



The Mind of the Dolphins

Jeff Pages

**THE MIND
OF
THE DOLPHINS**

BY

JEFF PAGES



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By the same Author

Barefoot Times and Call of the Delphinidae

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A special ‘thank you’ to my mother, too, for enduring even more reams of printout to pore through in search of my blunders, grammatical and otherwise. All the hugs in this story are for you.

And finally to you, my readers, many thanks for coming with me on this journey, and I hope you find it as uplifting and fulfilling as I have.

Author Biography

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

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

His first novel, *Barefoot Times*, was published in 2004, followed by *Call of the Delphinidae*, the second in the series, in 2006. *The Mind of the Dolphins* now makes it a trilogy.

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

Dedication

For Allan and Caitlin.

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Part One

The Haunting of Christopher

Gregory the Dolphin Slayer

“Sheol, they called it in some of the stories I’d read, the limbo between Heaven and Earth, a place for lost souls trapped in an eternity of loneliness and sorrow.”

“We are the Shepherds of Sheol.”

“They say that’s why Sheol is dark. If you could see what’s really there you’d go totally insane, totally insane.”

“It’s said many of the original Barefooters simply couldn’t stand the boredom of such long lives and passed through the portals into Sheol to lose themselves and find their own oblivion in that dark and timeless place.”

“Sheol has no right to exist at all. No right.”

“Go now, my friends, and do not return to this realm. Sheol is no place for the living, no place for the living.”

“I saw them too, I saw them too, I saw them too ...”

“Christopher, wake up!”

Chris opened his eyes, only to see his teacher leaning over and glaring at him. He wished he could close them again.

“You might be a relative of the High Priestess, but in *my* class that counts for naught. As far as I’m concerned, you’re just another pathetic little first year acolyte, no more and no less. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, so perhaps you could tell us the answer.”

“Um, could you repeat the question please, sir?”

“Certainly. Which governor of Bluehaven was known as Gregory the Dolphin-slayer?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“*I don’t know, sir.* You will write me a ten page essay on the life and times of Governor Gregory Harrington, and you will have it on my desk by nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The rest of you might care to read Frank Halliday’s wonderful paper on the Dark Years, which you’ll find on my website, and we’ll be discussing some of his more controversial claims in tomorrow’s class.”

“Old Tibbits has really got it in for you,” Sandra said to Chris as they made their way from the classroom.

“It certainly looks that way.”

“You should report him to the High Priestess. I’m sure if you did she’d give him the boot.”

“I should, even though he’s supposed to be this great Delphinidae historian from the university on Cornipus. It wouldn’t be right, though, using my friendship with Lorina in that way. The trouble is she probably would give him the chop, and she’s been having such a hard time attracting staff as it is.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed your grandmother and Father Simmons are doing quite a bit of the teaching.”

“Gran was only supposed to be helping out in the library. Apparently someone’s been spreading pretty bad rumours about the college, and Earth in general, and no-one from Bluehaven or Meridian will come near us.”

“What are they saying, do you know?”

“Well, um, when my grandmother first came here she had the misfortune of crossing the path of a serial rapist and was almost killed, and the rumours are saying all Earthlings are like that.”

“But that’s ridiculous.”

“Of course it is, but it creates fear, and no-one’s going to pack up their belongings and go halfway across the universe if there’s a chance they’ll be raped before they even set foot in the college.”

“I see. So what are they doing about it?”

“Mark’s trying to recruit people from here to study at the Temple on Bluehaven and then ultimately come back as teachers, but so far he hasn’t had much luck with that either.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“Me? I, but, I couldn’t, no, I just couldn’t.”

“Your uncle’s the Bluehaven Head of State, isn’t he? You could live with him.”

“Uncle Kevin? No way.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know, I guess he’s like a politician and really ambitious. You should’ve seen his eyes light up when he thought Mark was going to accept Farley’s offer and become the new supreme ruler over there, because he saw himself becoming the power behind the throne. He’s now on the Galactic Council and has his eyes firmly set on the top job.”

“Well I wouldn’t mind going and studying on Bluehaven for a bit. I reckon it’d be fun.”

“You should talk to Mark then.”

“I will, definitely.”

Chris watched as she dashed off in the direction of Mark’s office, mesmerised by the slapping of her bare feet on the stone pavers, before hoisting his backpack over his shoulders and trudging up the stairs to the library. If Sandra was going off to Bluehaven to study, he’d have no option but to follow, but the last thing he wanted was to go anywhere near that world. He was still spooked by the revelation that his grandmother was Kevin’s mother, making Kevin his uncle and Lorina his cousin, for in his worst dreams he’d see Kevin’s hand falling on the hilt of his sword a moment before whipping it out and slicing Mark’s head off. He knew Kevin would’ve been capable of doing precisely that, had he not thought Mark might still have been of some value to him.

His stomach gurgled, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten anything all day. With the essay to write for Professor Tibbits he’d probably

have to skip dinner as well, and he moaned as he pushed open the library door.

Mary glanced up as Chris stumbled past her desk. He glanced back at her and tried to grin, but didn't really succeed.

"What's wrong, Chris?"

"That bastard Tibbits wants me to write a ten page essay for him tonight."

"Why? What happened?"

"I fell asleep in his class again."

"Oh Chris, come here honey."

She hugged him and he hugged her back, this time managing a proper grin.

"I'll have a word with Lorina and see if she can make him ease up a bit. You're not eating, are you?"

"Does it show?"

"Just look at yourself. You're a walking skeleton."

He rubbed his hands over his ribs and blushed.

"What's the essay on?"

"The life and times of Governor Gregory Bloody Harrington."

"Come with me." She led him into the maze of bookshelves and pulled out a heavy tome. "Try chapter seventeen, I think."

Chris thumbed through the book and smiled. "You're a marvel, Gran. Can I take this home with me?"

"If you promise you'll have a proper dinner before starting on it."

Chris's stomach gurgled and he blushed again.

"Sure, Gran." He looked into her eyes and his smile faltered.

"There's something else bothering you, isn't there?"

"Um, Sandra wants to take one of Mark's scholarships and go to Bluehaven."

"I'm sure Mark will be pleased, and I suppose you'll want to be following her."

"I don't know. I love her, I really do, but I don't think I'm ready to go back there again."

"Are you still having those dreams?"

He nodded, and she ruffled his hair which was now almost as long as Mark's.

“Your uncle’s not a bad man, Chris. He had a rough childhood, living in constant fear of the imperials, and he’s, well, perhaps a bit overzealous to make amends.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but the look in his eyes when he discovered Mark had lost his Barefooter powers, I mean he, he meant to kill him.”

“You were only a boy then, Chris. I’m sure Kevin was angry, but he’s not a killer, honey, really.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“Have you spoken to Lorina yet?”

“How can I? I’d be accusing her father of wanting to murder her husband, and she’d laugh at me and tell me I’m crazy.”

“She wouldn’t laugh at you, Chris. She’s the High Priestess and is trained to help with this sort of thing.”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“No I don’t, of course not. You’re just confused and overworked, that’s all.”

“Well I can’t argue with that.”

“Good. Now run along home and have some dinner, and I’ll have a talk with Lorina.”

“Thanks Gran.”

“That’s what I’m here for. Now shoo!”

Mary watched him scamper out the door and sighed. She should have a talk with Maleena and Aaron as well, she decided.

* * *

Mark looked up from his pile of paperwork to see Chris’s girlfriend standing at the door.

“Come in, Sandra, and take a seat.”

“Thanks Mark. You look busy.”

“Yeah, if I’d known getting accreditation from Brisbane University involved so much paperwork I wouldn’t have bothered.”

“You have my sympathies.”

“So, what can I do for you?”

“Chris said you’re looking for people to go to Bluehaven to study and then come back as teachers.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well I’m interested.”

“Excellent. Let me find the brochure Lorina and I threw together, and I’ll tell you more about it.”

He tried to pull a sheet of paper out from under the pile on his desk but only succeeded in setting off an avalanche.

“Leave it,” he said as Sandra started picking up the scattered documents. “I really need to sort this stuff out properly and file it away, and it’s probably going to be easier now that it’s spread out on the floor. Here’s the brochure anyway.” He handed her the crumpled flier which she quickly scanned.

“How long would I have to stay on Bluehaven for?” she asked.

“We’re saying two years, but it’s fairly flexible. The Temple’s training structure is much less formal than what we have here, and students are encouraged to set their own pace. I really wanted to run our college like that, but we needed the rigid course structure to meet the accreditation requirements.”

“The bureaucrats always want to take the fun out of everything.”

“That’s so true. So how are you and Chris going with your studies?”

“Actually I’m a bit worried about him. The last few weeks he’s seemed constantly preoccupied, and this afternoon he fell asleep during Professor Tibbits’ history class.”

“I’m sure that would’ve gone down well.”

“The good professor was not amused. He gave Chris a ten page essay to write on the life and times of Gregory the Dolphin Slayer.”

“Ouch. Probably the last thing Chris needs right now is more essays to write.”

“There’s something else bothering him, too, and I was wondering if you could have a talk with him.”

“Of course. I might call in on him later tonight, and I’ll have a quiet word with Harry Tibbits as well.”

“Thanks Mark.”

“Does Chris know you’re thinking of going to Bluehaven?”

“Yeah. I told him he should come as well, but for some reason he’s scared stiff of going back there.”

“I don’t know why, he seemed happy enough at my wedding there a few years ago. I’ll see if I can get to the bottom of it for you.”

“Well good luck, and thanks again Mark.”

* * *

Chris was so engrossed in the story he was reading he didn’t realise until too late that someone had entered his room, and let out a terrified yelp.

Gregory the Dolphin Slayer, the book informed him, had been governor of Bluehaven for twenty years, and in that time had done nothing to earn him either praise or condemnation from his master, Morgoth the Enlightened. In his twenty-first year, however, all that changed when he hit upon the notion that the Dolphins of that world were an abomination.

‘They are agents of the devil and must be erased from the seas of this planet,’ he’d proclaimed to all who would listen, and set about assembling a navy of fishing boats the likes of which had never before been seen in the history of that world. The fleet headed west from Goldwater Bay on the southern coast of Dolphin Island, harpooning every Dolphin they encountered along the way.

The Delphinidae were not amused, to say the least, and, assembling a heavily armed fleet of their own, sailed around the northernmost tip of the island and down the coast to head them off. A fierce battle took place off the rocky headland later named Shipwreck Point, but the Delphinidae were outnumbered and their losses were heavy.

Just when all seemed lost, a freak storm swept in, decimating both fleets and driving many ships onto the rocks. When the seas finally calmed, not a single vessel of Gregory’s fleet remained afloat.

Morgoth, returning from his crusades in the galaxy’s outer rim, was outraged and executed Gregory on the spot, slicing his head off with his sword as he knelt before him. Gregory’s daughter, Elizabeth, fled to Bringal Vale where she married Gordon Anderson, a vegetable grower, and it’s believed their descendants have remained in that village until this very day.

“Shit Mark,” Chris said as his fright turned to anger, “you scared the daylights out of me!”

“S-sorry,” Mark spluttered as he struggled to stop from laughing. “That must be a pretty good book for me to be able to sneak up on you like that.”

“Yeah, it’s about Gregory the Dolphin Slayer and the battle he fought with the Delphinidae off Shipwreck Point. You know I think I could be related to him.”

“How so?”

Chris pointed to the last paragraph he’d been reading.

“We can easily find out,” Mark said, sliding in front of Chris’s ultranet terminal and connecting to the Delphinidae archives on Bluehaven.

“Right, your grandmother’s Mary Anderson, her father Ryan was the son of Albert, then we go back through Hector, Claude, Rowan, Malcolm, Elizabeth and Gregory. Yep, you’re right, you’re his great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson.”

“Oh shit, do you think Tibbits knew that, and gave me this essay to write on purpose?”

“If he did then he’ll have even more explaining to do. I spoke with him earlier this evening, by the way, and he’s revoked your punishment.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t have to write the essay.”

“But I’ve almost finished it now.”

“Sorry.”

“What did you have to go and do that for? I’ll be the laughing stock of the class now.”

“Everyone’s worried about you, Chris.”

“Well stuff them, and stuff you too. Now piss off, Mark, and let me finish this so I can hand it in first thing tomorrow like I was going to.”

“Calm down, Chris.”

“The hell I will! Why’d you have to go and poke your big fat ugly nose in where it’s not wanted? I’ve had it up to here with you and your ridiculous college! I should’ve gone to Brisbane and studied astrophysics like Dad and Uncle Jase did.”

“Well if that’s how you feel, I can draw up the transfer documents for you tomorrow.”

“You do that. No, on second thought, why bother? I think I’ll just drop out and go live in a tent at Yowie Bay.”

“What?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’?”

“Yowie Bay?”

“What’s wrong with Yowie Bay? I’ve heard they sell these wonderful dolphin burgers there.”

Mark’s jaw dropped, and Chris glared at him before turning back to his book.

“Look at me, Chris,” Mark said calmly and softly, and Chris turned to face him again. “We used to be friends. What’s happened?”

“It’s the dreams,” Chris whispered. “The dark place, always the dark place, and the river.”

“Tell me about it.”

Chris looked at him, his lip quivering and tears beginning to form in the corner of his eyes. “Piss off, Mark.”

Mark shook his head, sighed and left the room.

* * *

“He won’t talk to me.”

“What are we going to do, Mark?” Maleena asked.

“I’d like to bring Damon here. Perhaps he can help.”

“Isn’t he working on Meridian now?”

“Yes, he’s helping Frank Halliday with his research, but I’m sure he’d come if he knew Chris was unwell.”

“Do whatever you think’s best, Mark,” Aaron said. “We just want our son back.”

