it must.”

“Yes, the Musée de l’Homme; our world’s premier anthropology museum.”

“Gosh! I’ve wanted to come here ever since my undergraduate days.”

Peter led her up the steps and in through the building’s huge steel doors. Forgetting that seventy years had passed since her student days, Elsa dashed into the public gallery, nodding an acknowledgement to the long-standing tenets of her profession and occasionally raising an eyebrow at some of the more recent and controversial exhibits.

An alcove to the side, devoted to extra-terrestrial contact with early cultures, caught her attention. “Peter, look, you get a mention here!”

“Yes, I did some work with the museum a decade or so back.”

She pointed to one of the photos. “I knew this man Elko; he treated my head injury when I arrived here and looked after me until I was able to enrol at Armidale University.”

“He died almost thirty years ago.”

“Yes, I attended the funeral with Elissi and the others from Eridani.”

“Monsieur Peter, welcome!” an elderly man called out from behind them. “What brings you to Paris?”

“Just a holiday this time, Maurice.”

“Ah yes, and with a maiden in tow I see.”

“This is no mere maiden; Maurice Duval, meet Elsa Färjkarlen.”

“You’re not the Elsa Färjkarlen from Eridani, are you?”

“That’s me,” Elsa said, shaking his offered hand.

“What a coincidence! I’ve just been reading of your latest work; do you really think the northern Eridanians are an engineered race?”

“It certainly looks that way now. A man claiming to be a descendent of the original Tivinel refugees led us to an archaeological site where there’s plenty of supporting evidence for that hypothesis.”

Peter stared at her. “This man; his name isn’t Jameed, is it?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“Let’s just say our paths have crossed a couple of times, most recently in regard to Joel’s kidnapping. I wouldn’t consider him to be a trustworthy witness.”

“That’s what Elissi said, but the archaeological evidence does support his claims.”

Maurice looked at his watch. “Come let me buy you lunch in the Jardins du Trocadéro where we can continue this discussion in more convivial surroundings.”

He led them out across the street to a garden café overlooking the Fountain of Warsaw with the River Seine and the Eiffel Tower as a further backdrop.

“You must have the best lunch room in the world, Maurice,” Peter said as they settled at one of the outdoor tables.

“But of course. Why else would I remain at this job?”

The waiter arrived to take their orders.

“So Elsa, have your people been able to put a date on this genetic engineering?”

“Yes, it looks to have been close to three million years ago.”

Peter nodded. “That’d put it soon after the apocalypse on Huntress, which makes sense if, as Jameed claimed, those Tivinel refugees came from there.”

“Yes, it all fits pretty well. Eridani’s original hominid species were essentially the darker-skinned southerners and the northerners were created to allow the pale-skinned Tivinel to blend in and become their rulers. According to Jameed, there are few of his people left now and he may well be the last of his kind on that world.”

“The unique Eridanian biology wouldn’t allow them to cross-breed,” Maurice said.

“No, although I’m sure many tried.”

Maurice turned to Peter. “I know you’ve been ferreting out extra-terrestrial involvement in Earth’s early cultures. Have you come across any of these Tivinel here?”

“No, not specifically, although the biological similarities between us and the peoples of that galaxy suggest an early influence is likely to have happened.”

“You know I have a pet theory that it might have gone the other way, with some ancient Earth civilisation colonising their galaxy.”

Peter laughed. “Yes, Maurice, but where’s the evidence? There is none because it never happened.”

“That’s an obstacle, I must admit, but not an insurmountable one. Common sense alone suggests –”

Elsa’s mind drifted as the two men debated their theories; there was something they’d said, something that had set her forgotten memories churning just out of reach. The trouble was she couldn’t even remember now what had triggered her unease; perhaps she’d become too old to ever solve the mystery of her beginnings. She sighed, looking out across the vista spread before her and marvelling at what the human spirit could create.

“Elsa?” Peter asked. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry, my mind went wandering; too many time zones in one day, I think.”

The waiter returned with their food, providing Elsa with a much-needed distraction.

“Are you staying in Paris or will you be visiting elsewhere?” Maurice asked.

“We’ll be exploring the city for a few more days before heading down to the Riviera for some proper relaxation,” Peter said.

“That sounds wonderful. I recommend the boat trip out to Porquerolles; it’s such a beautiful island and the walk up to the lighthouse is stunning.”

Peter looked at Elsa, who nodded enthusiastically.

“Once long ago I took a lovely mademoiselle there and she’s been my wife ever since.”

“Thanks for the recommendation; I’m sure we’ll enjoy it.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Elsa said. “I’ve always loved hiking.”

Peter smiled. “It’s settled then.”

The waiter brought them coffees once they’d finished their meal.

“I best let you good people get on with your sightseeing,” Maurice said, draining his cup. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Elsa.”

“Likewise, and thank you so much for a delightful meal and chat.”

* * *

Elsa stared at the locked gate blocking the path to the lighthouse. “It says it’s closed to the public.”

Peter grinned. “Being a scientist of some renown occasionally has its advantages. I spoke to the government official in town and he gave me this.”

He pulled a key from his pocket, using it to open the gate.

Elsa kissed him. “You thought of everything.”

“That’s what I’m here for. After you, mademoiselle.”

“Thank you.”

“The official wouldn’t let us *inside* the lighthouse, that’s too much of a tightly guarded treasure, but we can at least admire the views from the outside.”

Climbing the hill, they soon reached the lighthouse perched atop the cliffs looking south over the sparkling Mediterranean.

“What a beautiful place. I can see now why your friend Maurice recommended it.”

Peter again reached into his pocket while crouching on one knee. “What’s good enough for Maurice is good enough for me. I know we’re both well into our twilight years, but ever since I met you a void inside me has been filled, a veil of sadness I’d barely been aware of lifted. I don’t know how many days ahead we have, but honestly I don’t care, as long as I can spend those days with you. Elsa. Will you marry me?”

Elsa closed her eyes as fragments of a memory flashed by, of a young man with a scruffy tangle of thick brown hair and captivating hazel eyes.

“I’ve just asked your father for permission to marry you.”

“Gosh! What did he say?”

“He said Hamati must decide since we’re indentured to him.”

“Oh, I see.”

“What’s wrong? Do you think he’ll say no?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

This time, though, she knew exactly what to think. Taking the offered ring, she slid it onto her finger, letting the sunlight reflecting in its jewel mirror the sparkling sea below. “I want nothing more than to spend my remaining days by your side, Peter. Yes, I’d be delighted to marry you.”

“Hip-hip!” Jack Morison shouted as Joel and Loraine entered the back room of the registry office in Santiago de Compostela.

“Hooray!”

Elsa and Peter joined in the clapping and cheering as the extended Collins family welcomed the pilgrims at the end of their long and arduous journey.

“Peter, thanks for coming!” Loraine said, turning towards them after accepting a platypus totem from Joey Red Wolf, the wheelchair-bound Cheyenne healer.

“We couldn’t miss it, Loraine, and anyway my fiancée wanted to tour Europe before we became too old for such things.”

“Fiancée?”

“Yes, this is Elsa; we met at that symposium in Sydney just before your wedding and have since discovered how much we have in common. It’s like we’ve known each other all our lives without actually knowing it.”

“That’s true,” Elsa said. “I’m sure he’s always been there, an empty space inside me waiting to be filled.”

“We have lots of lost time to make up for,” Peter said, kissing her. “Now after all these years I finally feel complete; it’s as if a terrible sadness has been lifted from my soul.”

“I’m so happy for you both,” Loraine said, hugging them.

“Yeah, me too,” Joel said, shaking Peter’s hand and giving Elsa a kiss.

“They’re such a lovely couple,” Elsa said as Loraine and Joel moved on to mingle with the other guests.

“So are we.”

Friendly Fire

Elsa opened the front door in response to the agitated knocking, deciding anyone wanting her attention this early in the morning would have to endure the sight of her naked body. “Oh, hi, Jason, what’s up?”

“Sorry to bother you at this hour, Elsa, but Pip just called to say Joel, Loraine and David are in a spot of bother on Huntress and he wants us all to come and help. I was wondering if you and Peter could join us.”

Peter, also naked, stepped from the bedroom. “Yes of course, Jase, as long as you give us enough time to put some clothes on and pack a few essentials. How are we getting there?”

“Pip’s hired an intergalactic cruiser for us.”

“Gosh! If he’s paying for that it must be important.”

“It is; from what he told me, many lives are at stake. We’ll be leaving from my place in an hour; I’ll fill you in once we’re underway.”

With their necessities squeezed into their backpacks, Peter and Elsa walked through the quiet backstreets of Coolum Beach to Jason’s house where the rest of the Collins family were gathered around a minibus.

“Thanks for coming,” Mark said, shaking Peter’s hand and giving Elsa a kiss.

“Everyone’s here now so we’d best get moving,” Jason said, ushering them on board.

Peter and Elsa followed the others onto the bus, taking the seats closest to the front.

With Jenny driving, Jason pulled down the tour guide’s back-facing seat and grabbed the microphone.

“This all began when Joel and Loraine went to Paris to see that geneticist Janet Wilson, who’d found a message embedded in Joel’s junk DNA which came about when his body was reconstituted after going through the volcano in that ancient time line. At about the same time, David was arrested on Hazler because he tested positive as a potential Pasha progenitor, so they went off to the other galaxy to try to sort everything out.

“Joel discovered that the message was a set of coordinates leading him to a west-coast village where he found an eight-year-old boy Pasha named Caleb. With Caleb’s telepathic help, Loraine, Pip and General Piper were able to free David, but the government and military didn’t like any of that so they fled with the boy to the old Pasha’s island.”

Mark interrupted him. “Maybe I’m confused, but I thought the idea everyone had with those hair samples Joel brought back and that test Hamati devised was to prevent the birth of a new Pasha. Are you now saying they’re aiding and abetting one?”

Jason nodded. “From what Pip told me, it’s complicated. The boy’s mother was a Barungi woman named Esmeralda, who was raped by Tristan ten years ago as insurance in case his plan to make himself Pasha failed. Esmeralda, it turned out, was Hamati’s old flame from before the star dimmer apocalypse on Huntress.”

“Oh what a tangled web –”

“But it gets better, or worse, depending on how you want to look at it. Charon, who’s apparently now working with the government and military, killed Esmeralda and has been arrested facing a charge of aggravated manslaughter, while Caleb, sensing his mother was in danger, left the island through Sheol to try to save her and is now on the run. In amongst all this, Colonel Gallagher, who was helping Piper divert the military’s attention, apparently switched sides in return for restoration of his rank to General but, Pip believes, might then have turned the tables on everyone by killing General Walker and framing Piper for it. Piper’s now under military arrest facing execution and Gallagher’s taken Walker’s place on the galaxy’s Joint Chiefs of Staff.”

“Bloody hell.”

Elsa raised her hand. “This Tristan you mentioned, is he the Eridanian who kidnapped Joel?”

“Yes, but it turned out he wasn’t Eridanian but a Tivinel, a descendant of those who fled Huntress millions of years ago.”

“His grandmother was Rebecca Gosling,” Jason said, “who once tried to make herself Earth’s Empress.”

“That’s a tale and a half in its own right,” Peter said, “and all right up your alley, Elsa.”

“Yes, I’m glad you’re with us, Elsa, as you might have insights into this business when we reach Huntress.”

“I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

Jenny pulled into the car park outside the Brisbane spaceport’s general aviation building. Handing the minibus key to the rental agent, she led everyone through and out to an intergalactic cruiser parked on the tarmac.

“This has been fitted with the latest subspace drives,” the pilot standing beside the open hatch said, “so I should have you on the ground on Huntress in a bit under twenty-four hours.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Mark said. “I just hope we’re not too late.”

* * *

Caleb licked his lips after finishing his breakfast. “Thank you, that was really nice.”