“I’ll try calling him now, although I’m not sure what time it is there.”

It took Mark forever to explain to the subspace operator where Meridian was, and when he finally got through he found himself talking to Frank’s message bank. He wandered back into the living room, shaking his head.

“I left a message for him to call me at the college tomorrow.”

“Thanks Mark,” Maleena said. “You should go and get some rest now. You look like you’re about to drop.”

“You’re not wrong there. Good night; I’m sorry I wasn’t of any help.”

“Don’t go blaming yourself, Mark. Let’s hope Damon can do something.”

* * *

Lorina was standing out the front of their house as Mark came trudging back down the road, head down and deep in introspection. For a moment she thought he was going to go right on past and head off in the direction of Brisbane, but at the last moment he looked up at her, smiling grimly. She held him and kissed him on the nose as he rested his head on her shoulder.

“No luck?” she asked.

“Chris hates me. He told me to piss off and keep my big fat ugly nose out of his business.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t hate you, honey. Sometimes I think you’re just too sensitive for your own good. Anyway, your nose isn’t fat.”

Mark chuckled in spite of himself. “So it’s just big and ugly then.”

“Well, yes.”

“I thought so.” He rubbed his nose, trying to feel just how big and ugly it was, while Lorina shook her head in mock despair.

“Chris wants to drop out of the college,” he said.

“Seriously?”

“I don’t know. I think he was just angry with me, but the way he is now it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“He needs a break. He’s pushing himself too much, and I hear Tibbits has been giving him a hard time.”

“Yeah, I had a talk to Harry about that earlier this evening. I’m wondering if he really has the right temperament for teaching.”

“He’s Cornipean, and they’re all like that. Until we can attract some teachers from Bluehaven, that’s the best we can do unfortunately. Has there been any interest in the scholarships yet?”

“As a matter of fact, Sandra came to see me about that this afternoon. She sounded pretty keen.”

“That’s good. Maybe Chris should go with her.”

“She suggested that to him, but he freaked out for some reason.”

“Maybe you should go too, at least until he settles in.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me now as well?”

Lorina sighed. “Poor Mark, the whole world hates him. Come on into bed and I’ll show you what I really think of you.”

* * *

Chris put down his pen and glanced at the clock. 3:30 am. Yawning, he pulled off his shorts and climbed onto his bed.

When Mark had left, he’d forgotten to log off from the archives, and out of curiosity Chris had gone exploring to see what he could find. Mark, as College Director, had access to sites that were off-limits to the general public, and Chris soon stumbled across records from Gregory Harrington’s era that blew away everything he’d just been reading.

In the end he’d torn up his almost-finished essay and begun again, this time offering a defence of Gregory and his jihad against the Dolphins. Before he knew it he’d written twenty-five pages, so he summarised his arguments and stapled it all together in a folder.

He was sure Tibbits would have a fit when he saw what he’d written, and he’d probably be put on detention or even expelled, but he didn’t care. Greater things were at stake now.

He closed his eyes, trying to visualise Sandra lying next to him, naked and warm and soft. With those thoughts he soon drifted off to sleep, but his dreaming once more took him back eight years, to the day he’d become a murderer.

He looked up and saw someone standing in the doorway. “Uncle Jason!” he cried, and everyone turned around.

“Who the hell are you?” Farley asked.

“I am Mark’s father. Release him please, and I’ll do you no harm.”

“Huh, father indeed,” Farley sneered. “You’re even punier than he is. Be gone, before I summon the guards.”

“My son may have lost his Barefooter genes, but I have not. Release him NOW!”

Farley’s knife flew across the room, embedding itself in Jason’s chest, and a small stream of blood began flowing down his stomach and onto the floor. Chris was unfazed, though, knowing that in a moment the knife would pop out and the wound immediately heal, and he watched with satisfied amusement as it happened yet again.

Farley took a step backwards, almost falling into the portal before taking a delicate little sidestep to avoid it. At that moment Chris leapt at him, catching him off balance, and he tumbled back and fell through into the other time line. Chris, however, was also off balance and felt himself being drawn into the portal, but stretched out and just managed to get a finger tip on the edge of the glowing ring.

He glanced around, expecting to see Lorina reaching out to rescue him, but instead she was standing a couple of metres away, cradling Mark’s severed head against her chest.

“Look at me, Chris!” the head said to him, a moment before his finger slipped and he fell into the blackness.

Pain, like thousands of tiny electric shocks, wracked him, but then it passed as he found himself lying on top of Farley in an alternative reality that was just moments from extinction.

“Ah, Chris, you’ve decided to join us this time,” Farley sneered as he reached for his knife, before remembering he’d thrown it at Jason.

A chair squeaked, and both Chris and Farley looked up to see Morgoth turning to face them. He smiled, and as he did the skin around his mouth crinkled like cellophane. Chris’s stomach cramped.

“Good to see you, young Christopher,” Morgoth said. “Gregory’s been asking after you and I’m sure he’ll be pleased to know you’re here.”

Chris let out a horrifying scream, and moments later Aaron and Maleena came running down the hallway and into his room. He was still screaming as they switched on the light, and then Maleena screamed as well.

Draped across the foot of his bed, with blood still dripping from its mouth, was the carcass of a baby Dolphin.

If Wishes were Fishes

“Pass me that rock hammer, would you?” Frank Halliday asked.
“No, no, the other one, the big one.”

“S-s-sorry, sir,” Pip stuttered.

“No it’s not your fault. I should’ve been more specific.”

“I feel so useless.”

“Not at all Pip, you’ve been a great help. Look, I’ll just finish off here and then we can go and find Damon and grab some lunch, okay?”

Pip smiled, while Frank attacked the rubble in front of him with renewed ferocity. After a succession of blows that had little effect, the rocks suddenly fell away in a cloud of dust, revealing a hole about a metre across that Frank almost toppled into.

“Ah, now this looks most promising,” he said once he’d steadied himself.

“What’s down there?” Pip asked.

“I think it’s the basement. Anton, see what you make of this.”

Frank’s assistant cleared away some of the rubble before grabbing a powerful flashlight and easing himself into the hole.

“There’s a bit of debris on the stairs but the rest of the basement looks intact and secure,” he said, emerging a few minutes later. “Even the lights still work down there.”

“Excellent,” Frank said. “Shall we go exploring, Pip?”

“After you,” Pip said, following him cautiously into the hole.

The basement was larger than Pip had imagined. An office area occupied one corner, with book shelves and filing cabinets along the wall. Frank stared at a recording device mounted above the shelves, before ejecting a disc from it and placing it in his coat pocket. “We’ll get Damon to take a look at this back at the library,” he said.

Defensive control stations filled most of the remaining space, but at the opposite end of the room stood a rectangular frame, about the size of a doorway, with a dull shimmering glow coming from within it.

“Fascinating,” Frank said, walking up to it. “Do you know what this is, Pip?”

“It’s a portal into Sheol, isn’t it?” He’d heard about such things in the course of his studies, but it was the first time he’d seen one in real life.

“Exactly,” Frank said, stroking his chin and with a satisfied expression on his face, like a bunyip that’s just found a honey pot.

“So is this what you’ve been looking for?” Pip asked.

“Damon didn’t tell you?”

“No, he just said a friend of his wanted some help at an archaeological site.”

“Well I did warn him not to discuss our work, so I guess he took that to heart,” Frank chuckled. “You’re familiar with the history of the War of the Barefooters, no doubt?”

“Yes, well at least what they taught us in school.”

“I suppose since the fall of Morgoth the history courses are probably a bit more factual than they used to be, but I’d still warn you to take everything you were taught with a grain of salt.”

“Scepticism is my middle name,” Pip laughed.

“I’m pleased to hear it, and I’m glad Damon recommended you for this job.”

Pip blushed.

“I mean it, Pip. I want you to think of me, not as your employer, but as your co-conspirator in uncovering the truth.”

“Um, yes, sir.”

Frank glared at him.

“I mean yes, Frank.”

Pip grinned as Frank patted him on the shoulder. “Together we’ll solve the mystery of the Lost Barefooters, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure we will. Um, who are the Lost Barefooters?”

“The education system of this planet still leaves much to be desired,” Frank sighed. “Before Morgoth came to power, this galaxy was ruled by the Barefooters. There was a committee of twelve, each

nominally representing one of the principal worlds, although all the Barefooters came from either Meridian or Cornipus.”

“Why was that?”

“Traditionally those two worlds were at the heart of the galaxy’s military and legal systems, and those originally given the Barefooter virus came from some of their most powerful families.”

“I thought it was originally given to soldiers, who then died soon afterwards.”

“It was, but those soldiers were all members of the great warlords’ families who at the time were fighting each other tooth and nail. Yes, they all died horrible deaths as their modified DNA broke down, but it was their offspring who became the true Barefooters and went on to rule the galaxy for five thousand years.”

“I see.”

“Now as I was saying, at the top was the committee of twelve, led by a brutal man named Thornton, but their assistants and senior bureaucrats were also Barefooters, and all up there would have been hundreds of them in the administration. In addition, there were many others who weren’t interested in government and went about their extraordinarily long lives pursuing other goals.”

“So how many full-blooded Barefooters were there?”

“It’s hard to tell as many of the records are missing or incomplete, but I’d say several thousand at least, possibly as many as five thousand.”

“Gosh, I’d never imagined there’d have been that many. What happened to them? Did they all die in the war?”

“The War of the Barefooters claimed many of them, maybe as many as half, and others died a natural death or passed into Sheol when their long lives became too much for them, but there are still up to a thousand unaccounted for.”

“I suppose they’re the Lost Barefooters then.”

“Exactly. Many should still be alive, given that Morgoth had lived this long and was by no means the youngest, and so I began asking myself what became of them.”

“What did you find?”

“So far mostly dead ends. Wherever it was they went, they concealed their tracks very carefully.”

“I suppose they were hiding from Morgoth and his people.”

“That’s what I originally thought, but now I’m not so sure. It’s been almost twenty years since Morgoth died and yet none have emerged from hiding, if that’s what they’ve been doing. Strange, don’t you think?”

“Yes it is, now that you put it like that. But if they’re not hiding, where did they go?”

“That’s the question I’m hoping we’re going to answer. Come, let’s take the disc I found back to the library, and maybe it’ll tell us what that portal’s doing down here.”

Frank pulled up in front of the library and helped Pip from the car. His disability, although mild, made it awkward for him getting in and out of vehicles, and he was grateful for the assistance.

They climbed the stone steps and entered the lobby through the huge revolving door that always caused Pip’s heart-rate to rise a little. As a child he’d feared being too slow to pass through the opening and getting sliced in two by the door, but to his knowledge it had never happened to anyone in the thousands of years the library had been open, and on that basis he supposed his fear was probably irrational. Nonetheless he always breathed a sigh of relief when he made it through to the other side still in one piece. He hastened over to where Frank was speaking with an attendant.

“Damon’s waiting for us in Reading Room Seven,” Frank said, guiding him through the security screening station to the lifts. He pressed the button for the nineteenth floor and moments later they were zooming skywards.

Damon looked up, waving them over to him as they entered the room. He had accumulated a pile of books on the desk in front of him, and grinned as Frank and Pip sat alongside him.

“What’s this?” he asked as Frank handed him the disc.

“We found it in the basement, along with a portal into Sheol.”

“Wow! Do you think that’s where they went?”

“Hopefully the contents of the disc will tell us.”

Damon placed it in the player in front of him, but his smile quickly turned into a frown. “It’s encrypted,” he said. “Any idea of what the key might be?”

“Well you could try the obvious ones, like Marinda or Snooky,” Frank said.

“Snooky?” Pip asked.

“Gallad’s pet bunyip.”

Pip giggled, before covering his mouth and blushing.

After unsuccessfully trying both of those, along with a few other likely words and phrases, Damon leant back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Pip followed his gaze, wondering for a moment if the key might be written up there, before admonishing his own stupidity. Damon continued to stare, though, as if locked in a trance.

He began humming a few bars of a tune, then keyed in an eight-letter word. The disc’s index suddenly appeared on the screen.

“Well done!” Frank said. “What was it?”

“*Outcasts.*”

“Huh?” Pip said.

“It was a song Martyn wrote just before being exiled to Bluehaven,” Damon said. “Gallad loved it, often saying it was his brother’s finest work, and the words were rather prophetic of what transpired in the days leading up to the war.”

“Wasn’t Martyn the one that Morgoth executed?” Pip asked.

“Yes, both he and his Delphinidae wife were bound to the rocks below the Old Temple on Bluehaven and drowned by the incoming tide,” Frank said. “That’s what ultimately turned Gallad against his father and triggered the War of the Barefooters.”

“I remember learning about that in school,” Pip said. “It was pretty gruesome.”

“That’s right,” Damon said. “You turned green and had to be taken to the sick room.”

Pip blushed again, giving Damon a dirty look.

“So what’s on the disc?” Frank asked, peering over Damon’s shoulder at the screen.

“It looks like it might be a collection of holographic recordings,” Damon said, “dating from just before the time freeze.”

“Excellent,” Frank said. “I suggest we grab some lunch now and I’ll see if I can book the viewing room for us this afternoon.”

* * *

“Come in,” Kevin said, and his elderly aide entered the room. “What can I do for you, Paul?”

“There’s been an incident at the college on Earth. A baby Dolphin has been murdered.”

“What?”

“Reports suggest your nephew was involved.”

“Chris? But how? What happened?”

The aide glanced down at his notes. “Maleena Smith, Christopher’s mother, said she heard him screaming and rushed into his room, only to find a dead Dolphin draped across the end of his bed. Christopher was taken to hospital and is currently under heavy sedation, while the local police are investigating.”

“I can’t believe Chris could do anything like that. Has Lorina said anything?”

“I’ve left messages for Lorina or Mark to contact us, but they haven’t responded as yet. I believe they’re both at the hospital with Christopher.”

“We need to send someone there as quickly as possible. Ask Brian Lachlan to come and see me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Paul Hoskins turned and left the room. *‘So far so good,’* he thought to himself as he walked briskly back to his quarters.

“You wanted to see me?” Brian asked.

“Yes,” Kevin said. “Have you heard the news from Earth?”

“A terrible tragedy. Have they found out who killed the Dolphin yet?”

“Not yet, although my nephew Christopher is apparently the prime suspect. I’d like someone from the Temple to go there and oversee the investigations.”

“I’ll go myself if you like. I don’t have any pressing work here at the moment.”

“Excellent, and take Owen with you as well; it’ll be good experience for him. Leave no stone unturned, Brian, I want to get to the bottom of this. If Chris is guilty then so be it, but if he’s not then we have a much more serious problem on our hands.”

“An attack on the Temple?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Leave it to me.”

“Thanks, Brian. Call me as soon as you arrive.”

* * *

“Ah, Mr Bewildered, come on in,” the pathologist said.

“Huh?”

“You are Mark Bewildered, aren’t you?”

“Um, I’m Mark Collins actually. Mark the Bewildered was a nickname I had as a kid.”

“Oh, I see. Sorry. I thought Bewildered was a strange surname, but these days, who can tell?”

“Indeed. You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, come on through,” he said, leading him down a narrow corridor and into a cold sterile laboratory. “I’d like you to meet Detective Inspector Morris.”

“Thank you for coming, Mr Collins,” the inspector said.

“I, um, I don’t understand,” Mark said. “What’s happened?”

“It’s normal procedure for the police to become involved in a suspicious death.”

“Whose death?”

“The Dolphin’s, of course.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Now that they’re recognised as a sentient species, we’re required to investigate if any die in unnatural circumstances.”

“So what can I do to help you?”

“I understand you’re the Director of the Delphinidae College here, and have close contact with the Temple on Bluehaven.”

“That’s correct, yes.”

“Tell me, how long would it take someone to travel to Bluehaven and back?”

“By ship it’s about thirty-six hours each way, so three days for a return trip.”

“What about through Sheol?”

“With a Dolphin escort, about twelve hours all up, I believe, although travel through that realm is now officially banned.”

“Why’s that?”

“Three years ago my father and Damon Enderling were warned to stay out, and the warning has been taken seriously.”

“I see. Is there any other mode of transport possible then?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“In that case we have a mystery.”

“How’s that?”

“The last food eaten by the baby Dolphin was a fish species found only on Bluehaven, and it was consumed three hours before its death. That death took place only a matter of minutes before it was found draped across the bed of your student Christopher Smith.”

“But that’s impossible. There must be some mistake.”

“There’s no mistake, I assure you,” the pathologist piped in.

“A mineral analysis of the salt water found in the Dolphin’s digestive tract also matches the seas of Bluehaven,” the inspector added.

“I suppose that means Chris couldn’t have been responsible,” Mark said.

“We’re not ruling out anything at this stage.”

“But, but he couldn’t have.”

“Unless you can offer a plausible alternative, we’re not ruling anything out.”

“I expect the Temple will be conducting its own enquiry,” Mark said.

“I understand that’s the case, and Brian Lachlan himself will be heading it.”

“You know more about it than I do, then.”

The inspector gave him a wry smile.

* * *

In his dreaming Chris once again found himself in the dark place, the realm Mark and Damon had called Sheol. In his waking life it had been a place of fear and dread, but in his dreams it had become a refuge from the far greater horrors the world had thrust upon him. Here he was safe, at least for a little while.

He moved forward and down, knowing through some sixth sense that the walls of the passageway he was following were drawing closer. He was sure if he reached out he could touch them, but he dared not. Behind those walls lurked unspeakable monsters.

Down he went, and gradually, almost imperceptibly, the darkness receded as the air around him began to glow, shrouding him like a heavy fog under dawn's first light. Underfoot the nothingness of Sheol's floor gave way to the cool soft dampness of dew-laden grass. A moment later the veil lifted, leaving him standing on a lush green slope beneath a clear blue sky. Before him was a river, spanned by a silver bridge, and beyond that a city of white towers gleamed under the warm sunshine. From across the water he could hear many voices shouting, calling him, and he ran down the hill towards them.

He reached the bridge, only to find it barricaded with steel mesh and a sign saying, 'River Styx Crossing Closed for Repair – Ring Bell to Summon Ferryman'. Below the sign hung a large bronze bell and for a moment he was tempted to just reach out and ring it, but something deep within told him that wasn't such a good idea.

Instead he scrambled down the embankment and stood at the water's edge, while on the opposite bank someone was waving and calling to him. The stream was broad, but the flow looked gentle and he was sure he'd have no trouble swimming across. He stepped forward and propelled himself from the bank, taking slow easy strokes towards the far shore.

The flow became stronger and more turbulent as he neared the middle of the stream, and he began to falter. The water swirled around him and a moment later he found himself trapped in a whirlpool. He struggled frantically, kicking and flailing as he tried to escape its pull, but his strength soon waned and he was dragged under.

Beneath him, and at the centre of the whirlpool that was dragging him down, was what appeared to be a giant underwater flower, its

stamen reaching up and trying to grab hold of his feet. He kicked and struggled against the current that was pulling him towards it, but it was too strong.

A heavy weight struck him in the chest, pushing him upwards. A moment later his head broke the surface and he spluttered as he tried to draw breath. He was spinning in the centre of the whirlpool and alongside him, floating belly-up, was the body of a baby Dolphin, its cold and lifeless eyes glaring at him accusingly.

“No!” he screamed as the swirling water pulled him down again. “No! No! No!”

The doctor injected another dose of sedative into Chris’s arm and within moments he’d settled again. He recorded the dosage and time on the chart before turning back to Aaron and Maleena.

“He’s in a deep state of shock. To be honest I’ve never seen anything quite like it, especially in someone so young.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Aaron asked.

“It’s hard to say. The scans show no lesions or physical brain damage, so I’d say whatever’s going on in there is purely psychological. Until we can bring him back to consciousness without setting him off again, there’s not a great deal we can do.”

“How long can you keep him sedated?”

“Indefinitely, at least from a physical standpoint, as these modern drugs have no side effects or addiction problems. Psychologically, though, it may help or hinder his recovery, we simply don’t know.”

They all looked around as Mark entered the ward.

“How is he?”

Aaron shook his head. “They’ve had to sedate him again.”

Mark sighed. “The police say the Dolphin came from the seas on Bluehaven, and had been there only a few hours before it turned up in Chris’s room.”

“But that’s impossible, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I told them.”

“So do they still think Chris was responsible?”

“*We’re not ruling out anything at this stage,*” Mark said in a passingly good imitation of the inspector.

“Have you been able to speak to Damon yet?” Maleena asked.

“No, he still hasn’t returned my call. I don’t know what else I can do.”

“What about your father? Do you think he could help?”

“He’s in Sydney on business today but he said he’d call in here tomorrow night, although there’s probably not much he can do while Chris is still sedated.”

“Anyway,” Aaron said, “the doctor said it’s all psychological, and from what I understand of Jase’s gift, it works by repairing damaged tissue but in Chris’s case there isn’t any.”

“I guess Damon’s our only hope then,” Mark said. “I wish I knew how to contact him.”

“If wishes were fishes then dolphins would fly,” Maleena said.

“Huh?”

“Something we used to say on Meridian.”

“Oh, I see,” Mark said, scratching his head.

* * *

“If wishes were fishes then dolphins would fly,” the tall Elvish woman said.

“True,” Gallad said, nodding, “but I still wish my father would listen to reason.”

“Say, isn’t that Maleena?” Damon asked.

“Yes, I believe it is,” Frank said.

They were seated in the library’s holographic viewing room, watching the first of the recordings on the disc Frank had found. Its date placed it just days before Morgoth’s attack on Meridian that had begun the final episode in the War of the Barefooters.

“Wow, I’m sure Chris would be fascinated to see this,” Damon said. “I wish he was here now.”

“If wishes were fishes,” Pip said, and Damon poked him in the ribs.

“Shush,” Frank said. “I think their meeting’s about to start.”

“Perhaps I could speak with him,” Damien said.

“No, you’re much too valuable to risk sending you to Bluehaven,” Gallad said. “Anyway, I doubt even you could convince him to change his mind now.”

The door opened as Marinda strode into the room, joining Gallad at the front of the hall. A hush fell over the gathered Barefooters.

“Morgoth’s just declared martial law,” she said, “and we’re now officially outlaws on this world too.”

Gallad thumped the table with his fist, before grimacing in pain.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, rubbing his injured hand. “You’ve done all you can.”

“Are any more coming?” he asked.

“No, we’re the last as far as I know.”

“What of those on Cornipus?”

“They’ve gone ahead with their plan.”

Gallad almost thumped the desk again, but pulled his hand up short. “Couldn’t they see what’s happening here?”

“They reckoned they could see it all too clearly, which is why they’ve left. Ben and Selene were the only dissenting voices.”

“Where are they now?”

“They returned with me and are just freshening up. They’ll be joining us shortly.”

At that moment the door swung open again as the two Cornipean Barefooters entered. They moved towards the vacant rows normally occupied by that world’s representatives on the assembly, but Gallad stopped them. “Come forward and tell us what’s happened on Cornipus.”

The room filled with murmuring as they made their way to the front and sat beside Gallad, Marinda, Maleena and Damien.

Selene cleared her throat, quietening everyone. “It’s been five thousand years since our people took control of the galaxy and brought an end to the petty struggles of the warlords, but in all that time what have we achieved? Thornton and his cronies grew fat on the spoils of office while peasants starved on Sontar, and so we aided Morgoth when he rose against them, but to what end? In place of a corrupt Council we now have a ruthless dictator, hell-bent on forcing his will on everyone in the galaxy. Our colleagues on Cornipus have

been asking themselves why this has happened, and they believe they've found the answer.

"We each carry the fractal genes the warlords planted into our parents and grandparents, those genes that make us Barefooters, and our analysts at the Microbiology Institute believe that linked to those is a genetic predisposition to psychopathic behaviour. If you or I or any of the other Barefooters in this room had been in a position to seize power instead of Morgoth, we would have inevitably become just as ruthless a dictator as he is, or so they say."

"But that's ridiculous!" a young fifth-generation Barefooter said from the back of the hall. "I'm no more a psychopath than the next man. I even help little old ladies across the street!"

"Look at Gallad!" another said. "He's no psychopath."

"And nor was Martyn!"

The room hushed at the mention of Gallad's late brother.

"Even Martyn would have become like our father, given the chance," Gallad said softly. "Oh, his methods would have been different. He'd have set up grand colleges of music and the arts and made sure every child in the galaxy received a liberal education, but behind all that would have been the same driving force that's now pushing this galaxy to the brink of war. Don't forget we were all made in the image of the warlords."

"Gallad's right," Ben said. "The genetic evidence is irrefutable. The only question is what do we do with that knowledge?"

"Our colleagues on Cornipus argued long and hard," Selene said, "and many ideas were championed and then dismissed, but in the end when it all boiled down they chose exile."

"So why did you and Ben not join them?" someone asked.

"When the final moment came to pass through the portal," Ben said, "we chickened out."

Selene gave him a stern look. "Leaving this galaxy with Morgoth still in power seemed like an abrogation of responsibility to us."

"Yeah, that's what I meant," Ben said, blushing.

"Where did the Cornipeans go?" a first-generation Barefooter named Herbert Douglass asked from the back of the hall.

"Their ultimate destination was a closely guarded secret," Selene said. "All I know is it was accessed through a portal into Sheol. We

were all given instructions of the path to take through that realm but as to where it led, I really have no idea.”

“If you could give me the instructions I should be able to figure it out from the explorations of Sheol I did some time ago,” Damien said.

“Certainly,” Selene said. “I’ll give them to you after the meeting.”

“Six years ago Morgoth launched his offensive against the Barefooters residing on Bluehaven,” Herbert said, “and I, along with thousands of refugees, fled here. Since then his military forces have taken over governance of Hazler, Shimmel, Amber, Sontar and now Cornipus, and our refugee camps have grown to bursting point. His forces have specifically targeted the Barefooters on each world, killing many of us, and now those remaining are all gathered here. Thus far an attack on Meridian has been unthinkable, but now I’m not so sure. Were that to happen, billions of lives could be lost, and I for one would not want that much blood on my hands. But if we were to all follow the Cornipeans into exile, Morgoth would no longer have an opponent and this war may be averted.”

“Morgoth would be mad to try to attack Meridian!”

“Morgoth is mad!”

“Let him come! We have more than enough firepower here to repel anything he could throw against us.”

“What Herbert says may well be true,” Gallad said, “and if we were to go into exile, this world might be spared from the fighting. However it would also hand my father absolute rule over the galaxy, and I would not do that unless I had no other choice.”

“Hear! Hear!”

“Perhaps already we have no other choice,” Herbert said.

“Nonsense! If Morgoth were to attack, and we were ready for him, it would be an ideal opportunity to defeat him. He’d be at his most vulnerable while he’s launching his offensive!”

“And then what would happen?” Herbert asked. “We would probably form a committee, not unlike the old Council of Barefooters, but eventually one of us would rise above the others and seize power. It might take a hundred, a thousand, even ten thousand years, but sooner or later we’d have another Morgoth to deal with and we’d be right back here having this same discussion all over again.”

“Surely not!”

“We could pass laws, change the constitution.”