“I’m glad you liked it,” Val said, clearing away his plate and cutlery. “Is there anything else we can do for you?”

“I need to go to the black dolphin place, if you know where that is.”

“Yes, the seminary’s not far from here but the road mightn’t be safe for you. Edwin and I can take you the back way when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, that’d be nice.” Caleb pointed to a framed photo on the wall. “Who are those people?”

“That’s our son Clem and his wife Mog.”

“I think they might have a part to play in my destiny’s path.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” Edwin said. “Clem used to be steward of the Black Delphinidae.”

Caleb took Edwin’s hand in both of his. “You’ll know what you have to do.”

“If you say so, I guess. Once you’ve brushed your teeth and grabbed anything else you need, we can be on our way.”

“Thanks.”

Edwin and Val, both wearing their woolly boots again, were waiting by the front door when Caleb returned from the bathroom.

“This is probably a silly question,” Val said, “but do you want any shoes? Clem stopped wearing his when he was only a little older than you and I’m sure they’d fit.”

“Thanks but no, you’re right; it’s a silly question.”

Val laughed. “I’m sure it’s just the mother instinct in me. Shall we go?”

“Yep.”

They led him down to the creek behind the houses where a faint track took them upstream along the bank. Overhanging trees blocked them from any aerial surveillance while the constant chirping of insects masked the sound of their footfalls.

The land rose gently on both sides as the creek turned more towards the south. Ahead came the sound of falling water where the gully emerged from the tree cover onto a series of cascades down a craggy rock shelf. Here the track turned away from the water, skirting the rock along the edge of the forest as it climbed the hill.

A cleft on the left led into what Caleb at first thought was a dead end until he spotted the footholds cut into the rock.

“Up you go,” Edwin said, giving him a boost to the top before he and Val followed.

Across a grassy field stood the Black Delphinidae seminary, the common room doors open with a few people sitting on benches outside with books or ultranet pads. Caleb ran towards the blond-headed man who stood, catching him in open arms.

“Caleb, what happened?” Pip asked. “Why did you leave the island?”

“My mum, she –”

It was all too much for him. He wrapped his arms around Pip, holding his head against his chest as his grief finally flooded out.

Eventually letting go, he wiped his eyes before glancing around at his surroundings. "I, I have to follow my destiny's path. Is the spaceship here yet?"

"What spaceship?"

Edwin pointed up as he and Val approached. "I think he means that one."

They turned as an intergalactic cruiser swept in from the east, circling above the seminary before setting down in the far corner of the lawn.

"This will be the Collins family and friends," Pip said. "I'd better go tell the kitchen staff to bring out morning tea."

Edwin turned to Caleb. "It looks like you're in safe hands now so Val and I will return home. May the Black Dolphin smile upon your quest."

Caleb bowed. "Thank you both for all your help."

* * *

Elsa stared out the window as their ship swooped low over the coastline. "Look, Peter!"

"Okay. What am I looking at?"

"I know this place, I'm sure. That's Sandpiper Bay and the village just up the river on the right is where my Uncle Hamati lived."

"Hamati? You mean the Barungi chieftain?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"We've met a couple of times, but –"

"I'm remembering! This must be where I came from; my father drove a ferry boat up that river to a town called, um, Benton – yes, that's its name – taking the Barungi from Kurramurra to their workplaces."

"Elsa, your surname Färjkarlen literally means *Ferryman*."

"It does, yes, of course, but I never made the connection. We lived in a house near the bay; I can remember now running down onto the sand to go swimming."

"That's great that your memories are coming back!"

“Yes; there were some people who turned up on Dad’s boat and I had to buy clothes for them. You were just a boy then; no, it wasn’t you, it was Pedro, with three others in their late teens, I think; the one in charge had black skin but that’s about all I remember.”

“Don’t worry; now that the trickle’s started, I’m sure things will soon become a lot clearer.”

The cruiser dipped and banked before settling on the lawn outside a hilltop building. Mark and Lorina dashed out as soon as the hatch opened, followed by Jason and Jenny.

“I think I remember this place too,” Elsa said, looking around after emerging from the hatch. “It was a seminary for the Black Delphinidae although the building’s changed, I’m sure.”

“It still is; the one Mark’s talking to is Pip Ingle, the Emissary.”

Mark turned to address them. “Okay, everyone, here’s the plan. Pip, bless his heart, is about to serve us copious refreshments and will then take us to the island where Loraine, David and Joel are holed up. The bathroom is in through the common room and around to the left for anyone who needs to go.”

“What about the boy they were supposed to be guarding?” Jenny asked. “Has he been found yet?”

Caleb stepped forward. “That’d be me, I suppose. Thank you all for coming; I’m really blown away by everyone’s kindness. With Joel’s help I’ve seen glimpses of the future, my destiny’s path, and you all have a part to play in that. There are –” He wiped away the tears that were trying to form. “There are more bad things ahead, awful things, but the path to a happy time can only stay open if we all hold true and do what we think is right.”

Lorina stepped over to him, wrapping him in a hug. “I sense that you’ve already experienced much sadness, Caleb, but I can also sense your destiny’s path and will do whatever I can to help you through.”

Mark joined them, taking Caleb’s hand. “What’s good for Lorina is good for me.”

“I think that goes for all of us,” Billy said.

Pip stepped forward. “Your arrival brings a time of fulfilment for the Black Delphinidae, Caleb, and I’ll do whatever I can to help. But right now we have more pressing concerns.” He smiled, pointing to the trestles where his staff had set out morning tea. “Dig in, please.”

“What’s this thing everyone’s sensing?” Elsa asked as she followed Peter over to the tables.

“Most of us here have some degree of telepathy.”

“Including you?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t worry; most of the time it’s more a nuisance than a benefit.”

“What are you sensing from Caleb?”

“It’s a feeling of change; the end of an era and the start of something new. In my mind’s eye I’m seeing a bright light shining out of darkness and something to do with waves breaking on the shore.”

“So, um, what is it you say on Earth, as clear as mud?”

“Yep, as clear as mud; the story of my life.”

Elsa kissed him. “It’s time to clear away that mud, don’t you think?”

“Definitely.”

Mark began pacing as he waited for everyone else to finish their refreshments. “Once you’re all done we should get moving. We don’t know what’s happening out on that island.”

“My shuttle’s around behind the building and is ready to go,” Pip said. “Damon will stay here to man the fort, so anything you don’t immediately need can be left with him.”

“I’ll be with you in a few minutes,” Elsa said to Peter as she headed towards the common room.

“Ready for one last hoorah, Peter?” Billy asked, joining him as he walked towards the shuttle.

“No, but I fear it’s going to happen whether we’re ready or not.”

“Don’t worry, there’s always light at the end of the tunnel.”

Peter shivered as he recalled what he’d sensed from Caleb. “Perhaps that’s what I fear most.”

“It’ll be a bit of a tight squeeze,” Pip said as they climbed on board, “but it’s only a short flight.”

Billy grinned. “As long as we get there, that’s all that matters.”

Again Peter felt that shiver of foreboding, but forced a smile. “Thanks, Pip.”

Once Elsa was on board, Pip closed the hatch and took to the sky. Caleb, sitting alongside him at the front, watched the landscape unfolding far below, looking for the cue he needed for the next step in his path.

* * *

“What’s up?” Cam asked as David suddenly stiffened.

“Caleb’s just connected to me again. He’s saying – slow down, Caleb – he says Pip’s bringing him and all my extended family here.”

“Oh, right; that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I suppose – what’s that, Caleb? Get the boat ready? What boat?”

“You don’t suppose he means –” Cam jumped as an alarm started beeping. “What’s that?”

“It’s just the early warning system detecting Pip’s – oh hell! Oh shit!”

David ran from the room, with Cam on his heels. “What’s wrong?”

“I wasn’t expecting friendly visitors and turned on the automatic defences. I just hope –”

Skirting around the fake door at the end of the corridor, he just reached the control console as a loud humming filled the room. He slammed his palm against the big red emergency shutdown button before turning to the display screen.

“Oh, Davo, no, you haven’t –”

“Bugger, we’ve hit them.” He increased the screen magnification. “It looks like Pip still has some control but, no, they’re ditching in the sea.”

“What’s happening?” Loraine asked as she entered the room.

“We’ve just shot everyone down; Mum, Dad, our grandparents, I suppose, Pip, Caleb – wait, I still have mental contact with him. He says they’re in the water and to hurry up with the boat as someone’s hurt.”

“Boat?”

“That one we fixed in the boathouse,” Cam said. “Come on, let’s go!”

“Let me get a fix on them otherwise we won’t know where to look.”

Loraine ran her hands over her face. “David, if we get out of this alive I’ll kill you, I promise.”

“If that bloody boat doesn’t work I’ll save you the trouble.”

Joel and Willy caught up with them as they dashed out the palace’s side door.

“No time to explain; we have to get that boat in the water quick smart! Joel, do you still have that coordinate thing on your phone?”

“The geocaching app? Sure.”

David handed him a scrap of paper. “Punch these coordinates into it.”

Once at the boathouse, they lifted the boat out across the ramp and into the water.

“Joel, you come with me, the rest of you wait here to help with the casualties.”

Willy looked confused. “Casualties?”

Loraine grimaced. “My idiot brother just shot down all the good guys.”

“Oh.”

David started the motor, almost toppling Joel overboard as the boat surged forward towards the breakwater.

Joel glared at him. “Do you know how to drive this thing?”

“No, but I’ll soon get the hang of it.”

“Don’t hit the breakwater!”

David swung hard to the left, almost tipping Joel off again.

“Missed it.”

Swinging around to the right, they entered the open sea, Joel glad conditions were calm.

“Which way does your thing say to go?”

Joel stared at his phone. “Straight ahead for about two kilometres.”

“I hope Cam and Caleb did a good job fixing that hole.”

“So do I.”

* * *

“Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink,” Jenny said, standing in the open hatch.

“David’s on the way in his boat,” Caleb said.

Elsa looked up at him. “You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

Peter, deeply unconscious but still breathing, lay across her lap. The laser blast had buckled the hull next to his seat, ramming the fuselage into the side of his head. Blood oozing from the wound had formed a crusty matting in his hair, stemming the flow, but from the force of the impact, Elsa suspected he’d sustained at least a compressed skull fracture.

Caleb looked back at her, tears again forming in his eyes. “It, it was the only way.”

“I can see the boat!” Jenny yelled.

She grabbed the rope Joel threw to her, tying it to the side of the hatch. Once secured, he climbed on board, looking around the cabin while doing a quick headcount.

“The boat’s not big enough for everyone; we’ll have to do two trips.”

“The younger ones should go first,” Billy said. “Us geriatrics are expendable.”

“No, Dad,” Jason said.

“Do as you’re told, Son,” Julia said.

Jason turned, ushering Mark, Lorina and Jenny ahead of him.

“You too, Caleb,” Billy said.

“But, Peter –”

“Don’t argue; we’ll look after him.”

Caleb, again trying to hold back tears, relented.

“Don’t be too long!” Billy called out from the hatch as the boat sped off.

Julia squeezed in alongside Elsa. “How is he?”

“Still out cold, but at least the bleeding’s stopped.”

“Jason has healing skills; once we get Peter ashore he might be able to help.”

“Maybe you should’ve let him stay with us.”

“No,” Billy said as a wave splashed in through the hatch. “I don’t know whether you’ve noticed it, but this craft is becoming less

buoyant; I think there might be a hole underneath. It'll be touch and go whether they get back before it goes under."

"What can we do?"

"If I can remove the seat cushions, we can use them as floaties; otherwise we tread water."

"But what about Peter?"

"We might be able to tie a couple of cushions around him. Julia, see if you can find any tools in those cupboards under the dashboard."