“Haven’t any of you been listening to what Selene has been telling us?” Herbert yelled. “We’re all programmed in our genes to become another Morgoth should the opportunity arise. While ever there are Barefooters in this galaxy, sooner or later one of them will try to become Supreme Ruler. It’s as inevitable as night following day.”

“Now wait just a minute!”

“I’ve never heard such nonsense!”

“Settle down!” Gallad shouted, thumping his fist on the desk and grimacing once more in pain.

“This is a matter for us each to decide,” Marinda said. “I suggest we adjourn for now to consider what our options might be, and reconvene tomorrow morning.”

“Were those Cornipeans the Lost Barefooters?” Pip asked.

“They were amongst them, certainly,” Frank said, “but there were many from Meridian who also disappeared. I think perhaps we’ll learn more from the next recording.”

At that moment the phone started ringing, causing Pip to jump a little. Frank answered it, speaking for a few moments before hanging up.

“I’m afraid something urgent has turned up that I must attend to this afternoon, but perhaps we could return here this evening if that’s all right with you both.”

“I should check in with the Temple on Bluehaven at some point, but otherwise I have nothing planned,” Damon said.

“I’ll be here too,” Pip said. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Excellent,” Frank said. “I’ll meet you in the lobby at, shall we say, seven-thirty?”

“That’s fine with me,” Damon said, with Pip nodding enthusiastically.

“Does any of this seem familiar to you?” Pip asked Damon as they strolled slowly down the road. “I mean, from your other life as Damien?”

“What I get from Damien aren’t really specific memories, more just feelings about things and a sense of what it was like for him. But occasionally there’s a flash of *déjà vu*, and I was getting quite a few of those while we were watching that recording.”

“Like when you figured out the key to decrypt the disc?”

“Yeah.”

“So do you know if Damien worked out where the Cornipeans went?”

“I don’t think he did, but I’m not sure; it’s just a feeling I have that the instructions made no sense to him.”

“I see,” Pip said, sounding crestfallen. “Perhaps we’ll learn more tonight.”

“I’m sure we will. How are your legs standing up to all this activity?”

“Not too bad, although I expect I’ll be pretty stiff when I get into bed tonight.”

“Would you like me to call a taxi?”

“No, I’ll keep walking, as long as we don’t have to rush.”

He turned as Damon patted him on the shoulder, looking him in the eyes and smiling.

“I’m glad you’re here, Pip.”

“So am I.”

* * *

Paul Hoskins settled in front of his ultranet terminal, having poured himself a drink, and smiled as he read the latest report on the events unfolding on Earth. He was surprised they hadn’t yet figured out the trick used to drop the dead dolphin onto Chris’s bed, but it seemed the investigators on Earth were no more intelligent than those on Bluehaven or Meridian. He thought he might drop a hint to Owen Lachlan, just to make things a bit more interesting.

The War of the Barefooters

“Ah, there you are,” Frank said as Damon and Pip entered the library. “Everything’s in readiness in the viewing room. Oh, and there was a call for you on my message bank, Damon. Mark Collins from Earth would like to speak with you.”

“Did he say what it was about?”

“No, but it didn’t sound particularly urgent.”

“I’ll call him when I get back to the hotel then.”

“I’m sure that’ll be fine.”

Frank waved to the guard before escorting them into the viewing room.

“Right, so let’s see, the next recording we have is from the following morning at the assembly of Barefooters.” He dimmed the lights before pressing the *Play* button on the holographic projector.

*“Did you have any luck interpreting those instructions, Damien?”
Gallad asked.*

“Surprisingly no. I went back through all my notes and maps of that realm, but it just doesn’t seem to fit. Perhaps Sheol has changed since I did my explorations.”

“Is that possible?”

“Anything’s possible I suppose. We still know very little about that realm, and the laws of physics don’t seem to have much relevance to what goes on in there.”

“So you have no idea where the Cornipeans may have gone?”

“None whatsoever, only that it probably wasn’t any of the known habitable worlds.”

“So if we were to follow them into exile, we’d be doing so blindly.”

“Yes, and I think that may have been their intention.”

“In that case,” Gallad said, “I move that we construct a portal in accordance with the instructions Selene and Ben have provided, but that it only be used as a last resort.”

“What do you mean by that?” Herbert Douglass asked.

“We only use it if we’re facing certain defeat and have no other choice.”

“You mean to fight your father then.”

“If he attacks this world, then yes, I do.”

Gallad looked around the room, waiting for the dissenting voices, but none were forthcoming. He glanced lastly at Herbert, who glared at him and fidgeted before lowering his gaze.

“Very well then, I’ll stand by you.”

Maleena’s phone rang, breaking the silence that followed, and she quickly answered it, jotting down notes as she spoke.

“That was the High Priestess,” she said after hanging up. “Morgoth is assembling his forces in orbit around Bluehaven. All battle-worthy ships from Nimber and Pulper have been sent there, and the garrisons from Cornipus have been recalled.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Marinda said. “There’s nothing left on Bluehaven for him to attack except the Delphinidae Temple itself, and he could surely reduce that to rubble with a pack of boy scouts if he wanted to.”

“He’s using Bluehaven as a staging post for an attack here,” Gallad said. “It’s the only explanation. We must prepare for the worst.”

“The orbital defences are in readiness and currently on yellow alert,” a Meridian Barefooter said. “I’ll raise them to red.”

“No, don’t,” Gallad said. “We don’t want to let Morgoth know we’re expecting him. Pass the word around that an attack may be imminent, but keep it quiet.”

“Will do.”

“Val, how are the civil defences around the capital cities placed?” he asked another Meridian Barefooter.

“All the hardware is in place and ready for action. We can have the regular troops on the ground and running within four hours, and the volunteers soon after that.”

“Good. Again keep it quiet, but make sure everyone is ready to move.”

Gallad turned to Damien. “I want you to go to the refugee processing centre in Azarath and take charge of the hospitals. The casualties will be coming in large numbers I fear, if and when the fighting starts, and Azarath has the best facilities on the planet for handling them.”

“We’ll need secure transport routes from the regional hospitals if we’re going to make it work,” Damien said.

“I can handle that,” Val said.

“Good,” Gallad said. “Maleena, I’d like you to take a team up to our orbiting spaceport and have the cruisers ready to roll. We may need to do some fast flying if things turn ugly.”

“We have a full complement of ships in the docking bay, including the Intrepid which has just returned from its mission to the Triclops Galaxy and is currently being serviced.”

“When will it be ready to go out again?”

“A couple of days at most.”

“And it can carry how many passengers and crew?”

“About five hundred, or six hundred at a pinch.”

“Excellent. Have it prepared for possible evacuation use if we need to leave here in a hurry.”

“I thought the portal was to be our last line of escape,” Herbert said.

“It is, but I don’t think we should put all our eggs in one basket. I’d like to leave as many options open as I can, and fleeing this galaxy in the Intrepid is one I’d like have up my sleeve if things turn bad.”

“You know your father better than any of us,” Marinda said. “How far do you think he’d go?”

“All the way,” Gallad said. “He won’t rest now until he’s wiped us out, and if that means destroying Meridian, well I don’t think he’d balk at that.”

“This is it then.”

“Yes, I think so. I’d like everyone who’s not otherwise assigned to remain here for now, at least until Morgoth makes his move.”

“There’s something else too, that I think we should keep in mind,” Maleena said.

“What’s that?” Gallad asked.

“Five hundred years ago, Meridian was threatened by a highly infectious disease. The scientists of the day constructed a mechanism that could suspend the flow of time on the planet, in order to buy themselves breathing space until researchers on Cornipus could develop a vaccine and produce it in sufficient quantities to prevent a pandemic. As it turned out, the virus was contained and quickly eradicated, so the mechanism was never used, but I believe it’s still functional and can be activated from the spaceport.”

“I don’t really see how that could help us in our current situation, but thanks for mentioning it and I’ll certainly keep it in mind. Are there any further questions?”

None were forthcoming, so Gallad called the meeting to a close.

Frank laughed as he turned the room lighting back on.

“What’s so funny?” Pip asked.

“Historians have always claimed that the time freeze mechanism was invented by Gallad’s people in the heat of battle, and they’ve even had university physics colleges named after them, but now we know the truth. Hah! Disease containment, five hundred years before the war. What a hoot!”

“There’ll be much burning of textbooks and gnashing of teeth,” Damon said.

“Undoubtedly. Right, anyone for refreshments?”

“A hot chocolate for me,” Damon said.

“Me too!” Pip said.

Frank picked up the phone at the back of the room. “Three hot chocolates please, Simon, with plenty of cream.”

Pip was surprised when the next recording began with a television news report. He recognised the reporter as a slightly younger version of the news channel’s current anchor man, and it struck him yet again that the War of the Barefooters, while ancient history for the rest of the universe, happened less than twenty years ago for the people of Meridian.

“There are more reports coming in of explosions right across the planet. So far casualties appear to be minimal and it’s believed they may be intended as a warning, but a warning to whom and by whom remains a matter of conjecture. Some experts are linking it to the heightened military presence around Bluehaven, however the official line from the palace remains that this is merely part of a training exercise.

“With me this morning is defence analyst Tom Bertwhistle. Tom, what’s your take on all this?”

“I have no doubt it’s all about the growing tensions between Morgoth and the Barefooters loyal to his son Gallad. There are unconfirmed reports that the Barefooters on Cornipus have disappeared, while the remainder have gathered at a secret base somewhere here on Meridian. A showdown of some sort seems inevitable, but what form that will take remains to be seen. I suspect these explosions may be the curtain-raiser to the main event.”

“Sobering words, Tom. Do you hold out much hope of a truce between Morgoth and Gallad?”

“I think it’s unlikely.”

“There’s a call for you from your father,” Marinda said as the image of the newsreader was replaced by one of Gallad, sitting alone in the Barefooters’ meeting room.

“I’ll take it here,” he said, pressing a button on the desk in front of him. An image of Morgoth appeared on the screen behind him and he turned to face it. “Father, are these explosions of your doing?”

“No, they’re a gift from the Easter Bunyip.”

“Why, Dad?”

“Just a little demonstration of what I can do if you don’t cooperate. I hear your friends on Cornipus have already taken my advice.”

“Your advice?”

“Of course, and if you and your rabble are unwilling to support me, I suggest you follow them.”

“I don’t understand, Dad. What’s this all about?”

“Ask your friend Damien why the Dolphins really gave him and Lorna their gifts. That’s if he’ll even admit it. It’s taken me long enough to discover the truth.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Dolphins aren’t the benevolent beings the Delphinidae would have you believe.”

“What?”

“They have their own agenda, just like everyone else in the universe. Damien and Lorna were to have been a part of that, but they, um, how should I put it, failed to live up to expectations. They’re now trying a different tack, and it’s up to us to stop them.”

“You’re mad!”

“No, I can assure you I’m quite sane. Come to me, son. Join me and together we can put things right.”

“I think this conversation is futile.”

“On that we agree.”

Gallad leant back and sighed as Morgoth’s image disappeared, while Marinda sat beside him, taking hold of his hand. “You’ve done your best,” she whispered.

“Have I?”

He glanced back across at the desk, before reaching over and pressing a button.

The recording ended.

“What was all that about Damien and Lorna’s gifts?” Pip asked, but Frank remained silent, his eyes closed and a satisfied grin on his face. “Frank?”

“Oh, I’m sorry Pip. That remark by Morgoth has confirmed a lot of my suspicions.”

“About what?”

“Patience, lad. I’d rather you thought it through for yourself, and then we can see if you reach the same conclusions as I have.”

Pip glanced at Damon, seeking support, but he remained silent also. He sighed.

The Barefooters’ meeting room had been transformed into a military command post, filled with murmuring voices, ringing

telephones and the clicking of computer keyboards. Gallad stood, a bundle of scribbled notes in his hand, and the room hushed.

“Morgoth has moved the entire imperial fleet into orbit around Meridian,” he said, “and an attack appears imminent. In addition he’s activated sleeper cells on the ground that, as I’m sure you’ve all heard from the news reports, are carrying out sabotage on a massive scale. The city of Halbatuca is burning and there are reports of massive explosions in Lankon, Horwith and Emerald. All air and sea transport has been suspended, and many of our cities are reporting traffic bedlam as people try to escape the carnage.”

“Have you had any contact with Morgoth?” someone asked.

“Yes, my father said he’d call off the attacks if we either pledge fealty to him or follow the Cornipeans into exile.”

“No way!”

“Just who does he think he is?”

“I move we stand and fight!”

“Hear, hear!”

“Let him come, and we’ll send him scurrying off with his tail between his legs!”

“We’ll not be bullied by him or anyone else!”

“Hear, hear!”

“I think we have a consensus then,” Gallad said. “Are there any dissenting voices?”

Silence filled the chamber.

“So be it. Go now, and defend Meridian in whatever way you can. I fear this war will be long and bloody.”

“Gallad was half-right,” Frank said. “The war was the bloodiest by far in the history of the galaxy, but it was mercifully short. Within two weeks of that last gathering of the Barefooters, it was all over.”

“Gosh,” Pip said.

The next recording opened with the familiar news anchor man.

“It’s less than twenty-four hours since the neutron bombs exploded over Lankon and Horwith, destroying all life in and around those cities, and an uneasy calm has settled over Meridian. Earlier,

forces led by Gallad's Barefooters shot down a fighter attempting to detonate a similar device over Emerald, and launched an offensive against the military blockade surrounding the planet, taking out an estimated twenty percent of the Imperial forces before His Highness Morgoth the Enlightened called for parley."

Morgoth's image appeared on the screen. "Citizens of Meridian, I weep for you," he said. "The use of nuclear weapons against your cities was done without my authority, and I can assure you I won't rest until I bring those responsible to account. To those who have lost loved ones in the cities of Lankon and Horwith, I extend my heartfelt sympathies.