She rummaged around, finally spotting a small box tucked away in the corner. "Here you go. There's some cord in here too."

Billy grabbed a screwdriver and spanner from the box, giving them a try on the seats. "Perfect! If we can tie enough of these together we might be able to make a raft for Peter."

With Billy unscrewing the cushions and Julia tying them together, they'd just finished when the craft suddenly listed to the left.

"You take his shoulders, Elsa, and Billy, grab his legs," Julia said as she positioned the raft in front of the hatch. "Now ease him down onto it, that's right."

A wave tilted the shuttle further just as they had him in place.

"This is it, ladies," Billy said. "Push the raft out then each grab a corner. Paddle as far from the shuttle as we can so we're not sucked under when it sinks."

"I hope there aren't any sharks," Julia said.

With an eruption of bubbles and a loud gurgling, the shuttle disappeared below the water.

"Hold on tight," Billy said. "They shouldn't be much longer with the boat."

Elsa reached up onto the raft, grasping Peter's hand. It might have been wishful thinking, but she was sure she felt his fingers tighten ever so slightly around hers.

* * *

"Where's it gone?" Joel shouted, scouring the waves where his phone app was pointing.

"Look, over there," David said. "They're in the water."

He pulled the boat alongside the raft.

“Ladies first,” Billy said. “I’ll stay in the water to help you pull Peter on board.”

Joel reached out, putting his hands under Peter’s shoulders. “I’ll need everyone else to lean out the other way when I try to lift him, otherwise we’ll all end up in the drink.”

Once the boat steadied, he lifted, pulling Peter’s upper torso over the edge.

“Be careful with his head,” Elsa said. “The slightest bump could kill him.”

“I will. Billy, can you climb onto the raft now and help with his legs?”

“It’s a tough call for an old geyser like me but I’ll give it my best shot.”

With surprising agility for a ninety-seven-year-old, he pulled himself up.

“Keep it steady,” David said, working his way over to take Peter’s legs from Billy. “Don’t rush it.”

Elsa held her breath as they manoeuvred him on board and into the centre of the boat. Billy climbed across, wiping his brow as he took a seat at the stern.

“Take us home, captain.”

Once ashore, they carried Peter into the boathouse, placing him on the mattress Willy and Cam had brought down from the palace.

Jason knelt beside him, taking hold of his hand. “I’ll do what I can but I can’t promise anything, Elsa.”

“Just try your best, Jase.”

Jason closed his eyes as he projected his mind into Peter’s, finding himself descending a familiar passage in the darkness of Sheol.

Passing through a dim mist, he emerged onto a rocky slope overlooking a broad river. On the far bank, where once had stood a city of gleaming white towers, were piles of rubble and broken masonry. Nothing remained of the silver bridge that had once spanned the water, save for one twisted girder protruding from the centre of the stream.

Taking care with his footing on the loose rocks, he reached the bank where a ferry boat was moored. A sign stood alongside the old timber jetty.

*River Styx ferry suspended until further notice.
Proceed left along the bank to the Pearly Gates.
If you have unfinished business, return to Sheol.*

Not sensing anything of Peter's spirit, Jason turned to the left, following the well-worn track through the dead scrub lining the bank.

With the air becoming stifling, he pushed forward, soon reaching a clearing. With a start he remembered this place from when he'd once been searching for Chris's spirit.

Just like before, in the centre of the clearing was a grave with a leaning headstone at its far end. Passing his hand across the surface, the engraving became clear.

Peter Thorpe

1974 – 2072

Gave it his best shot but failed in the end.

Hearing a rustling, he turned to see Peter standing on the far side of the clearing.

"Go back, Jase; you can't save me, not this time."

"But Peter, you can't die, not yet!"

"We all must die and my time has come. Tell Elsa I love her and will await her beyond." He raised his arm, pointing vaguely across the dead scrub.

"Don't give up, Peter; we can get help, just don't give up."

"I'm sorry, Jase."

Peter turned, walking around behind a dead tree and disappearing. Jason moaned as everything dissolved away into darkness.

He opened his eyes, surprised for a moment to find himself back on the Pasha's island. Releasing Peter's hand, he stood, turning to Elsa. "I'm sorry, he's beyond my reach."

Elsa covered her face, trying to hold back her tears.

"I'm so sorry, Elsa," David said. "This is all my fault. I should never have left the automatic defences turned on; it's just I wasn't expecting friendly visitors."

Elsa looked up at him. “No, what’s done is done, David, I –” She gasped.

“What’s wrong?”

“You were one of the people on my father’s boat with Pedro!”

“Huh?”

She turned, taking a good look at Joel and Cam. “So were you two!”

Joel’s eyes lit up. “You’re not *that* Elsa, are you? But how could you be? That was three million years ago.”

“That’s right; I remember now you saying you came through a time portal.”

“But how’d you get into our time? The portal was destroyed immediately after we returned.”

“That part I can’t remember, although the way my memories are returning, I don’t think it’ll be long before I know the full story. I just wish I’d been able to share that discovery with Peter.”

Joel hugged her. “Don’t give up hope yet, not while he’s still breathing.”

Elsa’s expression darkened. “Where’s Caleb?”

“Pip and Loraine took him up to the palace; he was distraught enough as it was and we thought it best not to let him see Peter being brought ashore.”

“He knew this was going to happen, I’m sure, perhaps he even planned it this way.”

“Surely not, he –”

David interrupted. “Caleb and I have both seen a vision of the future and what he calls his destiny’s path. I think what happened was something that *had* to happen.”

“Do you mean Peter had to die?”

“No, well I don’t know, I only saw the outcomes, not how to achieve them, but what I do know is that Caleb’s path is the only way to a tolerable future; anything else will be calamitous for both galaxies.”

Elsa covered her face again. “So Peter’s life is the price we have to pay for your future.”

“For *everyone*’s future, but yes.”

“Everyone’s future except Peter’s and mine, you mean.”

The Sum of its Parts

“Pedro, wake up.”

“Huh?”

“Make some light, Pedro.”

Remembering where he was in Sheol, Pedro generated his trademark orange glow, revealing his friend Jim standing over him.

“Oh, it’s you. What’s happened? How long was I asleep?”

“About seventy-five years but don’t worry, time does strange things in here. You have to come with me; someone needs your help.”

Pedro stood, sighing. “Okay.”

He followed as Jim walked off into the darkness, smiling when he felt the floor beginning to descend. Passing through the mist, he stopped short when he emerged onto the River Styx bank.

“What happened here? This place has sure gone to hell while I’ve been asleep.”

“All things must pass, even us.”

Seeing Charon’s ferry, Pedro started off down the slope towards it but Jim grabbed his arm. “No, not that way; follow the path along the bank.”

Scratching his head, he turned, picking up the track through the dead scrub. Upon reaching the clearing, he saw two familiar figures standing alongside a grave.

“Steve! Danny!”

As he dashed towards them, a third figure emerged from behind a dead tree.

“He took some convincing, Jim,” Danny said, “but between us we managed to stop him going through the gates.”

“Peter?”

“Hi, Pedro. So here we are at the end, together on equal terms.” Pedro stepped forward. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“It’s like it says on the headstone; I gave it my best shot but failed in the end.”

“No, Peter; you were never a failure.”

“That’s right,” Jim said. “Neither of you were, or are.”

Pedro turned back to Peter. “Did you meet Elsa?”

“Yes, although it took most of my life before it happened. She’s a wonderful woman, the perfect match for us both. We were engaged to be married.”

“So it was with me, but it seems fate opposes us on that count. What happens now?”

“Wait,” Steve said, turning back towards the track. “For now you must wait; Caleb’s path remains alive and he’s yet to play all his cards.”

* * *

“What’s that beeping?” Elsa asked.

David looked up. “There’s another spacecraft approaching.”

“You’re not about to shoot it down too, are you?”

“No, the automatic defences are turned off.” David crossed his fingers, hoping that was true.

Joel grimaced as the craft passed overhead, circling before descending to land on the palace forecourt. “In that case it’s probably the military come to finish us off.”

“That’s not military,” David said. “It’s a civilian rental cruiser by the look of it.”

He grabbed Cam by the hand, dashing up the steps and around the side of the palace. Joel thought about following but decided instead to stay with Elsa and Peter. He’d find out soon enough who the visitors were.

“From what I can remember, Joel,” Elsa said, “you were very much the hero back when I met you in the past. You were stopping someone from killing Roly, weren’t you?”

“No, it was the other way around; we were stopping Tristan from stopping Drago from killing Roly.”

“Tristan; was he Caleb’s father?”

“Yes.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No, not at all; my dad and I are about as opposite as you can get.”

“Oh, I see.”

“As far as I can tell, the only thing Caleb got from him was his Pasha powers.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“So do I, for everyone’s sake.”

Joel turned to see David, Cam and Pip leading a man and woman down the steps. “Clem? Mog? What are you doing here?”

“Joel, it’s great to see you again!” Mog said. “Look at you; you’re all grown up now and married I hear.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Clem knelt beside Peter while Mog gave Joel a hug. “Edwin called to tell us we might be needed here and it looks like he was right.”

Elsa covered her mouth. “Can you, can you do anything for him?”

“Perhaps,” Clem said, “but Pip, I’m going to need your amulet.”

Pip lifted the ebony dolphin from around his neck. “May the blessing of the Black Dolphin go with you once again, Clem, son of Edwin.”

Clem hung the amulet around his neck before taking hold of Peter’s hand and closing his eyes.

Pip led Elsa a few paces away. “Clem once saved me from a similar head injury to Peter’s. He’s a direct descendent of the half-castes from ancient Huntress; if anyone can save him, he can.”

* * *

Peter and Pedro turned as another figure emerged from the track.

“You sure took some finding,” Clem said, brushing the dead sticks and leaves from his arms. “But hang on, why are there two of you?”

“That’s Pedro,” Peter said. “He was a by-product in the resolution of a temporal paradox.”

“This makes it complicated but never mind, I’ll manage, I suppose. How old were you both when it happened?”

“Twenty-three.”

“So you share memories from before that time, is that right?”

“Yes; that’s how we both know Danny and Steve.”

Clem scratched his head. "Is there anything in the present time you both share?"

Pedro and Peter looked at each other. "Elsa," they said in unison.

"Excellent, you were joined in the past and are joined in the present so I just have to stitch you back together in the middle."

"What do you mean?"

"Two spirits can't occupy the one body, not without causing a whole lot of psychiatric problems, so I first need to put you back together, okay?"

"I'm not going back," Peter said. "My injury is too severe."

"For just you, yes, but that's because you're incomplete."

"He's right," Steve said. "Together you can pull it off, I'm sure."

Danny nodded. "Together, just like before."

"Think of Elsa," Jim said. "What would she want?"

"All right, but just as long as I don't end up a vegetable. I'm sure Elsa wouldn't want that."

"You might be surprised at the depth of her love," Clem said, "but no, I don't think it'll come to that. What about you, Pedro?"

"Yeah, sure, why not? I'm not doing much else at the moment and it sounds like it might be fun."

Clem perched himself on top of the headstone. "Right, I need you each to take one of my hands."

Peter and Pedro looked at each other before stepping forward and doing so.

"I'm going to act as a conduit through which you can share each other's memories, but for this to work you can't hold anything back, okay?"

Peter again looked at Pedro. "Yeah, okay."

"Pedro?"

"Yeah, I don't have any secrets. Probe away."

Clem closed his eyes.

"You cunning devil, Peter," Pedro said. "That was a neat trick using the Eridanian remote command system to thwart those Barradhim rebels. I wouldn't have had the patience to research all that stuff."

"It helped that I'd been laid up in a hospital bed at the time. But hey, Pedro, what about you and all the stuff you did helping Joel defeat Tristan. That was awesome!"

"Your defeat of Rebecca Gosling took some guts too, Peter."

"It fades in comparison to what Drago put you through back on ancient Huntress. So it was you who sabotaged the star dimmer, was it?"

"Yes, it was the only way I could make the future come true."

"You sure took a gamble flying that ship across intergalactic space. How'd you do it?"

"Steve and Jim helped a lot, but mostly it was just heaps of luck and hoping relativistic time dilation would do the rest."

"It's time for the final step," Clem said, opening his eyes. "Without letting go of me, you now have to grasp each other's hands."

"Hang on," Pedro said, turning to Peter as he extended his hand. "The last time we almost did this, you said we might annihilate each other."

"That was just a guess and I didn't want to take any chances back then. Clem?"

"You'll be fine, I promise. Just do it before I lose my nerve."

Peter and Pedro touched fingers and, when no sparks flew or worlds imploded, grasped each other's hands.

"Look!" Danny said. "The writing on the headstone just vanished."

A red glow, emanating from Clem's amulet, enveloped Peter and Pedro, making their features indistinguishable. A moment later, the headstone crumbled to dust, causing Clem to topple over backwards. When he looked up, Peter and Pedro had gone.

"Do you think they annihilated each other?" Jim asked.

"No," Clem said, standing and dusting himself off. "I believe they've returned to the living, as I must now do."

He turned and walked back along the track.

"That's it then," Danny said.

Steve nodded. "We'll see them again, Danny, but not for many years, I hope."

“That’s good,” Jim said. “My wife, Dornie, will be wondering where I’ve got to.”

* * *

Clem opened his eyes as he tumbled backwards onto the floor of the boathouse.

“Are you okay?” Pip asked.

“Yes, just exhausted. You didn’t tell me there were two of him.”

Elsa helped him up. “What do you mean?”

Before Clem could respond, Peter sat up. “Oh my head. What happened?”

“Peter, are you okay?”

“Elsa? Sorry, it’s just taking me a moment to reconcile the Elsa I know now with the one I knew before. I must say you’ve aged well, far better than I have by the feel of it.”

Elsa took a step back. “What do you mean? Are you now Pedro?”

“I’m both Peter and Pedro, thanks to young Clem here.”

Caleb came running down the steps, closely followed by Loraine. He stood before Peter, giving him an inquisitive look. “Are you okay now?”

Peter grinned. “I’m more than okay, Caleb, I’m *healed*.”

“Before you get too carried away,” Mog said, “you really should have that bump on your head checked by a doctor. We can take you to the Sandpiper Bay hospital as soon as you’re ready.”

Peter tentatively touched his temple. “Yes, it’s still pretty tender. After all this, I wouldn’t want a splinter of bone or something to do more damage.”

“I’ll come with you,” Elsa said, now wrapping him in a hug.

Peter kissed her. “You’re as lovely as ever.”

“So are you, Peter, Pedro, whoever you are. What should I call you now?”

“Peter will be fine. Pedro was always just a caricature of how I felt at the time.”

Elsa turned to Caleb. “Did you know this was going to happen?”

“No, only I didn’t think he’d die. My destiny’s path leads to happiness but there are bad things along the way, that’s all.”

“This isn’t a bad thing, Caleb; it’s a very good thing, as are you. I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”

Caleb blushed. “Thank you.”

Taking Peter’s arm, Elsa led him along the path towards the forecourt.

“I’ll come too,” Pip said as they ascended the steps. “Cloe will start panicking once she realises my shuttle’s on the bottom of the sea.”

Before boarding Clem’s cruiser, Pip turned to David. “At least some of us are likely to return once we know where everything stands with the military and government, so please, don’t turn your weapons back on.”

“If he does I’ll tie him to them,” Loraine said.

Clem ushered them on board before closing the hatch and strapping himself in.

Pip turned to Mog once they were airborne. “How’s your restaurant on Bluehaven going?”

“Amazingly well. We’ve had to move into larger premises and our regular clientele are wonderful.”

“You should all come for a meal when this is over,” Clem said.

Pip nodded. “We will if we survive, I promise. Is Russell still with you?”

“Yes, he’s now our head waiter. In spite of his reservations about being bored to death on Bluehaven, he’s really enjoying the laid-back lifestyle and the constant influx of interesting visitors.”

“That’s great. I miss you both terribly, of course, but Damon’s doing an excellent job of running the show here.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

* * *

The doctor ushered Elsa into the examination room. “I was just telling your husband that the scan shows evidence of a substantial compressive skull fracture.”

Elsa gulped.

“But the bone and underlying brain tissue have healed completely; all that remains is some superficial bruising on his scalp. When did you say this accident occurred?”

“This morning, but he’s had help from a Black Delphinidae healer.”

“Was it Damien?”

“No, Clem.”

“Remarkable. I should offer him a contract to come and work here. Anyway, your husband’s free to go; enjoy the rest of your holiday and don’t bang your head again.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Elsa took Peter by the hand, leading him outside. “We should make that official, you know.”

“What?”

“You being my husband.”

“Yes, of course; after all, Hamati did give his permission.”

“That’s right. My memories of those times are all coming back now. Do you remember our walk through the mountains up to Dartmoor?”

“How could I forget? That’s when Glamming tried to buy me.” Peter grimaced. “It was Glamming who pushed you down the steps of Drago’s palace, giving you the head injury that wiped your memories. It’s a good thing he’s long dead because I don’t know if I could control myself if we ever came face to face again.”

“I can’t remember anything that happened that day. I know we were sending the Gomeral off on those starships, but the rest is just a blur.”

“It’ll be for the best if it stays that way, I think.”

“I’ve booked us into a hotel here for tonight, then tomorrow I want to go visit Uncle Hamati.”

“He’ll be in for a shock when he sees you’re still alive, I’m sure.”

“And you too, Pedro; I hope they’re both pleasant shocks for him.”

* * *

Elsa and Peter woke at dawn, feeling refreshed and full of life.

Peter looked at her, grinning. “So, my wife-to-be, how did you find the new me? Did I live up to your expectations?”

“Yes indeed, and then some. What they say on Earth is true.”

“What’s that?”

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

“You’re in the wrong job, Elsa; expressing our love life as a mathematical equation is the hallmark of a great physicist.”

“But it’s true.”

“Thank you. Do you want to go for a swim before breakfast?”

“Sure, but I didn’t bring my bathing suit; we were in kind of a hurry to leave home, remember?”

“Think back to the old days, Elsa. Did we ever wear bathing suits?”

“No, but these aren’t the old days anymore.”

“It’s still Huntress, though, and David and Cam don’t seem to think clothing’s a necessity here. Anyway, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“Yeah, you’re right; let’s be devils while we’re still young enough to do it.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Elsa led the way down her ‘secret’ track to the beach, which was now signposted in multiple languages, where they stripped off. When nobody screamed or called the police, they dashed down into the water and dived under an incoming wave.

“Coolum Beach and the French Riviera are both nice,” Elsa said, “but this will always be my favourite beach.”

“Me too,” Peter said, remembering the hot lazy days he’d spent here with Elsa in his early time on ancient Huntress, back before all the troubles had begun.

“Do you think, Peter, when this business with Caleb is all settled and we can marry, do you think we could come and live here for a while?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“There are heaps of places I’d love to revisit.”

“Don’t forget all that was three million years ago so a lot will have changed.”

Elsa smiled. “That’ll be half the fun, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I suppose it will.”

Their swim completed and a light breakfast eaten, they set off on foot through the bayside shopping centre and over the bridge onto the road to Kurramurra. Climbing along the spur, they soon reached the old stone bridge crossing the river gorge.

“This hasn’t changed much,” Elsa said.

“I believe it’s been recently renovated. A couple of decades back, it was almost falling down and Pip got stuck when his foot dislodged a loose rock and became wedged.”

Elsa stepped tentatively onto the bridge, keeping a tight hold of the parapet until she reached the other side. “There used to be a track just along here leading down to a sea cave at the end of Honeydew Cove. My parents and Uncle Hamati would take me there for picnics when I was little.”

Peter pointed to a signpost on the right. “Is that it?”

“Yes! We should check the tides and go down there later. It’s beautiful.”

They continued down along the road into Kurramurra, passing the riverside taverns before turning up a side street to Hamati’s house.

A Barungi woman met them at the front door. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, we’d like to see Hamati.”

“I’m sorry but he’s terribly busy right now. I can make an appointment for you if you like; how does next Tuesday afternoon sound?”

Elsa frowned but Peter grinned. “Just tell him that his favourite niece is here to see him.”

The woman disappeared back inside as Elsa poked Peter in the ribs.

“What?”

Footsteps approached as Hamati came to the door. “What this about niece?” He looked up at her. “Elsa?”

“Yes, Uncle, it’s me!” Elsa said, switching to her native tongue.

“I can’t believe it! We all thought you’d died in the apocalypse; where have you been all this time?”

“It’s a long story but I had a head injury and lost all my memories until just recently.”

Hamati turned to Peter. “Now don’t tell me; you’re Pedro, aren’t you?”

Peter grinned. "Yes, sir, that's me."

"This is amazing! Come in for a drink, please; we must celebrate before I wake up and find this is all a dream."

They followed him inside to the lounge room where he grabbed a bottle of wine and three glasses.

"To family lost and found!" he said, raising his glass.

"To your good health and prosperity, Hamati," Peter responded. "May your days be long and happy."

"Until this moment, I'd have thought that unlikely." Hamati's expression darkened. "Perhaps you've heard that my fiancée died a few days ago; your father, blaming Esmeralda for your death, attacked and killed her."

"What?"

"Yes, and now it seems it was all for naught."

"Where is he now?"

"In the watch house awaiting trial."

"You must take me to him; now, Uncle."

"Very well." Hamati put down his glass. "Follow me."

They walked a few blocks down to an old stone building with barred windows. The Barungi guard sitting behind the front desk waved them through when he saw who it was.

At the end of a dark corridor, a hooded man sat behind bars in a cell made for people half his height.

"You have visitors, Charon."

"Yes?"

"Dad, it's me, Elsa!"

"What? No, you can't be, you're dead. What are you playing at, Hamati?"

"No, Dad, it's really me; touch my mind if you don't believe me."

Charon closed his eyes, his brow furrowed beneath his hood.

"You speak the truth, my dear sweet Elsa. How is it you live?"

"It's a long story, Dad, but I was injured when the Unity League captured Pedro and me, causing me to lose all memory of my life here until just now."

"What became of Pedro, do you know?"

"I'm right here too," Peter said with a grin.

Charon again closed his eyes. “Well I’ll be a monkey’s uncle; you and Peter have remerged! I always suspected that might happen in the end.”

“We have the boy Caleb to thank for a lot of this.”

Charon grimaced. “Oh that poor lad; if only you’d come a few days earlier so much grief could’ve been averted. Hamati, I’m so sorry, so terribly sorry; if only I’d known I would never have –”

He covered his face, collapsing onto his haunches as fits of sobbing wracked him.

Hamati stood firm, his face impassive, but when his hand found Elsa’s she could feel his trembling.

“Charon, once long ago we were friends; perhaps, with Elsa’s return bringing happiness in the midst of grief, we could put the past behind us and start anew.”

Charon looked up at him, his face streaked with tears. “No, not after what I did.”

“I forgive you, Charon; I know you didn’t mean to kill Esmeralda –”

“But Hamati, that’s the terrible thing; I *did* mean to kill her and then she died. How could I do such a thing?”

“She died because she was drunk and slipped on spilt wine. All you did was break a bottle, Charon, and even that was an accident.”

“But I goaded her; I even called her a witch if I recall.”

“And worse; a *conniving sycophant* I think your words were, and perhaps she did enchant me and divert me from my duties when our world was falling apart. But that was long ago and now we have a chance to start anew; I forgive you, my friend.”