"When I sent my forces to Meridian, it was with the express purpose of preventing such violence, and it saddens me greatly that this has not been realised. I call upon my son Gallad to put aside our differences and join me in aiding the people of Meridian. Call me, son, and let's bring an end to this needless bloodshed."

"So far there's been no response from Gallad," the newsreader said. "We cross now to Mike Hardy at the medical evacuation centre on the outskirts of Lankon. What's the situation there, Mike?"

"In a word, chaotic. Survivors continue to stream into the camp, many suffering severe radiation burns. Meanwhile authorities here have the massive task of clearing the tens of millions of dead from the city before disease sets in. With me is Doctor Cassidy who is coordinating the rescue effort. Doctor, what can you tell us about the injuries you're seeing?"

"Most of the survivors are suffering severe internal tissue damage caused by the neutron burst, and I fear they'll have little chance of survival even if we can get them to our medical facilities in Azarath. We have fifty Barefooters working here now, using their healing skills with some degree of success, but by and large the prognosis is grim. Those who do make it through these first critical weeks will require ongoing treatment for many years, perhaps for the rest of their lives."

"How many survivors have you processed?"

"Roughly two hundred thousand have been found or come forward of their own accord, and half have died already. Of the remainder, about a quarter has been transported to Azarath while the rest are receiving treatment here."

“I’m afraid we’ll have to leave it there, as I understand we have breaking news from the capital.”

“That’s right,” the anchor man said. “We cross now to Government House where the Governor is about to issue a statement.”

A fat man dressed in heavy robes appeared in front of them, wearing a frown on his face that would curdle a vat of milk.

“Who’s that?” Pip asked.

“He was Evan Morris, the Governor of Meridian at the time,” Frank said. “He died in the Farley massacre.”

Pip’s mind turned inward as he was instantly carried back to that infamous day eight years earlier. He’d been just nine years old at the time, and they’d been in the middle of a music lesson when the headmistress had walked into the classroom.

“I’m afraid there’s been some trouble in the capital and the school’s going to have to close for the day,” she said. “Your parents will be coming shortly to take you home.”

Pip stood, joining Damon and the rest of the class as they made their way out into the playground. He glanced across as the headmistress whispered something to their teacher, but the look on the teacher’s face made his stomach cramp.

“Something terrible’s happened,” he said to Damon, but Damon himself had turned white.

“They’re all dead,” he whispered in a trance, before seeming to snap out of it.

“Who’s dead?” Pip asked, but Damon just gave him a puzzled look.

“Could everyone gather round, please,” their teacher said, putting an end to their conversation. “Some bad men have taken over the government building in the capital, and it looks like some of the council may have been killed. We don’t believe you’re in any danger here, but as a precaution we’ve decided it’s best to close the school until everything calms down again. While we’re waiting for your parents to arrive, let’s all sing that song we’ve been practising.”

She pressed a button on the machine she was holding, filling the playground with the sound of musical instruments.

*“In Elfstar’s light we run with joy,
Across the field, each girl and boy.
O’er hill and dale we run and run,
until at last the night is done.
In dawn’s soft glow we rest our heads,
and wake up in our cosy beds.”*

Pip found himself singing those words out loud. Damon glanced at him before joining in as well.

*“Oh Elfstar with your silver beams,
take us nightly in our dreams.
To Bluehaven, our long lost home,
where ancient Dolphins vainly roam.
In search of what they cannot find,
with many souls but just one mind.”*

Anxious parents now streamed into the school grounds, and one by one Pip’s classmates disappeared until only he and Damon remained. The teacher stopped the music and pulled out her phone. Pip watched nervously as she made several calls.

“Damon,” she finally said, “your father’s on his way and should be here in a few minutes.” Damon nodded. “Pip, I’m afraid I haven’t been able to reach either of your parents. Damon’s father said you can go with him if you want, or you can stay here until we can contact your folks.”

“I’ll go with Damon,” he said, although his throat felt suddenly dry and hardly any sound came out.

“Okay then. Mr Enderling should be here very soon now. Do you want to do any more singing?”

Pip looked at Damon, but he was staring vacantly into the distance again. “No, I don’t think so,” he said, placing his arm anxiously around his friend’s shoulder. Damon turned and looked into his eyes.

“Your dad will be here soon,” Pip whispered, and Damon nodded even though he still looked dazed and confused. And so they waited,

Pip's arm locked tightly around his friend, until Mr Enderling arrived and bundled them into his car.

The school had been closed for three days, Pip remembered now, and he'd spent much of that time at Damon's place while both his parents worked. Damon's mother had tried to keep them away from the television, but they'd caught enough snippets to figure out what had happened. A band of soldiers, led by an evil man named Farley, had raided the government building and killed all the councillors, before fleeing to Bluehaven and taking over the old imperial palace there. The Delphinidae, led by Brian Lachlan, had tried to capture them, but they'd been ambushed and more lives had been lost.

For three weeks the people of Meridian had waited nervously for the next development in the war, for everyone had decided that it was indeed another war, but nothing happened. He and Damon returned to school, but the lessons were subdued as staff and students alike had their minds elsewhere. Then Mark Collins, known to them as *Mark the Bewildered, Slayer of Morgoth*, had returned and saved them all. Farley had fallen into blackness after being pushed into his own portal by a young boy named Christopher, and then the old palace had collapsed, burying all the soldiers. Mark and Chris had emerged unscathed and were given a civic reception at the Delphinidae Temple before returning home, while Pip and Damon had watched every moment on television, swept up in the tide of great joy and relief that had followed the weeks of darkness. It was a time Pip would never, ever, forget.

"Are you okay, Pip?" Frank asked, and it was then Pip realised he had tears running down his cheeks.

"Yes, just memories of a traumatic time when we were kids," he said, and Damon patted him on the shoulder. He turned to face his friend, a silent understanding passing between them. "It's okay, you can start the recording again."

Frank pressed the *Play* button.

"Citizens of Meridian," the Governor said, "an atrocity, the likes of which have never before been seen in the history of this galaxy, has been committed against our people by the monster who calls himself

Enlightened. If this is what it means to be enlightened, give us darkness, I pray. Over a hundred million people are now feared dead in our cities of Lankon and Horwith, their lives snuffed out by the forces meant to protect us, and all our beloved leader can say is, 'it wasn't my fault'. Mr Enlightened One, the buck stops with you!

"Henceforth, by official decree of the governing council of Meridian, this world is no longer a part of the Galactic Empire, and Morgoth and his forces will now be known only as The Enemy. All trade with the worlds of the Empire is hereby suspended and all aliens currently on this world have twenty-four hours in which to leave or be interned for the duration of hostilities.

"Gallad has assured me that his Barefooters will defend this planet to whatever end, and fully supports our secession from his father's empire. I call upon all able-bodied men and women to register with the Barefooters stationed in each of our major cities and take up arms in defence of our world."

"So began the final battle of the war," Frank said. "Morgoth was outraged by the Governor's speech and unleashed a rain of destruction from the skies of Meridian, but the Barefooters and their forces fought back and much of Morgoth's fleet was destroyed. Gallad should have won the war, but something happened, something that led instead to his utter defeat. Perhaps we're about to learn what that was."

He started the last of the recordings on the disc.

"The defence minister wishes to meet with you," Marinda said as she put down the phone.

"I don't have time to go to the capital," Gallad said. "Bring him here."

"Very well."

Gallad turned to another of the Barefooters. "Are there any enemy vessels between here and the capital?"

"No, sir, everything's quiet at the moment."

Marinda nodded before leaving the room.

"Keep a close watch on her shuttle and give her plenty of warning of any enemy activity," Gallad said.

“Yes, sir.”

Gallad called the medical centre in Azarath. “Stuart, is Damien there?”

“One moment, sir.”

“Gallad?”

“Damien, how’s everything going there?”

“We’re extremely busy, but still coping. There’s a steady stream coming in from Lankon and Horwith, plus there are now casualties from the latest assaults, but fortunately those are still few in number.”

“Make sure everyone you can spare gets some rest, yourself included, as there’s a lot more fighting to come I fear.”

“I understand. Sometimes I think my gift from the Dolphins was really a curse.”

Gallad paused in silence.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, sorry Damien. Keep me informed if there’s any change in your situation. We can send additional people if it becomes overwhelming.”

“Thanks Gallad, and let’s pray this war ends soon.”

“Yes indeed. Take care, my friend.”

“You too.”

Damon gasped and Frank stopped the recording. “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, it’s just one of my *déjà vu* attacks. That was the last time Damien ever spoke to Gallad.”

“Yes, I believe you’re right. Should I continue or do you want to take a break?”

“No, keep going.”

“Sir, Marinda has just reported that she’s picked up the defence minister and is on her way back.”

“Excellent. Any sign of the enemy?”

“No, it’s all clear.”

“Have a couple of escorts on standby in case there’s trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir,” another Barefooter said, “there’s a report coming in of an attack on the outskirts of Azarath. Our fighters have scrambled and the enemy’s been repelled, but there are quite a few casualties.”

“Damn! I guess Damien and his people won’t be getting much rest after all. Tell Lankon and Horwith to hold off any more transfers to Azarath for the moment.”

“Yes, sir, but they won’t be too pleased.”

“We’re fighting a war, Simpkins. Nobody should expect to be pleased.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Sir, I’m not sure what to make of this, but there’s twelve enemy craft descending simultaneously to points equidistant around the equator.”

“Put it on my screen,” Gallad said. “Are there any towns or military bases in their target areas?”

“No, sir. Five of them are jungle and the other seven are over water.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Get tactical to take a look and see what they can make of it.”

“Yes, sir. Oh, Marinda’s shuttle has just returned.”

“Good. Is there anyone following her?”

“No, sir, the sky’s clear from horizon to horizon.”

“For some reason, that makes me nervous.”

The door opened as Marinda strode into the room, closely followed by the defence minister. The moment he stepped through the security scanner, though, an alarm sounded.

“Excuse me, sir,” the guard at the door said, picking up his scanning wand. “Would you mind emptying your pockets? We can’t be too careful, you know.”

The minister frowned, but emptied out his pockets for the guard. He waved the wand over him, but it beeped as it crossed his chest.

“Do you have anything in your coat pocket, sir?”

“Only this.” The minister pulled out a small communications device, pressing a button on it before turning and running for the door.

“Stop him!” Gallad yelled, but by then the guard had already tackled him and cuffed his hands behind his back.

Gallad walked to the back of the room and picked up the dropped communicator. "What's this?"

"You'll know in a few minutes," the minister said.

"Sir," Simpkins said, "twenty fighters have dropped out of orbit and are heading straight for us!"

"What the hell have you done?" Gallad yelled, kicking the minister in the backside.

"You should not have crossed your father, Gallad."

"Everyone, prepare to evacuate!"

"Sir, those twelve ships around the equator have dropped matter imploders!"

"What the hell is he doing? Quickly, get me an analysis of their likely impact, and in the meantime start moving everything into the escape vessels."

"Yes, sir!"

"Sir, what do I do with him?" the guard asked, pointing at the minister.

"Shoot him."

"No, wait!" Gallad said as the guard pulled out his weapon. "Take him outside and dump him in the street. I'm sure he'll want to welcome my father's troops when they arrive."

"As you wish, sir."

"Sir, tactical say those matter imploders are big enough to implode the planet when the super-chunks reach the core."

"How long do we have?"

"Seventeen hours, give or take an hour."

"Damn! Send a flash message to all units to drop whatever they're doing and head for the space station. We'll convene there in half an hour."

"Yes, sir."

"Right, everybody out of here, NOW!"

"You and Marinda go," Herbert Douglass said. "Find a way to stop the implosion if you can, and use that time-freeze mechanism Maleena spoke of to buy yourselves time if you need to. We'll stay and defend the village, and escape via the portal if we're overwhelmed."

Gallad paused for a moment. "Very well, then. Those who want to, stay with Herbert, and the rest follow me."

Some twenty Barefooters followed Gallad and Marinda from the room.

"Right," Herbert said, "everyone into the basement and man your defensive positions. Keep those fighters busy until Gallad's away and clear."

The room emptied as the sound of muffled explosions grew louder. The building shook, filling with dust as part of the ceiling collapsed. The camera tilted before tumbling to the floor, and the last image of the Barefooters' headquarters disappeared.

Frank turned on the lights.

"Gosh," Pip said as he stood and stretched.

"Gallad and his people escaped from their headquarters minutes before it and the surrounding village were destroyed by enemy missiles," Frank said. "Ten thousand civilian lives were lost in that attack alone."

Damon turned pale as he stared at the ceiling of the viewing room. "Damien had lived in that village for many years prior to the war. When word came through of the attack he wanted to go back and help, but was snowed under with the casualties from the raid on Azarath. By the time he got away it was too late; the village was just a smouldering ruin and all the townsfolk were dead."

Pip instinctively took hold of him as a look of utter anguish crossed his face. Holding him tightly, he closed his eyes as Damon's vision of those final moments flooded into him.

Damien stepped from his shuttle and looked about. All around him were blackened buildings, their remains still smouldering in the dull pre-dawn grey. Smoke hung accusingly in the air, along with the unmistakable stench of burning flesh.

He walked slowly down what had once been the main street of the village. From the broken shop windows, it was clear the imperials had looted whatever undamaged stock they could find before departing. Not that it mattered any more, not with everyone dead, but it was the final insult that caused Damien's blood to boil. He picked

up a charred brick, hurling it at a lamp post across the street, and as the clang of masonry against metal reverberated through the silent village, he doubled over and wept.

At length he stood, making his way through the rubble to the Barefooters' headquarters. The building was less damaged than the others, or perhaps it had just been made of tougher stuff. He pushed open the door, which hung precariously askew on its hinges, and entered what had been up until a few hours ago Gallad's command post.

The imperial looters had ransacked much of the meeting room, but in the far corner the closed door to the basement remained, its security lock still flashing and functional. Cautiously crossing through the scattered papers and smashed terminals littering the floor, he keyed in his access code, and as the door swung open, he passed through and descended the stairs.

He was half-way down when the door slammed shut behind him, its vibration causing something in the damaged building to shift. As the ceiling began to fall, he leapt down the remaining stairs and rolled across the floor, coming to rest in front of Herbert Douglass's portal into Sheol.

'Our final escape route,' he thought, glancing back up at the rubble blocking the stairs. Now it was his only way out.

Next to the portal an ultranet terminal sat perched atop a pile of books, its log-on window flashing enticingly on the screen. Damien squatted on the floor in front of it, connecting to his personal archives in the database on Bluehaven and beginning to write what he knew would be his final journal entry.

'Six thousand years ago the Dolphins of Bluehaven gave me a gift, but did they know it would ultimately lead to this? Is this what they wanted? It seems everything I've done has brought only war, suffering and death, and I'm utterly spent.

'In a few short hours this planet will implode and everything here will be gone. I cannot wait for that, though, for I am too much the coward. Instead I shall pass through the portal into Sheol, not to follow my friends from Cornipus, but to find my own oblivion in that dark and timeless realm.

'And yet somewhere in my soul remains a glimmer of hope, that from all this might yet emerge a genuine and lasting peace. Should that day ever come to pass, perhaps I might return, but as just a humble fisherman I think.'

An ominous grinding noise came from above, cutting short his ponderings. He closed the terminal before turning towards the portal.

"Goodbye, my friends," he said to the empty room, and stepped through.

Pip opened his eyes and stepped back from Damon. His friend looked utterly drained, yet a smile of genuine happiness crossed his face.

"All my life I've been haunted by Damien's feeling of guilt when he arrived too late to save the villagers," Damon whispered. "It wasn't his fault, though. He couldn't have done anything to save them, even if he'd come straight away. The attackers were just too strong."

Pip smiled back, glad his friend had finally coughed up the stone that had been choking him for so long.

"So what happened after that?" Pip asked once they were seated again.

"The final action of the war took place on the space station," Frank said, "and there's a recording of that last gathering of the Barefooters somewhere in the archives." He searched through the database on the terminal in front of him. "Yes, here it is." He dimmed the lights again and pressed the *Play* button.

"We have fifteen hours until Meridian implodes," Gallad said. "Any ideas, anyone?"

"You mean apart from 'get the hell out of here'?"

Gallad wasn't amused.

"I don't know what else we can do," another Barefooter said. "The matter imploders have already gone off and the super-massive particles are on their way to the core. There's no way we can burrow underneath to retrieve them."

“Perhaps there is,” Simpkins suggested, and everyone turned to look at him. “How big are those particles?”

“They consume the matter they pass through on their way to the core, growing progressively larger,” Marinda said, “but even so they’re still pretty small, less than a metre across.”

“That’s what I thought. So if we were to set up subspace portals on the other side of the fold, one directly under the path of each of the particles, couldn’t we divert them to the other side and let them collide harmlessly in empty space?”

Everyone looked at each other, waiting for a counter-argument, but none came.

“Could we do this?” Gallad asked.

“We have the raw materials here on the station,” Maleena said, “but it’ll take some time to set up.”

“How long?”

Maleena stared at the ceiling. “Ten or twelve hours, if everything goes smoothly.”

“That’s cutting it fine.”

“Couldn’t we activate that time-freeze thing if we need to?” Simpkins asked.

“Yes, but I’d prefer not to use it unless we have to,” Gallad said. “We don’t know how my father would react to it.”

“Speaking of the Enemy,” Marinda said, “it looks like he’s withdrawing all his forces back to Bluehaven. If we’re going to deploy the subspace portals, this will be the ideal opportunity to do it.”

“So are we all in agreement with this course of action?” Gallad asked. There was no dissention. “Right, let’s get to work.”

The recording paused for a moment as it stepped forward ten hours.

“There’s a ship approaching,” Simpkins said. “It’s General Torg, and he’s hailing you.”

“What do you want, Torg?” Gallad said after opening the communications channel.

“First up, I just want to say I’m totally disgusted by what’s happened on Meridian. Believe me, I had no idea they were going to drop those matter imploders until it was already done. But I have my orders, and I’m here to offer you an olive branch, for what it’s worth.”

“Say your piece, then go,” Gallad said wearily.

“Meridian is doomed, but there’s no need for you or your people to die. Come back to Bluehaven and meet with your father. Let’s end this war and work together to rebuild the empire.”

“Tell that to the people of Meridian.”

“I’m sorry, Gallad, truly I am, and if there was anything I could do to save them I would, but continuing this war won’t do anyone any good.”

“Join me, then, and help us overthrow my father.”

“I, I cannot betray my Lord’s trust in me.”

“In that case I suggest you go back to Bluehaven.”

“I have orders to bring you before your father, by force if necessary.”

“You’ll have to come and get me then.”

“If that’s what you wish.”

The communications link cut off.

“A squadron of fighters has just emerged from subspace,” Simpkins said. “Defensive shields are at maximum.”

“Damn!” Gallad said. “Ask Maleena how they’re going with the portals.”

“She said they need another hour.”

“Tell them to drop what they’re doing and come up here.”

A moment later the room filled.

“My father has sent Torg to come and fetch me,” Gallad said. “I don’t think we have much choice now but to put Meridian in the time-freeze and make a run for it in the Intrepid. Maleena, I’d like you and your people to stay here and hold the fort, and we’ll return and finish the job as soon as things have quietened down a bit. It’s me and the Barefooters my father wants, so you should be in no danger once we’re gone.”

“Very well,” Maleena said. “I’ll wait until the last moment before activating the freeze, though. We have a good readout on the

progress of the super-massive particles, and I'd prefer not to give the Enemy any idea of what we're doing until we have to."

"I'll leave it in your hands, then. Right, everyone grab whatever you need and get on board the ship. We leave in ten minutes."

The recording paused again for a moment, and when it resumed, only Maleena remained in the room.

"Gallad and his Barefooters left three days ago with General Torg in hot pursuit," she said. "With just minutes remaining before the implosion, I activated the time freeze and watched as Meridian became an impenetrable black sphere. Morgoth, or should I call him the Enemy, seems content to leave us alone, and is reported to have said that a Meridian frozen in time is just as good as a Meridian destroyed."

"For now I wait here for Gallad to return. If he doesn't, well, that's something I really don't want to think about."

"And that's where it ended," Frank said, turning on the lights. "When Gallad didn't return, Maleena placed the space station in a time freeze as well, leaving instructions with the Dolphins on how to deactivate it. A million years passed before that finally happened, when young Mark Collins arrived and fulfilled the prophecy."

"Why didn't she just deploy the portals herself?" Pip asked.

"She feared Morgoth would attempt to destroy Meridian again if she did, and I suspect she was probably right."

"I see." Pip yawned.

"Yes, it's been a long day for you both. Come, I'll drive you back to your hotel."

* * *

"I'm glad I watched those recordings," Pip said to Damon as they rode the lift up to their room. "It makes me realise just how lucky I am to be living now in the genuine peace Damien had longed for."

“We have Mark to thank for that,” Damon said as he unlocked the door. “Which reminds me, I must return his call.” He stepped over to his bedside and picked up the phone.

The Inquisition

“There’s someone here to see you,” Lorina called out from the front door. Mark stumbled from the bathroom, a towel around his waist and his hair dripping water onto the floor.

“Who is it?”

“A couple of lawyers from Bluehaven.”

Standing before him on the doorstep were a grey-haired man and his younger companion, both wearing the purple robes of the Bluehaven legal profession.

“I’m sorry to intrude at such an early hour,” the elder of the two said, “but Lorina told us to come straight round to the house. I’m Brian Lachlan, representing the Temple on Bluehaven, and this is my son Owen.”

“I think we may have met briefly at my wedding,” Mark said as he shook Brian’s hand. Brian nodded.

“It’s, it’s wonderful to meet you in person, sir,” Owen said, sounding very much out of his depth. “I’ve, um, heard so much about you.”

“Come on through to the kitchen,” Lorina said. “I’ll get you some tea while Mark makes himself a bit more presentable.”

Mark emerged a few minutes later dressed in the blue shorts with white trim that identified him as the College Director. Lorina handed him a steaming cup of coffee, which he sipped appreciatively.

“Brian and Owen are here to investigate the baby Dolphin business,” she said.

“I assumed as much,” Mark said. “How can we help you?”

“To start with, we’d like to take a look at Chris’s room, if that can be arranged,” Brian said. “We understand the Dolphin was found draped across his bed.”

“I’ll check with his parents, but that shouldn’t be a problem.” Mark stepped over to the phone, dialling Aaron and Maleena’s number, and after speaking briefly with Maleena, turned back to the others. “I can take you around there now, if you like.”

“Excellent,” Brian said, gulping down the last of his tea. Owen did likewise, but it caught in his throat, causing him to cough a mouthful out across the kitchen floor. Brian patted him on the back, while Lorina grabbed a dishcloth and began cleaning up the mess.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Owen spluttered. “It was a bit too hot for me I guess.”

“That’s okay,” Lorina said. “Think nothing of it.”

Owen blushed, but relaxed a little when Mark caught his eye and grinned.

“Have you worked on many investigations like this one?” Mark asked as he led him back outside.

“No, I normally work in corporate law. This is my first criminal case.”

“Well good luck with it, and I hope you find the culprit quickly.”

“So do I. It’s a nasty business, that’s for sure.”

“Indeed it is. Poor Chris, he’s totally distraught.”

“So I’ve heard. Has there been any improvement in his condition?”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve been trying to get hold of Damon, to see if he might be able to help, but I’ve been unable to reach him.”

“I think he and Pip are still on Meridian.”

“Yes, I left a message for him on Frank Halliday’s voice mail.”

Owen nodded sympathetically.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to Aaron and Maleena’s house, staying a few paces behind Lorina and Brian who were discussing Bluehaven politics. Aaron was waiting on the front porch for them when they arrived.

“Come on in,” he said once the introductions were made. “Would you like some tea?”

“Um, not for me,” Owen said before anyone else could respond.

“No, we’re fine thanks,” Brian added.

“A coffee, Mark?”

“If you’re making one.”

Lorina gave him a stern look.

“On second thoughts, no,” Mark said. “Lorina reckons I’m drinking way too much coffee these days.”

“She’s right,” Maleena said as they stepped into the house. “It does terrible things to you, from what I’ve been reading.”

“Being College Director does terrible things to you,” Mark laughed.

“He’s not wrong there,” Lorina said. “This Dolphin business is the last thing we need right now.”

“There are stories going round on Bluehaven of terrible crimes that have been committed on your campus,” Owen said. “Is any of that true?”

“Fortunately no,” Lorina said, “but if I could catch whoever’s spreading those rumours, well that would be one terrible crime you’d have no trouble solving.”

“Actually we’ve had virtually no crime at all on the campus or amongst our staff or students,” Mark said.

“That’s right,” Lorina said, “apart from the fish tank.” Mark squirmed slightly.

“Fish tank?” Brian asked.

“We had a large tank filled with tropical fish in the administrative office,” Lorina said, “but about a month ago it just disappeared.”

“How odd. Was there any sign of forced entry?”

“No, and nothing else was taken or out of place either.”

“It was a gift from a local supporter, so its loss has been rather embarrassing,” Mark said.

“Well if we come across it in the course of our investigations, we’ll let you know,” Brian said.

“Would you like to come upstairs to Chris’s room now?” Maleena asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

The curtains were drawn and the room was in semi-darkness as they entered. Maleena flicked on the light.

“We haven’t touched anything at all since the, um, incident,” she said.

“Good, we appreciate that,” Brian said. “So you found the Dolphin draped across his bed, here?”

“That’s right.”

“Yes, I can see the blood stains on the floor. Owen, could you take some samples please?”

“Sure, Dad.”

Owen pulled a plastic bag and a small brush from his pocket and began scratching away at the carpet, while Brian gazed around the room. Above the bed was a poster of the Milky Way galaxy, showing the locations of the more prominent civilised worlds. Alongside that hung a framed photograph of Aaron, dressed in a white shirt, white trousers and a baggy green cap. He was holding some kind of sporting implement over his head.

“Aaron’s maiden test century at Lords,” Maleena said, and Brian nodded, even though he had no idea what she was talking about. “Chris was so proud of him.”

On the opposite side of the room sat Chris’s desk, with the shelf above it holding the set of ten books making up the *Barefoot Times* story. Supporting them on one side was the heart-shaped shell the Dolphins had presented to Billy Collins on the occasion of Mark’s birth, and which Mark had subsequently given to Chris as a token of his friendship. Next to that stood a photograph of Chris’s grandparents, Bobby and Mary Smith.

“Chris took Dad’s death pretty badly,” Aaron said, seeing Brian studying the photo, “and was none too pleased when Mum married your mate Ron Simmons soon afterwards.”

“I see,” Brian said, suddenly struck by all the interwoven family ties surrounding this case. He’d even been commissioned by Mary and Ron’s first child, Kevin Simmons, who was the Bluehaven Head of State and currently campaigning for the top job on the Galactic Council back home. “Do you think Chris could have harboured a grudge against Ron?”

“Perhaps initially, but since they’ve got to know each other they’ve actually become quite close friends.”

Brian’s eyes fell on the desktop and he stepped over to it.

“What’s this?” he asked, picking up the manila folder lying on it.