Charon extended his hand through the bars to shake Hamati’s. “Thank you, my friend.”

Hamati grimaced. “Now I just have to convince the magistrate to set you free.”

“If you haven’t lost your persuasive touch, Uncle,” Elsa said, “that should be easy.”

“You always were a flatterer; my favourite niece indeed!”

“As far as I know, I’m still your *only* niece.”

Hamati led Peter and Elsa back to his house where his attendant dashed out to meet him. “Sir, there’s a horrible man in uniform waiting inside for you. I told him you were busy but he refused to leave.”

“That’s all right, Carmel, I’ll see what he wants.”

Peter and Elsa followed Hamati inside to where General Gallagher stood studying the paintings on the wall.

“You have quite an art collection, Hamati; what a pity it’d be to see it all destroyed.”

“What you talking about, Gallagher?”

“I’m here to do a deal, Hamati, that’s all, so calm down and take a seat.”

“Say what you must then leave house. Military no longer welcome on Huntress.”

“Now, now, I’m sure our differences can be amicably resolved. Will you at least hear me out?”

“Go on.”

“It’s all quite simple, Hamati. You will hand the boy Caleb over to me within twenty-four hours or this world will be utterly destroyed.”

“Are you serious?”

“The military never joke, Hamati. This is your one and only chance; give me the boy or everyone here will die.”

Hamati stood. “You double-crossing snake in grass, Gallagher; answer is no, never will Hamati do deal with you.”

“Be careful what you say, Hamati. I have the means at my disposal to implode your sun and I’m more than willing to do it if you don’t hand me the boy. You have twenty-four hours.”

Without waiting for a response, Gallagher turned and marched out the door.

Enough Rope

“Hamati want everyone to leave planet.”

“I’m sure Gallagher’s bluffing,” Pip said. “Where would we go?”

“Temple on Bluehaven take you in, be safe there.”

“All right, but how do we get there? It’s a long flight and Damon’s ship will only carry six passengers.”

“I can squeeze a few more into the galley and hold,” Damon said.

“Is that legal?”

“No, but I doubt we’ll be arrested for it, given the circumstances.”

“What about the Barungi?” Cloe asked.

“Barungi take refuge in Sheol,” Hamati said. “We do that before, can do it again.”

Damien walked in to join them. “No amount of ships will get you off the planet now, I’m afraid. Gallagher has just placed a blockade in orbit, with an interdicator on the other side of the fold to stop any escape through subspace.”

“All come into Sheol with Barungi then.”

“No,” Peter said. “The portals into Sheol rely on a subspace duplicity and the interdicator will also block that.”

Pip sighed. “I guess we just have to hope Gallagher’s bluffing.”

Peter suddenly turned pale.

“What’s wrong?” Elsa asked.

“It’s something I just remembered. When Drago made us fly that ship to set up his star dimmer, it was on the condition that Glamming gave us its full technical specifications. I’m sure it had a mode of operation making it a solar reflector instead of just a deflector, and activating that would likely cause a stellar implosion.”

Pip nodded. “When Drago took over David’s body, he threatened to implode the suns of all our worlds, so yes, if Gallagher knows how to do it –”

Elsa wrapped her arms around Peter, tears now flowing. “Just, just when I thought everything was going to be wonderful.”

Damon cleared his throat. “I assume handing Caleb over to Gallagher isn’t an option.”

“No way!”

“Perhaps it could buy us some time.”

Hamati thumped the desk. “NO! Hamati die before that happen.”

“All right; it was just a thought.”

Elsa straightened herself up. “From what I gathered on the island, Caleb’s seen the future through Joel and is following his destiny’s path. If he saw the shooting down of Pip’s ship and Peter’s reunification with Pedro, he must surely have foreseen this and have found a way around it. What was it he said? *My destiny’s path leads to happiness but there are bad things along the way.* I think we should trust him.”

Pip nodded. “Yes, we should; that’s what the Black Dolphin is telling me to do.”

* * *

General Gallagher stood on the interdicator’s bridge, watching the clock on the wall as its second hand made one final sweep. “Time’s up, Hamati. Croft, follow me.”

“Are you sure you should be doing this, sir? I mean, I could just as easily do it for you.”

“No offence, Croft, but experience has taught me never to delegate anything critical.”

“All right, sir.”

They entered the loading dock. “Do you have the instructions and that dolphin-shaped key?”

“Yes, sir, right here.”

“Don’t give them to me now, Croft; wait till I’m in my space suit.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Gallagher climbed into the suit, checking all the tabs and pressure seals. “Now put them in that pocket where I can reach them with my gloves.”

“If you don’t mind me saying, sir, it gives me the greatest of pleasure to finally see the end of Ingle and his Black Delphinidae cronies.”

“This has nothing to do with personal revenge, Croft; it’s the military’s way of resolving a problem and is what we’re paid to do. Now help me put this damn helmet on.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once suited up, Gallagher passed through the airlock and manoeuvred himself alongside the star dimmer. Pushing the dolphin-shaped key into its receptacle, he breathed a sigh of relief when the control panel cover slid open.

“Croft, do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir, loud and clear.”

“Order the blockade fleet to withdraw now and confirm back to me once they have.”

“Yes, sir.”

Unfolding the instruction sheet, Gallagher began keying in the sequence to activate the dimmer’s reflector mode.

“Sir, the fleet has withdrawn and jumped to subspace.”

“Acknowledged.”

He pressed the activate button, nodding as the confirmation light flashed and the countdown began.

Pulling the key from its receptacle, he turned and propelled himself towards the airlock.

“Take us home, Croft,” he said once back on board. “I don’t want to be anywhere near this place when it blows.”

* * *

“The blockade has withdrawn,” Damien said, “but the interdicator’s still sitting alongside the star dimmer. No wait; it’s just jumped to subspace too.”

Hamati turned to Peter. “What happen now?”

“The reflected solar energy will superheat the sun’s photosphere, causing it to emit more energy which will in turn be reflected back, compounding itself. Ultimately the reflector will be overloaded and fail, releasing that built-up energy into the solar system and

vaporising the inner planets. The star itself won't implode for many weeks or months, as the shockwave has to propagate inwards to the core, but by then it'll only be of academic interest, something for far-away astronomers to watch through their telescopes."

"Is any way to stop it?"

"No, not now. Even venting the core across subspace like we did with the Pleiades supernova won't stop the initial energy flash."

Mog turned to Clem. "The rental company won't like having their cruiser blown up."

"Don't worry; it's insured."

"What about the restaurant?"

"I'm sure Russell can take over; no-one will go hungry, I promise."

"That's all right then."

Damien wrapped his arms around his son, Damon. "Who'd have thought it would end like this?"

"This isn't the end," Pip said. "Don't ask me how I know, but I do."

Peter gave Elsa a hug and a kiss. "I hope you're right about Caleb."

"So do I."

Thousands of kilometres to the west, Caleb stood on the palace steps, watching the clouds dance across the sky. He smiled.

* * *

Gallagher picked up his phone.

"It's Michael Chandler here; I can confirm the destruction of Huntress."

"Thanks, but it's strange that I'm not seeing any reports through the military channels."

"Just delays in your system, I expect."

"I'm sure you're right; our chain of command is far too long. Thanks for your help."

"It's my pleasure, General."

Gallagher hung up, smiling to himself. With this demonstration of his power, he was now sure his plan would succeed, for he knew that

Drago had placed similar star dimmers on all the galaxy's inhabited systems. There was no need for Pashas or mind-bending Tivinel overlords to rule the galaxy, just a no-nonsense General with his finger on the button could do that, thank you very much. Closing his eyes, he ran through the list of changes he'd make, starting with the dissolution of the Council and execution of the Supreme Councillor. *No loose ends* was a motto he'd learnt early in his career. After that –

Croft beeped him on the intercom. "General, there's someone here who insists on seeing you."

"Tell them I'm busy."

The door burst open. "The hell you're busy, Gallagher."

"Who the hell – what? How is this possible?"

"What do you think you're doing sitting behind my desk?" General Walker said as two military police officers followed him into the office. "Take him."

"Stuart Bartholomew Gallagher," one of the officers said while the other cuffed Gallagher's hands, "I arrest you on a charge of grand treason. You are not required to answer any questions, but anything you do say may be used in evidence against you. Do you understand?"

"Of course I damn-well understand. How'd you do it, Walker?"

"Let's just say I had a tip-off, shall we?"

"Who?"

Walker shook his head. "Best leave that for the court martial."

"And Chandler?"

"He was in on it too."

"What about the star dimmer? Why didn't that destroy Huntress?"

Walker smiled. "We removed and destroyed all the original dimmers soon after that business with Drago, but replaced them with fakes as bait for anyone pulling a stunt like yours. All the keystrokes are recorded, of course, as evidence of intent."

"You bastard, Walker."

Walker smiled as the officers led Gallagher away.

* * *

“Hamati, there’s a call for you,” Damon said, passing him the phone.

“Hello, Hamati speaks.”

“Hamati, it’s General Walker here. Supreme Councillor Chandler and I request permission to come and discuss our terms of surrender.”

“Hamati not surrender.”

“No, you misunderstand me; it’s we who are surrendering. You’ve won, Hamati.”

“Aren’t you dead, Walker?”

“No, I’m still alive thanks to Caleb. I was wrong about him, Hamati. We all were except you, Ingle and Piper, which is why we’re surrendering.”

“Oh, right. Permission granted, come to Black Delphinidae seminary.”

“Thank you; Walker out.”

Hamati put down the phone, grinning from ear to ear. “Military and government surrender, Hamati win!”

“What? How?”

“Walker and Chandler here soon; they explain.”

“You mean General Walker? Isn’t he dead?”

“No, Caleb save him but Hamati not know how. He explain when get here.”

Pip shook his head. “I’d better let the kitchen staff know to prepare more refreshments.”

The small military shuttle settled on the lawn outside the common room.

“Michael, it’s good to see you again,” Pip said as the Supreme Councillor emerged from the hatch.

“And you, Pip. This is General Walker.”

“Come and join us for refreshments in the common room.”

“Thank you.”

Walker sat at the end of the table. “I must say this is a nice place you have here.”

Pip smiled. “Thank you, General.”

“Please, call me Robert.”

Pip laughed. "This is the first time I've heard anyone in the military use their first name. I didn't even think you had them."

"We do, but they're a closely guarded secret to be revealed only under exceptional circumstances, which this is."

"So how is it you're still alive? We'd heard that your ship had been shot down over Sandpiper Bay."

"It was but I wasn't in it, nor was anyone else for that matter. David Collins contacted me just as I was about to fly down to a rendezvous with Gallagher, warning me that the boy had touched his mind and seen his plot against me. As a precaution, I sent the ship down unmanned."

"In light of what transpired," Michael said, "it's clear we misjudged the boy and your role in protecting him so, as Robert told Hamati, we're offering to negotiate the terms of our surrender."

Hamati nodded. "Please do."

Michael pulled a parchment from his briefcase. "We will reinstate the Barungi's original deed of autonomy, as formulated by Mark the Bewildered, and will prohibit military access to your airspace unless at the request of the Barungi leadership."

"Agreed."

"With regard to Caleb, we will cease to pursue him, but in return we need you to devise a solution to protect this galaxy and its people from his powers."

Hamati turned to Peter. "Is that possible?"

"Allow me to suggest one scenario," Robert said. "If you can establish that a Pasha's powers don't extend across intergalactic space, we'd be happy for you to take him to the Milky Way galaxy."

Michael nodded. "Another option might be to send him to that world now occupied by the bunyips. I'm sure he'd love it there; I mean, doesn't every boy want a pet bunyip?"

Pip shook his head. "Their carnivorous phase might be problematic for him."

"There's nothing like hungry carnivores to keep a keen young lad on his toes," Robert said, "but no, I take your point."