“It’s an essay Chris was working on the night before it happened,” Aaron said. “Professor Tibbits had set him an assignment on Gregory the Dolphin Slayer.”

“That sounds a bit prophetic, given what happened. Do you mind if I take a look?”

“Not at all.”

As Brian began reading, he gradually slumped onto the chair behind him while his jaw dropped lower and lower. “Have any of you seen this?”

“I glanced at it when I called around that night,” Mark said. “It seemed a fair summary of the textbook accounts of Gregory’s escapades.”

“This is no time for joking, Mark,” Brian said. “What’s written here is blasphemy of the highest order.”

“What?”

Brian handed him the folder and he quickly scanned through it.

“But this isn’t what I saw! What’s going on?”

“Perhaps this is what Mark saw,” Owen said, lifting a pile of crumpled-up sheets from the waste basket.

“Yes, that’s it,” Mark said. “He must have done a rewrite after I left.”

“What did you tell him?” Brian asked. “Did you say anything that could have triggered this, this filth?”

“Me? Of course not. He said he thought he might be a descendant of Gregory, and I logged onto the archives and confirmed that indeed he was, and then we had a bit of an argument and I left.”

“What did you argue about?”

“I got Harry Tibbits to revoke his punishment and he resented me doing it. He said it would make him the laughing stock of the class, and that I should keep my big fat ugly nose out of his business.”

Owen stared at him. “Your nose isn’t fat, Mark.”

“I know, it’s just big and ugly.”

“So let me get this straight,” Brian said. “Chris writes a run-of-the-mill essay on Gregory the Dolphin Slayer, then Mark turns up, they discover Chris is Gregory’s descendant, they argue over Mark’s nose, he leaves and then Chris tears up his essay and instead writes this so-called justification of his ancestor’s attempted annihilation of the

Dolphins. Finally three hours later there's a dead baby Dolphin draped across his bed."

"I guess that sums it up pretty well," Mark said, and Lorina glared at him.

"But how did the Dolphin get in here?" Aaron asked. "No-one came in or out of the house after Mark left, and he certainly didn't bring it with him."

"Are you sure?"

"He was wearing only his blue-and-white shorts and couldn't very well conceal a dolphin in those."

"Um, doesn't Earth have a twin planet across the fold?" Owen asked.

"Yes, it's called Eden."

"Could the Dolphin have been flipped across from there?"

"It's possible I suppose. We can go over there easily enough to check it out, but I'll need to get authorisation from AusScience. Entry to that world is restricted because of the time slippage and the danger of setting off time cusps."

"Could you organise that please?" Brian asked.

"Sure."

"While Aaron's doing that I might go over to the hospital and see how Chris is going," Maleena said.

"Do you mind if we join you?" Brian asked.

"Not at all."

* * *

In his dreaming, Chris had gone back once more to his first visit to Bluehaven, when he and Mark had just arrived after a gruelling journey through Sheol. Lorina's father had expected Mark to be a great Barefooter warrior who'd come to save them from Brett Farley's forces, and was none too pleased when told he'd lost his heritage.

"Is this true?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, I lost my Barefooter genes in my confrontation with Morgoth," Mark said, "and I no longer have those powers."

“Then all hope is lost.”

Mark looked across at Lorina, seeking inspiration, but none was forthcoming. Instead she looked down at her feet.

“I really don’t know what we can do with you,” Kevin said, pacing up and down across the room. “You’re too scrawny to be of much use in combat, but perhaps you can – oh for Loria’s sake, boy, can’t you take your eyes off my daughter for one moment and at least show me the courtesy of looking at me when I’m speaking to you? Is that why you came here, boy, to have it off with my daughter like your grandfather tried to do ten years ago?”

Mark’s head dropped and his shoulders drooped. Lorina tried moving towards him but her mother held her back.

“I’m sorry, Mark, I have hurt you, unjustly it would seem,” Kevin said as he stepped towards him, but Mark flinched away, brushing at his eyes before steeling himself.

“Why did you come here, Mark?” Kevin asked. Mark raised his head, looking him in the eye as he steadied himself.

“I didn’t come here; I was brought here against my will. Yesterday I was happily playing cricket with my family on Earth and then suddenly I’m in Sheol, being chased by ogres and God knows what else. Then I get spat out onto your beach and, well, here I am. Now if you can show me the way home I’ll trouble you no more, good sir.”

“Enough!” Kevin said, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. Before anyone could react, he whipped it out and sliced Mark’s head off. It rolled across the floor, leaving a trail of blood in its wake, before coming to a halt at Lorina’s feet.

“Good-for-nothing show-pony,” Kevin muttered as he strode from the room. Lorett gave her daughter a wistful look before dashing after him.

“Do you want this, Chris,” Lorina asked as she casually picked up the head, “or can I keep it?”

Chris screamed and screamed and screamed...

...just as Maleena, Brian and Owen entered the ward. Maleena dashed forward towards her screaming son, but a large nurse, armed with an equally large syringe, pushed her aside as she strode over to

him and administered another dose of sedative. Within moments he'd settled into an undisturbed sleep.

"I'm afraid there's been no improvement," she said to Maleena on her way out again.

"I guess that says it all," Maleena said to Brian and Owen. "He's been like this ever since the baby Dolphin appeared on his bed. They sedate him, but as soon as it begins to wear off he starts screaming again. Mark's father, Jason Collins, is a half-blooded Barefooter and has offered to try to help him when he gets back, but Aaron reckons his gift only works on physical trauma."

"That's true," Brian said. "Do you think Damon might be able to help?"

"Mark's been trying to contact him, but apparently he's off on some archaeological expedition with Frank Halliday on Meridian, and hasn't returned his calls as yet."

"I'll be reporting in to Kevin this evening, so I'll see if he can get a message through to him."

"Thanks Brian."

* * *

The shuttle craft descended slowly towards the point on Eden corresponding to the Smith house on Earth.

Thick low scrub covered the coastal flats, punctuated here and there with stunted trees bent by the prevailing nor'easter, but amongst that and quite clearly visible stood a tower of scaffolding upon which sat a glass tank partially filled with water.

"It's the missing fish tank!" Lorina said as they hovered alongside it. Mark looked bewildered.

A path from the beach to the base of the tower had been roughly cut through the scrub, and Aaron landed the shuttle on the sand adjacent to its entrance. Before waving the others from the craft, Brian examined the numerous footprints going to and from the path.

"It looks like Owen was right," he said as they joined him. "Someone went to great lengths to come here with the Dolphin in that tank, elevate it to a level equivalent to Chris's bedroom, and then flip it across the subspace fold."

They made their way cautiously to the base of the tower, with Brian taking numerous photographs before allowing Owen to climb it.

“There are blood stains on the platform,” Owen said as he reached the top. “I think this is where they slaughtered the dolphin.”

“Can you get a sample?” Brian asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Grab a sample of the water in the tank too.”

After he’d done that, Owen stepped over to the edge of the platform and looked around. A red object in the undergrowth caught his eye.

“Dad, there’s something in the bushes about twenty metres to your right that you might want to check out.”

Brian pushed his way through the thick scrub, catching his robes on the spiky branches and wishing he’d worn something more practical. By the time he reached the object, the smell emanating from it gave him a pretty good idea of what it might be.

“What have you got there?” Mark asked. “Phew!”

“Food for the dolphin, I expect,” Brian said as he emerged carrying a plastic bucket half filled with decaying fish.

“That looks just like the bucket from our laundry at home,” Lorina said, holding her nose while peering into it. “That *is* our bucket! There’s the stain where Mark used it to mix lawn fertiliser last year.”

“But, but how?” Mark stammered.

“That’s what we need to find out,” Brian said. “Owen, could you seal the bucket and its contents in a bag before we’re all overcome by the smell?”

“Yeah, sure Dad.” Owen hunted through his pockets, searching for a big enough evidence bag, while the others stood as far back as they could get.

“We’ll get your local police to dismantle the tower and place it and the tank in secure storage,” Brian said as they walked back to their ship.

“So what do you make of it all?” Mark asked.

“I’m thinking the perpetrator brought the baby Dolphin here from Bluehaven, either through Sheol or on an intergalactic ship, and kept

it in that tank, feeding it on the Bluehaven fish in the bucket, until they were ready to kill it and flip the corpse across the fold and onto Chris's bed."

"I guess that means Chris wasn't responsible."

"Not without an accomplice, anyway," Brian said. "Now Mark, your father and grandfather both have the ability to flip themselves across the subspace fold, don't they?"

"Yes, they do."

"Is it possible you have that ability as well?"

"Me? No. I probably would have, only I lost all those powers when the subspace pulse that killed Morgoth destroyed my Barefooter genes as well."

"I see. So there's no remnant or anything?"

"No."

"But didn't I read somewhere that you've retained your enhanced immunity to disease and tolerance to cold?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. Just what are you insinuating?"

"Just following a line of thought, that's all."

* * *

"Kevin, it's Brian," he said once the secure link to Bluehaven had been established.

"Good to hear from you. How's it going?"

"Pretty well, the pieces are starting to fall together. What can you tell me about Mark Collins?"

"My son-in-law? What can I say? Everyone likes him, and he seems fairly innocuous, but to be honest I think he's a bit of a show-pony. Are you saying he's involved in this?"

"I'm not sure. There's evidence pointing towards him, but it's only circumstantial and I can't see him fitting the profile, or having any motive for that matter."

"Dad tells me he's having difficulties with the college he and Lorina are running. Do you think it could be tied in with that?"

"Could be, but I'll have to dig a bit deeper. What about his father, Jason Collins?"

“He’s a half-blooded Barefooter, and very quiet and reserved. He’s strong-willed, though, and won’t let anyone stand in his way if he has a mind to do something. He’s very protective of Mark and Chris, as you’d expect.”

“Do you know anything about Mark’s grandfather, Billy Collins?”

“No, I only met the man briefly at Lorina’s wedding. He’s a one-quarter Barefooter, as is his wife, and he’s a well-respected scientist in his home galaxy, but beyond that I’d be only guessing.”

“I see. Could you do me a favour, Kevin?”

“Certainly.”

“Check the logs on the restricted section of our archives. Someone’s been delving into some highly classified documents on Gregory the Dolphin Slayer, and I’d like to know who.”

“Consider it done.”

* * *

“The fish tank was here,” Lorina said, and Brian nodded while Owen studied the stand in minute detail.

“What’s this thing?” Owen asked.

“It’s the air pump. It keeps the water oxygenated.”

“Hey, that’s pretty clever. Have you ever seen anything like this before, Dad?”

“Not now, Owen. Do you mind if we take a look in Mark’s office?”

“Not at all,” Lorina said. “I’m sure he has nothing to hide.” She led them into the inner sanctum.

“He’s not very tidy, is he?” Owen said, taking in the pile of papers on and around Mark’s desk.

“He’s not usually this bad,” Lorina said. “Things have been rather hectic, even before the Dolphin incident; what with getting accreditation from Brisbane University and the problems we’ve been having attracting staff.”

“Even so, not a sign of a good administrator,” Brian said, frowning. *‘He’s a bit of a show-pony,’* Kevin’s voice echoed inside his head.

“The staff and students all love him,” Lorina said.

“I expect they do. Owen, give the room a thorough search, would you?”

“He’s really not that bad,” Lorina said as Brian led her back into the outer office.

“I’m sure you’re right; it’s just that I have to examine every angle in a case like this. Most of the time the people concerned are completely innocent, but anything that looks unexpected or out of place has to be checked out. Often times the vital clue shows up –”

“Dad!” Owen cried.

“What is it?”

“I found this down behind a filing cabinet,” he said, passing Brian a sealed plastic bag containing a blood-stained knife. “The murder weapon, I think.”

Lorina gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

“We’ll soon find out, I’m sure,” Brian said.

* * *

When Mark and Aaron entered the ward, Jason looked up at them, letting go of Chris’s hand.

“Any luck, Dad?” Mark asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. He’s too heavily sedated right now for me to make any contact with his mind. The nurse said the effects would be starting to wear off again in about an hour, so I thought I’d hang around till then.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said, patting his friend on the shoulder. “I really appreciate your help.”

“It’s the least I can do. Now do you think we could rustle up a cup of coffee anywhere around here?”

“Follow me,” Aaron said.

“I hear there are a couple of investigators from Bluehaven snooping around,” Jason said as they sat sipping in the cafeteria.

“News sure travels fast,” Mark said. “Brian Lachlan and his son Owen are acting on behalf of the Temple, under orders from my father-in-law apparently.”

“I remember Brian,” Jason said. “Ron got me to help him after he’d been shot during the insurrection on Bluehaven about eight years ago. He’s very highly thought of amongst that galaxy’s legal profession, and at the time was mayor of Dolphin Island.”

“One of the big wigs then,” Aaron said, forcing a chuckle out of Mark.

“He thinks I killed the baby Dolphin,” Mark said.

“And did you?” Aaron asked, earning himself a glare from Jason. “Just kidding.”

Mark sighed. “I feel like the whole universe has suddenly turned against me.”

“I felt like that all the time when I was your age,” Jason said.

“Most of that was my doing,” Aaron said.

“I know,” Jason said, shaking his head in mock despair. “But whatever happens, Mark, your mother and I will always stand by you.”

“And Maleena and me as well,” Aaron added.

“Thanks, both of you,” Mark said. “Um, shouldn’t we be getting back to Chris now?”

By the time they returned to the ward, Chris had started dreaming again, and in his sleep murmured something that sounded like, “I’m coming already, don’t rush me!” Jason took hold of his hand and closed his eyes...

...finding himself standing on a grassy slope overlooking a broad river. It was a place he’d seen before, he thought, but couldn’t recall now where it had been. Chris jumped a little as he turned his head towards him.