"A drug or surgical procedure that removes his powers would also be acceptable, subject to independent scrutiny of course."

"How long would we have?" Elsa asked.

“We’re not imposing a hard and fast time limit, but this must happen sooner rather than later and certainly before the boy reaches puberty.”

“We’ll have to discuss this with those closest to him,” Pip said, “and with Caleb himself of course.”

“That’s fine; all we need for now is an in-principle agreement.”

Hamati looked around the table. “Any dissent?”

“I’m really not sure,” Elsa said, but Peter squeezed her hand.

“We’ll sort something out, I’m sure.”

“Excellent,” Hamati said. “Give me pen.”

Robert turned to Pip after the document had been signed and countersigned. “Is there any chance of seeing Caleb so I can personally thank him?”

“Later, perhaps, but for now I think it best he remain with those closest to him.”

“I understand.”

“What will happen to Gallagher?” Cloe asked as Michael and Robert stood.

“He’s pleading guilty to grand treason and has chosen death by firing squad.”

“That’s barbaric, isn’t it? Couldn’t you have acted sooner to nip him in the bud?”

“No, to be sure of a conviction I had to give him enough rope to hang himself. Given his rank and the nature of his crimes, we have to set an example. After all, as he once reminded me, the chain of command is the keystone to an efficient and well-disciplined military, and circumventing that chain is the slippery slope into chaos. We simply can’t have officers bumping off their superiors willy-nilly, can we?”

“I guess not. What about General Piper?”

“He’s been released and reinstated as head of Special Operations. It was he who suggested our formal surrender and I have no doubt he’ll eventually have my job.”

“It looks like the worst is now behind us,” Elsa said, giving Peter a hug as Walker’s shuttle took to the air.

“Yes, we should go and break the good news to everyone on the island.”

“My cruiser awaits,” Clem said.

* * *

Peter and Elsa were mobbed by the others as they stepped from Clem’s ship.

“How’s your head, Peter?” Julia asked. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, the scans showed everything’s healed except for a bit of superficial bruising.”

“That’s great!”

“We have more good news,” Pip said. “The war is over; the military and government have surrendered to Hamati and will no longer pursue Caleb.”

“Huh?”

“Somehow David warned General Walker that Gallagher was planning to shoot him down, so Walker faked his death and foiled Gallagher’s plot to destroy this planet. He now owes Caleb a life debt and will leave him alone.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“There are some conditions, though,” Elsa said. “We have to find a way to stop Caleb’s Pasha powers from interfering with the governance of this galaxy.”

Billy scratched his head. “Is that possible?”

“They suggested taking him to the Milky Way if we can show that Pasha powers don’t cross intergalactic space.”

“That’s more up your alley, Peter. Can they?”

“It depends on what the underlying biological processes are behind those powers.”

“I might be able to help you with that,” Elsa said. “A blood sample from Caleb would be a good starting point.”

Peter looked around. “Where is he?”

“He was down in the dolphin cave with –” Loraine started to say, but paused as an elderly blond-headed man emerged from the palace door, his hand tightly gripping Caleb’s bicep.

“You know it’s not a good idea allowing children to play in this place; there are many dangers lurking in the shadows, including me.”

The man dragged Caleb down the steps and across to the platform over the water, where a boat laden with more blond-headed men approached.

“What are you doing?” Loraine asked. “Where are you taking him?”

“The mind of a young Pasha is quite malleable, you know, so the Unity League will be preparing him for his rightful role as ruler of the universe. It worked with Drago, at least until he became sidetracked by those damned dolphins, so I’m sure Caleb will provide sterling service for us.”

“You!” Peter said, pointing an accusing finger. “You’re Glamming.”

“It’s Doctor Glamming, sir, but alas I don’t recall ever meeting you.”

“Does the name Pedro ring any bells?”

“Ah, I thought you’d perished in the apocalypse. How did you survive?”

“It’s a long story, but let’s just say *Star Dimmer 1* made it all the way across intergalactic space.”

“Remarkable. So it was you who sabotaged my solar photonic deflector.”

“Yes.”

“You always were a cocky little troublemaker too big for his britches, but that was totally over the top even for you. Do you know how many Tivinel you killed? Do you?”

“One fewer than I should have, it seems.”

Releasing Caleb, Glamming leapt at Peter, tackling him to the ground and thrusting his palm against his forehead. “It’s time to fry your brain, you bastard son-of-a-whore.”

“Stop it!” Elsa yelled, dashing over and trying to push Glamming off.

“Who are you? Oh yes, you’re Elsa, Pedro’s little playmate. Don’t worry; I’ll deal with you once I’ve finished with him. Seize her!”

Two of the men from the boat grabbed Elsa’s arms, holding her while he turned his attention back to Peter.

“Stop hurting him,” Caleb said. “As your Pasha I command you to stop.”

Releasing Peter, Glamming stood and turned to face Caleb. “Little boy, do you really think your mind powers are any match for mine? Technically you might be a Pasha, but you’re still a fledgling fresh from your mother’s teats. Oh, that’s right, she died, didn’t she? A drunken whore impaled on a wine bottle, from what I heard.”

“Don’t tell lies about my mother, you horrible man!”

Caleb tried to run towards him, but two more of the boat people intervened.

“You must really learn to control your temper, little boy, if you want to grow up to be a proper Pasha. Didn’t your mummy teach you that?”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

The air above Glamming sizzled as sparks and flame shot through his hair. He shook his head, extinguishing it.

“Subdue that infant while I finish what I started.”

Glamming returned his attention to Peter while two more boat men surrounded Caleb, pulling him to the ground and tying his hands and feet with rope.

“Stand aside, Glamming,” said a voice from atop the palace steps, “there’s a good chap.”

David, wearing Drago’s dragon-crested robe and with his hair cut short revealing his red roots, descended the steps.

“My lord Drago, how –”

“Silence, you fool. Caleb may be a fledgling Pasha, but I am not. Release Pedro, Elsa and the boy before I lose *my* temper.”

“As you wish, my lord. I, I thought you’d –”

Elsa, brushing aside the two men, took a deep breath, wound back her arm and punched Glamming in the side of the head.

Flinching slightly, he rubbed his cheek before turning to face her. “Excuse me for one moment, sire.”

He lashed out, pushing Elsa over the edge and into the water, but as she fell, she hooked Glamming’s ankle with her foot, pulling him off balance. He toppled over, striking his head on the side of the deck and, unconscious, teetered for a few seconds before rolling off and disappearing in a loud splash.

Hamati dashed forward, diving in and surfacing with his arm around Elsa, supporting her as she climbed back onto the deck. He

dived under again, swimming through the murky depths for the best part of a minute before resurfacing.

“Glamming entangled in weeds on bottom. Can’t pull him up.”

While everyone was watching what was happening in the water, the Tivinel men dashed for their boat.

“Stop!” David yelled. As he spoke, the boat burst into flames before extinguishing itself as it sank. “Cam, Joel, come help me escort these fine gentlemen into the dungeon.”

Heads bowed, the Tivinel complied, following David into the building with Joel and Cam herding them along from behind.

Peter stood, a little groggily at first, as Elsa stepped over to him. “Wow, you sure packed a punch. Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Smiling, she kissed him.

A few minutes later David returned, pulling off Drago’s robe and throwing it into the sea. “Good riddance!”

“David,” his mother yelled, running over to him. “What happened to your hair? You haven’t turned back into Drago, have you?”

“No, but somehow my Pasha powers have switched back on since I’ve been staying here.”

Pip shook his head. “Does anyone outside of us know about that?”

“No, not yet.”

“We’d best keep it that way otherwise we’ll have Walker and Chandler on our backs again.”

He pulled out his phone, putting a call through to Scott Davies.

“Pip, where are you?”

“I’m on the old Pasha’s island off the west coast of the Huntress mainland. Are you back in the police force’s good books?”

“Yes, orders just came through from Michael Chandler to reinstate me.”

“Excellent; we have a bunch of Tivinel overlords locked in the basement here that you might like to take care of.”

“That’s great work, Pip; I’ll dispatch a cruiser straight away.”

“You might want to send the water police as well; one of them drowned.”

“Which one, do you know?”

“Glamming.”

“Pip, you’ve just made a whole lot of tired policemen very happy.”

“Glad to be of service, Scott.”

Elsa crouched beside Caleb, untying his ropes. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“Yes, but I can’t stop thinking about what that man said about my mum.”

“It was all lies, Caleb; all lies.”

Caleb nodded half-heartedly as she wrapped him in a hug.

“Is this the end of your destiny’s path?”

“No, not quite, but all the bad things have passed now.”

“I’m very much relieved, I must say.”

Sunshine, Warm Seas and Love

Joel, Willy and Cam carried the main course up from the kitchen to the formal dining table in the palace's hall.

"This is a meal fit for kings, I mean Pashas," Jenny said, prompting a cheeky grin from David.

"That was a stroke of genius cutting your hair like that, David," Loraine said, glancing up at Drago's portrait. "That and the robe really completed the ruse."

"Thanks, sis. The haircut was Cam's idea; he'll make a great barber someday."

"How did you and Caleb warn Walker?"

"That was the *vital message* we'd foreseen in Caleb's path, although we had no clue beforehand of what it would be about."

Caleb nodded. "That bad soldier put me to sleep after my mum, after she, um, fell, but when I woke up he was talking on his phone and I read his thoughts. I know I'm not supposed to do that, but I thought it might be important."

"It sure was, Caleb. I got the information through our mind link, but it took forever to convince the military switchboard operator; luckily someone recognised my name as a *person of interest* and put me through to Walker in the nick of time."

Joel looked at Caleb. "Everything in that vision we shared now makes sense, except for the last bit about sunshine, warm seas and love. There was laughter and splashing water, too, but I can't fit that in anywhere."

"It hasn't happened yet but it might be soon, perhaps tomorrow."

"In that case you'd better go to bed as soon as you've finished your dinner," Loraine said. "It's been a trying day for you and you'll need a good night's sleep for whatever's still to come."

“Yes, Mum; sorry, Loraine.” Caleb covered his face, tears now flowing again.

David wrapped an arm around Caleb’s shoulder while ruffling his hair. “It’s been a long day for both us Pashas. Tomorrow will bring a fresh start for all of us, I’m sure of it.”

“Tomorrow,” Caleb said, his head drooping down onto David’s lap as he fell asleep.

* * *

Caleb woke early, leading everyone out in the pre-dawn twilight to the little beach on the eastern side of the island. “This is where it happens, I’m sure.”

“Where what happens?” Joel asked, trying not to yawn.

“I don’t know, but it’s soon now, very soon.”

Small waves lapped upon the shore as the sky in the east continued to lighten. Just beyond the shallows, two dolphins surfaced. Caleb ran towards them, turning his head back as he entered the water. “David, Pip, Clem, you need to come too!”

The three looked at each other before following Caleb into the water.

Damien followed too, but turned back to the others when he reached the water’s edge. “Twenty years ago, when rescuing Pip from the scorching heat of this planet’s first new day, I felt an alien but benevolent presence helping him, one that spoke of sunshine, warm seas and love, of a simple life, lost long ago but perhaps even now still redeemable. I’m sensing that presence again, only it’s a lot closer and stronger this time.”

As the sun’s first rays broke over the horizon, a third dolphin, a new-born infant, broke the surface, its skin as black as pitch. The four humans joined hands around it, unsure of what was happening but each playing their part in passing on that presence to its new embodiment.

“The Black Dolphin lives again,” Pip said, removing his amulet and placing it around the baby dolphin’s head. “The Black Delphinidae’s quest is fulfilled.”

“Glory be this day!” Clem said. “The ancient truth we sought is at last revealed.”

“That which the first Pashas stole from you is now returned,” David said, placing a hand on the dolphin’s fin.

“Sunshine, warm seas and love,” Caleb said, wrapping the babe in a hug as its parents nodded in approval.

“That which I have is also returned,” Damien said, joining them, content in the knowledge that his extraordinarily long life would soon draw to a close.

Swept up in an outflowing of wonder and joy, those still on the shore ran into the water, laughing as they splashed their way out in celebration of that simple life; a life lost long ago but now at last redeemed.

“The Barungi return that which was taken,” Hamati said in his native tongue.

“As do the Tivinel,” Willy said, laughing as he spoke.

“The Delphinidae also return your gift,” Lorina said.

Billy took Jason’s and Peter’s hands. “Along with the Barefooters.”

“And the bewildered,” Mark said, “although I guess I’ll always be that.”

“Don’t forget the singlets!” Joel said.

Loraine glared at him. “Singletons, Joel, sing-gle-tons, okay?”

“Whatever they are, they return what they’ve taken, okay?”

She laughed. “Okay.”

“All I have to give is love,” Cam said, “so that is my gift.”

“And ours,” Julia said, holding Jenny’s and Cloe’s hands.

Sensing that the ceremony was complete, Pip removed his amulet from the baby’s head, casting it into the sea as the three dolphins swam away. Still rejoicing in the sunshine, warm sea and love, everyone continued to splash about and play before returning, happily exhausted, to the shore.

* * *

“Are you and Caleb still Pashas after all that?” Elsa asked David as they walked back to the palace.

“Yes, in part at least; I can still sense all the other minds around me, especially Caleb’s. I think what we passed to the dolphin might have been spiritual but the underlying biological processes are still running. It’ll take something more to close that gate, I’m sure.”

Peter stopped mid-stride. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“When Drago was probing me just before the apocalypse, I turned my mind’s eye around, looking back through the conduit into him. What I saw is hard to describe, but at first there were DNA strands with tiny molecules zooming back and forth along them, taking some paths but avoiding others, until a glowing light appeared, allowing those previously closed paths to open and create a glow of their own. Then everything shifted, becoming more a parable, I suppose. I saw a gate holding Drago and his red horses in a corral, initially closed until Roly came along and opened it. After Drago’s horses passed through, he killed Roly but was able to keep it open himself, allowing his horses to come and go at will.”

“Drago’s horses? What does it mean?”

“It sounds like you’re describing a genetic switch,” Loraine said. “All our cells have them to activate specific genes depending on the cell’s function. If they didn’t, we’d be just a big homogenous ball of gunk.”

“I love it when she talks technical,” David said, earning himself a poke in the ribs. “So how does that relate to Roly, Drago and the horses?”

“I know what it means,” Jenny said. “Pashas beget Pashas; it takes the presence of another to switch one on.”

Cam flicked his fingers. “Of course; those horses are Drago’s powers, at first unleashed by Roly but then self-sustaining. That would explain why David’s Pasha genes switched back on when he came into contact with Caleb.”

Elsa looked doubtful. “But how did Caleb switch on?”

“He was born around the time Drago took over David’s body so he must have been activated by that.”

“And Drago himself?”

“He was activated by Roly, and so on back down the line.”

“So how was the very first Pasha activated?”

“I think I can answer that,” Pip said. “They stole whatever was required from the black dolphins living here at the time, driving them into extinction.”

“Yes,” Clem said. “The ancient documents I once studied in the Black Delphinidae catacombs hinted at something like that, although they never came right out and said it.”

“Ancient documents never do; they always speak in riddles.”

“Just like Eridanians,” Julia said.

Elsa smiled. “So how do we close the gate?”

Pip grimaced. “I think I know the answer but you’re not going to like it.”

“Tell us anyway.”

“David’s Pasha genes switched off when I took Drago’s spirit away, so what we have to do is take David’s and Caleb’s spirits away from their bodies, far enough away to break the connection.”

“How far away is far enough?”

“I think Clem’s grandfather gave me the answer to that when he was training me. The spirit must enter Sheol and then pass out through a portal onto another planet, but there’s a catch.”

Clem turned pale. “It was something my grandfather drummed into everyone he trained. The body dies if you do that.”

“Yes,” Pip said, “just like my body died when I took Drago’s spirit through the portal to the Barefooters’ planet of exile. If it hadn’t been for Sandra’s CPR keeping me going, I’d be dead now.”

Lorraine bristled. “Are you out of your mind, Pip? Killing David and Caleb might well switch off their Pasha genes, but it isn’t exactly a good outcome for them, is it?”

“No, wait, sis, Pip’s right,” David said. “The death isn’t instantaneous since the body can be kept going with CPR. How long would we have to break that connection for to switch off the genes?”

Pip shook his head. “That I don’t know. It might only be a few seconds, in which case we wouldn’t even need the CPR.”

“But what if it takes days or weeks?” Lorraine asked.

“Then we’ll have to find another way, that’s all.”

“Hamati know answer.”

Everyone looked at him.

“I feel Pasha’s presence like hole in telepathy. When Pip take Drago through portal and spirit of David return to body, hole gone. It happen straight away.”

Loraine shook her head. “I still don’t like it.”

“I’m willing to try,” David said, “but Caleb will have to do it at the same time otherwise his presence will just switch me straight back on.”

Joel turned to Caleb. “Do you understand what Pip and David have been talking about?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“What do you reckon?”

“I really don’t want to be a Pasha anymore. My destiny’s path ends today so either that’s what happens or I die.”

Loraine opened her mouth but no words came out. David grinned.

“I can take their spirits through Sheol to the portal on the Meridian space station,” Pip said. “There they can step through, come back out and I’ll bring them home.”

“There might be a problem with that,” Damien said. “When the dolphins abandoned Sheol following Drago’s reappearance, the government decided there was too big a risk of people getting lost in that realm, so they closed all the public portals.”

“What other portals are there?”

“There are some private portals, such as the one in the old Barefooters’ headquarters on Meridian, but they’re normally kept closed, again for the same reason.”

“There might be one that’s still open,” Peter said. “One of the last things Drago had me do was place an underwater portal on Bluehaven so the dolphins carrying his essence could pass through to that world. We know the dolphins themselves were using it up until eight years ago, so it should still be working.”

“Will you be able to find it, Pip?”

“It’s not one I visited during my training, but it’ll be somewhere in the Bluehaven chamber, I guess.”

“All right, but we’ll need to keep a close watch on their bodies while they’re roaming, in case anything goes wrong.”

“Mark and I have had recent CPR training, just in case,” Lorina said. “Has anyone else?”

“Jase and I have,” Jenny said.

“It’s been a while since Peter and I did the course,” Billy said, “but we should still be able to help if need be.”

“Okay,” David said. “Let’s do it.”

“Are you all set, Caleb?” Elsa asked.

“Yes.”

Pip sat on the floor. “Lie down beside me and take my hands, then close your eyes and let me enter your minds.”

David and Caleb complied. A moment later, they found themselves standing beside Pip’s glowing spirit in the darkness of Sheol.

“Come this way,” Pip said, “and don’t let go of my hands as it’s easy to become separated and lost in here.”

He led them along a narrow passage from the chamber embodying Huntress, soon emerging into another chamber.

“This is Bluehaven; now I just have to find the portal.”

“What does it look like?” Caleb asked.

“It’ll be a black rectangle in the grey wall. Let me make a little more light.”

An orange glow surrounded them as they made their way around the chamber.

“Is that it over there?” Caleb asked, pointing off to the right.

“Yes, I think so. Now Caleb, take David’s hand and on the count of three, you both need to go through and come back out again. I’ll wait for you on this side.”

“How long will we have to stay in there?” David asked.

“Not too long. Just count to ten and come back, I suppose.”

“All right. Are you ready, Caleb?”

“Yes.”

“One – two – three – go!”

They emerged in dazzling light on the sea floor of Bluehaven, some ten metres below the surface amongst swaying fronds and schools of brightly coloured fish. Caleb looked around in wonder but, upon realising how deep he was, pulled his hand out of David’s grasp and, in blind panic, propelled himself upwards.

“Caleb, no,” David said, surfacing beside him. “We have to go back through the portal.”

“I can’t; if I go out of my depth I’ll drown!”

“No you won’t. We’re just spirits now; our bodies are safely back on Huntress, okay?”

“Yeah, but, but I can’t, I just can’t.”

“We can’t stay here, Caleb, otherwise our bodies will die. You don’t want that to happen, do you?”

“No, but, but I can’t, I just can’t. I’m only a little kid, I can’t do this!”

Caleb turned away, wailing as his panic overwhelmed and smothered all reason.

* * *

“Davo’s stopped breathing and has no pulse!” Cam yelled, himself close to panic.

“Give them a few seconds more,” Damien said.

“It’s been too long already,” Loraine said. “Mum, Dad, you have to start CPR now, please.”

“All right,” Lorina said. “Mark and I will take Caleb; Jase, you and Jenny can do David.”

Cam crept back as they went to work, hardly daring to breathe as fear gripped his heart. He couldn’t stand to lose Davo, not after all they’d just been through. In his mind’s eye he could see himself standing over Davo’s grave, lost and all alone in the universe. *Why did he have to do it? Why couldn’t he have just stayed a Pasha? It was only red hair and some whacky mind tricks; no-one else ever need know so why’d he have to do this? Why?*

Too much time had passed; way too much. Unable to watch any longer, Cam ran outside, coming to a stop at the edge of the platform where that Tivinel man had fallen in and drowned.

The dawn’s promise of sunshine, warm seas and love had vanished in the blink of an eye, snatched away, leaving just dark despair and loneliness. He stared into the murky depths, imagining himself gliding down into its cold and blissful embrace; no more hurt, no more fear, just peaceful silence and everlasting sleep. Teetering on the edge, he covered his face and wept.

* * *

“Caleb, what’s wrong?” said a voice; a familiar voice, one he’d known all his life.

“Mum?” He turned, seeing her floating beside him, more beautiful and radiant than she’d ever been in life.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“I can’t go back down; it’s too deep and I’m scared.”

“The water can’t hurt you, Caleb, but staying up here will if you wait any longer.”

“But I’m too scared, Mum, too scared.”

“Remember those heroes in the stories I read to you? They were scared too, just as scared as you, but did that stop them?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Why?”

“Because they were brave and true.”

“Exactly. You can be brave and true too; my big brave Caleb, my beautiful little bundle of joy.”

Caleb laughed. “How can I be both big and little at the same time?”

“Because you’re special, that’s why. Now take my hand, and you too, David.”

“That’s right,” David said. “The water’s just water; it can’t hurt big brave Caleb or big brave Davo, can it?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Let’s go then!”

Down they swam, hand in hand, past the brightly coloured fish and swaying fronds to the shimmering rectangle of light embedded in the sea floor.

“I’ll always be with you, Caleb,” Esmeralda said. “Whenever you’re scared or alone, just look deep inside your heart and I’ll be there, cheering and smiling for my big brave Caleb.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“Now off you go to a lifetime of happiness and joy.”

David and Caleb passed through the portal together as Esmeralda waved goodbye.

“What kept you?” Pip asked as they popped back out into Sheol. “You were in there for way too long.”

David gave Caleb a wink. "A little hiccup, that's all, but nothing Caleb couldn't fix."

"All right, but we must head back before we're too late."

"Lead on, Macduff."

"Who?"

"Never mind. It's a misquote anyway."

* * *

A hand gripped Cam's shoulder. "Careful you don't fall in."

Cam whipped his head around, almost toppling over in spite of the fingers digging into the flesh beneath his shoulder blade. "Davo? Davo! You're not dead!"

"Do I look dead?"

David grabbed Cam's wrist, pulling him up. Cam wrapped his arms around him, tears now flowing in relief and joy.

"Steady down; if you squeeze any tighter I'll burst."

"Sorry." Cam released him while taking a step back. "Is Caleb okay too?"

"Yes, he's fine. Come back inside and see for yourself."

Cam took David's hand, letting him lead the way.

"Cam, there you are!" Caleb said, running up to him and wrapping him in a hug.

Cam turned to David. "Did it work?"

"Best we ask Hamati that question."

Hamati closed his eyes for a moment. "No hole in telepathy; Pashas both gone, you just Gomerl now."

"Woohoo!"

"The rise of the Gomerl," Elsa whispered to Peter.

"Yes."

"So what happens now?" Joel asked. "With Caleb, I mean."

"I hear there are some great orphanages on Meridian and Cornipus; I'm sure one of those will take him in."

Lorraine bristled. "David, you can't send him to an orphanage!"

David grinned.

Lorraine looked at Joel. "How, um, how would you feel if we adopted him? I know we want children of our own one day, but —"

Joel grinned. "I think it'd be wonderful! Caleb, would you like to come and live with Loraine and me?"

Caleb jumped into Joel's arms. "Yes please!"

"What about the legalities?" Mark asked. "That could be tricky."

"There no record of Caleb's birth," Hamati said, "and no recorded kin, so legally he waif. Adoption easy-peasy."

"That's great!" Elsa said. "Happy endings all round."

"There's just one more thing," Peter said. "Pip, Elsa and I want to marry and, since we both have connections to the Black Delphinidae, I was wondering whether you could conduct the service back at the seminary."

"Yes, of course, although Damon usually handles such things."

"Damon will be fine," Elsa said.

"Great; well any time you're ready, there's no need for you to make a booking."

"Thanks, Pip."

Mark looked around. "We should lock this place up now and head back to the seminary. I don't know about the rest of you, but I've had enough of Pashas and their islands for one lifetime."

David looked at Caleb. "Come on, nephew-to-be; I'll race you to Clem's shuttle."

Cam watched them go, smiling before walking back to their room to grab their belongings.

* * *

Elsa, dressed in a white flowing gown, walked down the aisle hand in hand with her father, Charon, to where Peter and his best man, Billy, waited alongside Damon.

Damon raised his hands, silencing the small gathering. "Friends and family, I welcome you today to celebrate the union of what must be the ultimate star-crossed lovers, Peter, also known as Pedro, and Elsa. I'll spare you their epic tales of love and separation spanning three million years, as I'm sure they'll be happy to recount those at the reception, only to say that if any couple deserve to be wed, they do.

“I’m sure this is just a formality, but I have to ask; is there anyone here present who would object to this union?”

Damon grinned as the gathering remained silent.

“Right, so let’s get straight down to business. Do you, Peter, son of Michael and Rachel, take this woman before you to be your lawful wedded wife, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?”

Peter, finding his throat suddenly full of frogs, cleared it. “Yes, I do.”

Damon turned to Elsa. “Do you, Elsa, daughter of Charon and Matera, take this man before you to be your lawful wedded husband, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?”

Elsa grinned. “I do.”

“The rings please, Billy.”

Peter took the first ring from Damon, placing it on Elsa’s finger. “With this ring I thee wed.”

Elsa repeated the vow with the other ring.

“By the authority vested in me by the Black Delphinidae and the autonomous government of Huntress, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Peter wrapped his arms around Elsa, giving her a long slow kiss.

“Please stand as the new Mr and Mrs Thorpe make their way out to complete the paperwork, but don’t go away just yet as I have another ceremony to perform.”

The gathering all looked around, for this was unexpected.

“David and Cam, please step forward. You too, Caleb, as I know you have a part to play in this as well.”

David, his head shaved with just the slightest black stubble showing on his scalp, dragged Cam around the outside from the back row, while Caleb, a big grin on his face, dashed up from the front where he’d been sitting between Loraine and Joel.

Damon nodded to them. “To say you two have been through hell and high water to reach this point in your lives would be an understatement, I’m sure. David, son of former Supreme Councillor Mark the Bewildered and Delphinidae High Priestess Lorina, you have turned your back on both politics and religion, while Cam, son of coffee tycoons Rupert and Aphelia Dunn, you have turned your

back on business and high finance, to both follow your hearts' pursuit in subspace physics and, in the course of that pursuit, your profound love for each other.

"For reasons I won't delve into, yours can never be a physical union; nonetheless you are, for all intents and purposes, just as joined at the hip as Peter and Elsa. It therefore gives me the greatest of pleasure to formalise this today, but first I must ask if anyone here present objects to your union."

Everyone turned to Loraine. "Huh, me? No, I don't object; I think it's great. Cam will be a wonderful brother-in-law, I'm sure."

Joel gave her a wink.

"David, son of Mark and Lorina, do you take this man before you as your lawful wedded partner, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?"

"That's a tough question, Damon, but, um—" He flashed a grin at Cam. "Yes, indisputably and without reservation, I do."

Cam wiped his forehead.

"Cameron, son of Rupert and Aphelia, do you take this man before you as your lawful wedded partner, to honour and to cherish for the remainder of your days?"

"Uh huh." David poked him in the ribs. "Sorry, um, yes I do."

"Right, now that's settled at last, Caleb, I believe you have a couple of rings in your pocket."

Caleb reached into one of the pockets on his shorts but found nothing.

"The other pocket, Caleb."

"Here they are!"

"Thank you."

He handed one of them to Cam, who placed it on David's finger. "With this ring I thee wed, Davo."

David, in trying to take the other ring, promptly dropped it. Caleb ran after it as it rolled down underneath the seats. Crawling between people's legs, he finally yelled, "Got it!"

Climbing over Edwin's and Val's laps, he ran back to the front, handing it to David who dropped it again but caught it before it hit the floor.

His hand still shaking, he pushed the ring onto Cam's finger. "With this ring I thee wed, Camo."

Damon sighed. "By the authority vested in me by the Black Delphinidae and the autonomous government of Huntress, I declare thee married. Now I know you're not into kissing, so, um, whatever, okay?"

"High fives?" David asked, before wrapping Cam in a hug which he vigorously reciprocated.

"Phew, I'm glad we finally made it; there's food waiting and stomachs are rumbling, but fear not, as soon as the paperwork's done, the festivities will be on for one and all in the common room. Thank you all for your attendance and support today."

* * *

Hamati pulled Charon aside after the reception, slipping into his native tongue. "What are your plans now this is all over?"

"I suppose I'll return to my ferry in Sheol."

"A pity, because the Barungi are keen to re-establish Benton as a farming community using the river as a fast and efficient transport link to Kurramurra. We've acquired one of the latest high-speed catamarans but need an experienced captain to pilot it."

"You're offering me a job, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case, my friend, I accept."

"It'll be just like old times, Charon."

"Yes, just like old times, for sure." He waved Elsa and Peter over. "Guess what?"

Epilogue

Two years later in a restaurant on Bluehaven...

Mog and Russell carried out the two huge cakes, each bedecked with a hundred glowing candles.

“Oh my goodness,” Elsa said.

Peter glanced at Billy. “We’re going to need a fire extinguisher to blow all those out.”

“They’re not real candles,” Mog whispered while handing them each a small box. “Just push the button on your remote to switch them off.”

Elsa stood, leading the singing of *Happy Birthday*, after which Peter and Billy went through the motions of blowing while secretly pressing their buttons under the table.

“Hip-hip!” David yelled.

“Hooray!”

Jason stood as the applause and cheering died away. “A hundred years ago on a stormy night in Brisbane, a child came into the world, followed the next day by another. Unknowingly carrying the Emu and Dodo spirits that had been passed down to them over the ages, they soon became the best of friends, eventually returning those spirits to the bodies of Dromaius and Raphus preserved on the planet later named Genesis.

“But that wasn’t the end of it; they were both involved in my son Mark’s overthrow of this galaxy’s tyrant Morgoth the Enlightened, the defeat of Drago when his spirit tried to usurp my grandson, David, and our most recent adventures with Loraine, Joel and Caleb on Huntress.

“I propose a toast to these centenarians, to both celebrate their lives’ achievements and wish them many more years of happiness and joy. To Billy and Peter!”

“Billy and Peter!”

Billy stood. “As the first born, I get to go before Peter, it seems. I can’t speak for him, but I’m sure my being here tonight, alive and in one piece, is due far more to good fortune than any heroism along the lines Jase implied. It’s been an amazing journey and one which I hope will continue on for a little while yet, but that’s been largely due to my adorable wife, Julia, our extended family and our friends. To the latest generation, Loraine, Joel, David, Cam and Caleb, may your own lives be as happy and exciting as mine has been.

“A toast, then, to family and friends!”

“Family and friends!”

Peter stood. “Thanks, Billy, but like you, my fortuity has been more good luck than good management. My life in the present has mostly paralleled yours, so instead I’ll look back to the deep past where, as Pedro, I first met Elsa. Arriving in that time as a fourteen-year-old, it was a *Boys’ Own* adventure with a beautiful young girl at my side. I’m also grateful to Hamati for taking me in and going along with my crazy plans to save the future, to Charon for accepting me as a prospective son-in-law and to Elsa for putting her unwavering trust in me. In the same light I’m also eternally grateful to my childhood friend, Cory Matheson, whose grit and determination lives on in his grandson, Joel.

“My toast then is to staunch allies past and present!”

“Staunch allies!”

With coffees served, the gathering began to mingle into groups. Peter caught the eye of David and Cam, who sauntered over. “I hear your studies are going well.”

“Yes,” David said, running his fingers through his long black locks. “We’re in our honours year now and both planning to start our doctorates next semester. Cam’s been doing some amazing work on hybrid fractal crystals.”

“Part of that’s your doing as well, Davo.”

“I guess.”

“Didn’t I hear something in the news recently about your parents, Cam?”

“Um, yes, they were arrested for tax evasion and fraud and are likely to spend the next twenty years in a Meridian prison.”

“Oh.”

David grinned. “Cam’s sister is now running the business and saved it from bankruptcy, so I reckon it was a good outcome all round.”

Peter shook his head, turning as Joel, Loraine and Caleb approached. “So how’s life back in Coolum Beach?”

Loraine gave him a kiss. “Happy birthday, Peter. Everything’s great; Caleb’s enjoying school with lots of new friends and, after a shaky start, Joel and I are now well into our courses at Brisbane University. Joel even managed a High Distinction in Chemistry.”

“I’m sure it was a fluke,” Joel said, “or a glitch in the university’s computers. So are you and Elsa enjoying life on Huntress?”

“It’s great! So much has changed since the old days, yet so much hasn’t. Every turn is a new adventure and it’s wonderful to see the Barungi prospering now.”

“The Tivinel on Ignus are also prospering,” Willy said, joining them. “The profits from the mines have allowed us to invest in much-needed farm machinery, resulting in bumper crops last season and a plentiful bounty for all.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Billy stepped over, ushering Peter outside. With no moon and few streetlamps to cause light pollution, Bluehaven’s night sky shone with a brilliant vista of stars.

“It’s been a wonderful life, Peter; I couldn’t have asked for better.”

“It sure has, Billy; it’s all my dreams come true.”

Peter pointed out to the east. “The tiny smudge next to that group of bright stars is the Milky Way galaxy.”

“Yes; I still have no idea how you managed to fly a primitive ship all the way there through real space and then find Earth when you arrived.”

“The whole thing’s fuzzy now and perhaps it was all in my mind, but I’m sure I had some ghostly help from Steve and Jim.” Peter raised his cup. “To absent friends.”

“Yes, to absent friends.” Billy turned to face him. “I can’t help thinking back to when it all began. Do you remember that night we were sitting with Matthew Hardcastle on the riverbank at the *Tropical Retreat*?”

“Uh huh.”

“You made a wish on a shooting star, if I recall. Tell me now, did it come true?”

Peter smiled. “Yes it did, a thousand times over.”

THE END