“Oh hi, Uncle Jase. You startled me. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, actually.”

“Come on Chris, we don’t have much time,” called a voice from down towards the river, and Jason saw another man standing next to the silver bridge spanning the water.

“Who’s that?” Jason asked.

“That’s Gregory. He wants to show me something.”

Chris took off down the slope, with Jason following in his wake. By the time they reached the bridge, though, Gregory had disappeared.

“Where’d he go?” Chris asked.

Jason was about to suggest that he’d gone across the bridge, before noticing the rusty steel mesh barricading its entrance.

“Hey, Gregory, where are you?” Chris yelled.

“Shush,” Jason said. “I don’t like this place. There’s something not right here.”

“This way I think,” Chris whispered as he began following a track that had opened up in the long grass to the left of the bridge. Jason followed, casting his eyes about for the source of unease he felt growing all around him.

The path seemed to run parallel to the river, but the grass and undergrowth soon thickened and Jason lost all sight of the water. The air was still and hot, and yet the light seemed dimmer and somehow less illuminating. He felt sure unspeakable terrors lay hidden in the dense foliage on either side of them, waiting to pounce, and a chill ran up his spine. For a moment he lost sight of Chris and dashed forward, expecting the worst, but as he rounded a bend he saw him standing at the opening to a small clearing.

“What’s this?” Chris asked. Before him was a patch of bare ground with a crude headstone sitting askew at the far end.

“It looks like a grave,” Jason whispered.

Chris bent over, trying to read the eroded engraving on the stone, but as he rubbed his hand across it, the words became clear.

Mark William Collins

2027-2053

‘Mark the Dolphin Slayer’

May he rest in eternal torment

Chris and Jason both screamed...

...and Jason found himself on the floor of the hospital ward with Aaron holding onto one arm and Mark the other. The scream died in his throat, but behind him Chris continued wailing and thrashing

about on his bed. A nurse dashed into the room, giving Jason a dirty look before administering another dose of sedative.

“I think you’d better leave now,” she said on her way back out again.

“What happened?” Aaron asked, but before Jason could answer, Detective Inspector Morris entered the ward, closely followed by Brian, Owen and Lorina.

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

“Brian, you can’t be serious!” Lorina said, but the sorrowful look on his face told her otherwise. Her jaw dropped as the tears began to form.

Aaron dashed over to her, holding her head against his shoulder. “It’ll be okay, I promise,” he whispered.

“Mr Collins,” the inspector continued, “it’s my understanding that the Delphinidae Temple will be seeking your extradition to Bluehaven.”

“That’s correct,” Brian said.

“In the meantime, you’ll be held in custody at the Coolum Police Station. Come with me please.”

The inspector led him from the room, with Brian and Owen following closely behind.

Delphinidae Justice

When Damon's ship emerged from subspace into Earth orbit he put a call through to the Delphinidae College, but was surprised when he received only a recorded message saying, *"Due to circumstances beyond our control, the college is currently closed. Please leave a message after the tone if you would like someone to return your call."*

"It's Damon here," he said after the tone. "What's going on? Give me a call on the *Renewal* if you receive this before I arrive, otherwise I'll be there in person in about an hour."

"What's happening?" Pip asked.

"I don't know, but I have an uneasy feeling about this. I hope everything's all right."

"Mark said Chris was ill, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he didn't go into any detail. He said it was nothing too serious but he thought I might be able to help him."

Pip sighed. "Why does everyone have to be so secretive about everything?"

Damon shrugged, but before he could respond further, his phone rang.

"Hello."

"What?"

"You can't be serious!"

"I see. Okay, we'll be there as soon as we have clearance to land. See you shortly."

"That was Mary, Chris's grandmother," he said after hanging up. "She said she'd meet us at the spaceport and explain everything then."

Pip sighed again.

Mary dashed forward and embraced Damon as he and Pip emerged from the customs hall at Brisbane spaceport.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” she said, hugging him again.

Ron stepped forward and shook Damon’s hand. “Good to have you back. I guess you’ve heard about what’s been happening here.”

“I haven’t actually, but I’m sure you and Mary will fill us in on the way back to the college. This is my friend Pip Ingle from Meridian, by the way.”

“Pleased to meet you, Pip,” Ron said. “Damon’s mentioned you a few times, I’m sure.”

“It’s an honour to meet you at last, Father Simmons,” Pip said just before Mary engulfed him in a hug.

“Please call me Ron,” Ron said as he shook his hand. “I’ve never been one for fancy titles.”

Ron, Mary and Damon strode off in the direction of the car park, leaving Pip struggling in their wake. The arrivals lounge was bustling with people all talking at once, and even though Pip’s Elvish heritage allowed him to pick up the language fairly quickly, his head started to ache from linguistic overload.

Ahead of him spun a revolving door, triggering the start of a panic attack. He staggered, falling to the floor as his troublesome legs gave out beneath him, and for a moment the world turned to grey as the cacophony of sound pounded into his head. He held his hands over his ears and moaned.

By the time Damon found him again, a crowd had gathered round.

“I’m sorry, Pip,” Damon said in his native tongue, “I didn’t realise you’d slipped behind. Can you stand?”

Pip eased himself up. His vision sparkled for a moment and his forehead felt cold and clammy, but then it passed and he wiped his brow.

“You’re as white as a ghost,” Damon said. “Here, I’ll help you out to the car. It’s not far.”

“I think I’m okay now,” Pip said, but his voice sounded weak and far away. “Could you get me some water?”

“Sure. Just take a seat over there and I’ll be right back.”

Pip eased himself into the lounge chair and closed his eyes, cursing himself for making such a woeful start to his first visit to Earth. He'd been thrilled when Damon had invited him to tag along, and had spent the entire thirty-six hours of the flight from Bluehaven in a state of nervous anxiety, unable to eat or sleep. But now it had all caught up with him, and he'd almost dozed off when Damon returned with a cup of water.

"Sip it slowly, and if it's not enough I can get you some more."

"Thanks Damon."

He felt his strength returning as the water flowed into him. Meanwhile Ron and Mary had returned to the terminal, concerned at what was keeping them.

"You should've said something, Pip, instead of letting us go charging off," Mary said.

"I know, but by the time I realised I was slipping behind, you were too far ahead."

"They have wheelchairs available here if you'd like me to find you one," Ron said.

"No, I'm fine as long as I take it slowly, although revolving doors freak me out a little."

"You're not the only one," Ron said. "I hate the damn things too. When I was a kid they had one on the bank in Bringal Vale and I was terrified it'd cut me in two."

Pip laughed and, realising he felt a whole lot better, eased himself back onto his feet. "Shall we go?"

* * *

"And then that damned inspector arrested Mark, just like that," Mary said as they pulled into the college car park.

"Surely you can't believe he'd be involved in any of this," Damon said.

"Of course not," Ron said, "and I'm sure as soon as it goes to trial he'll be cleared of all charges."

"It's just so typical of Brian," Mary said. "Once he gets a sniff of something he won't let go. He was like that when we were at school together."

“But what if they find him guilty?” Pip asked.

“They’ll probably put him to death,” Damon said. “But don’t worry, the legal system back home is a lot more equitable now than it was under Morgoth, or so I’ve been told.”

“It couldn’t be much worse,” Ron said.

“So what do you want us to do?” Damon asked.

“The first thing is for you to take a look at Chris,” Mary said, “and see if there’s anything you can do to help him.”

“Of course. With everything else that’s happened I’d almost forgotten he’s still in hospital.”

“Let me know when you’re ready to see him and I’ll take you there,” Mary said.

“I’ll just show Pip to his room, and then we can go if you like.”

“Fine, I’ll be waiting for you here.”

Damon led Pip across the courtyard and into a door on the opposite side. “I’ve put you on the ground floor,” he said as they turned down a long corridor.

“Thanks.”

“The rooms were meant for temporary staff accommodation, so don’t expect any great luxuries.”

“As long as there’s a comfortable bed and a hot shower it’ll do me.”

“Bed? Shower? So *that’s* why no-one wants to come and work here.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Sorry, my humour doesn’t work too well after a long space flight.”

Damon unlocked a door on his right, leading Pip into a small but comfortable-looking room. As well as a bed, it also boasted a work-desk with inbuilt ultranet terminal cum entertainment system, a small refrigerator, an office chair and two armchairs. “The bathroom’s through there,” he said, pointing to the en-suite, “and if there’s anything you need just dial 1 to talk to the front desk.”

“It’s very nice, I’m sure. Um, do you think I could come with you when you go to see Chris?”

“I don’t see why not, if you’re not too tired.”

“No, I’m fine; I’ve got my second wind now. What do you think’s wrong with him?”

Damon stared into space for a few moments. “In this enlightened age we’re not supposed to talk about demonic possession any more, but Damien dealt with a number of cases that could probably be described as such. I won’t know for sure until I see him and try to touch his mind, but from what Mary said I think Chris might fall into that category.”

“Gosh, is there anything you can do?”

“In the olden days they’d slaughter a bunyip, but we’ll probably have trouble finding one of those here and in any case I don’t think it was ever particularly effective. There are other less bloodthirsty tricks I can try, but I’ll need to see what I’m up against first. I suppose I could always offer you up as a human sacrifice.”

“The demon would take one look at my legs and throw me back.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Scratch that idea.”

“Okay. Shall we go then?”

“If you’re sure you’re okay.”

“Come on, I may be a cripple but I’m not an invalid.”

“You’re so touchy today.”

Pip sighed, while Damon grinned.

Chris was sleeping peacefully when Damon, Pip and Mary entered the ward. Sandra, who was sitting alongside the bed, stood, giving Mary a hug.

“Sandy, this is Damon and his friend Pip,” Mary said.

“I’m so glad you’ve come. Mark said you’re, you’re our only hope.” She sniffled and wiped her nose.

Damon held her, using his powers to try to ease her anxiety, before stepping cautiously over to the bed. Three years had elapsed since he’d last seen Chris; when he’d taken on the mantle of *Brother of the Delphinidae* he’d intended basing his work at the Coolum Beach College, but had soon been drawn back to Bluehaven to aid in the establishment of the new government. Over a two-year period he’d toured all twelve of the principal worlds in his home galaxy, helping Kevin and Loretta explain the workings of the new Galactic Council as well as ministering to the Delphinidae devotees on each planet. He’d

been planning to return to Earth when Frank Halliday had asked him for help with his archaeological explorations, and that had kept him fully occupied for the last six months.

Chris stirred a little, mumbling something incomprehensible, as Damon looked down on his face. Even though he was only seventeen, the same age as himself, his four-day stubble and pale complexion added years to his appearance. Cursing himself for not being here when his friend had needed him most, he took hold of his hand and closed his eyes.

The darkness of Sheol enveloped him, turning his thoughts back to the last time he'd ventured into there a little over three years ago. "Go now, my friends," the ghost of Jim Hamilton had warned, "and do not return to this realm. Sheol is no place for the living." Damon shuddered, wondering if he should've heeded that warning, before reaching out with his mind in search of Chris's consciousness.

His senses led him into a narrow passageway that felt as if it was winding its way downwards. In Sheol there was really no up or down, and physically there was nothing at all, nonetheless his mind kept insisting he was descending. Although he'd acquired much of Damien's knowledge of that place, the path he was following was unfamiliar to him, and that surprised him a little.

As he descended, he sensed the passageway growing narrower, something for which he could find no parallel in Damien's memories. In all his predecessor's explorations of that realm, the passageways had never felt constricted like this one was becoming. A feeling of unease began growing in him, as if danger lurked very close at hand, but then to his surprise the darkness yielded to a grey mistiness, swirling around him for a few moments before dissolving away into bright sunshine.

He was standing on a grassy slope overlooking a broad river, while sitting on the bank below him were Chris and a tall middle-aged man. He sprinted down towards them, but as he drew nearer, the man turned his head and Damon froze. Here was his demon, he had no doubt.

* * *

The public gallery of the Bluehaven Supreme Court was packed to overflowing as Mark was led into the dock. Presiding over the court was Joshua Franks, the Chief Justice of Cornipus, and he scowled at the accused over the top of his spectacles. In another time and place he may well have been called the *hanging judge*, as his punishments ensured there were few repeat offenders, but since the construction of Morgoth's *Solar Terminator* there'd been no hangings on Bluehaven and so that particular turn of phrase had largely disappeared from the language.

"Ron told me the judge was Brian's room-mate at law school," Aaron whispered to Lorina, but she didn't respond. Instead her eyes were riveted on her husband as he settled nervously into his seat.

In the time since Mark's arrest she'd only been allowed to speak to him once. That had been limited to just a few minutes and under the strict supervision of officers from the Department of Justice, and apart from telling him that she loved him and not to worry, there was little else she could say. The one thing she wanted so desperately to tell him she simply couldn't under those circumstances, and she sighed to herself as Aaron patted her on the arm. She turned to face him, trying to see into his eyes through the mop of hair that perpetually covered them, and he smiled back knowingly.

Justice Franks cleared his throat and the courtroom hushed. "Would the defendant please stand."

Mark rose, glancing nervously around the room. He was wearing only his blue and white shorts, as Delphinidae decorum dictated, but his normally long and dishevelled hair had been trimmed and neatly combed. He rubbed his nose before deciding that perhaps he shouldn't, so clasped his hands behind his back instead.

"Mark William Collins, it is alleged that approximately one month ago you abducted a juvenile Dolphin from the seas of Bluehaven and transported him to the planet known as Eden in the Milky Way galaxy, where, after a period of cruel captivity, you terminated his life and transported his body across the subspace fold and onto the bed of a sleeping Delphinidae student." The judge glanced at Brian who nodded almost imperceptibly. "Do you wish to enter a plea?"

"Not guilty, your honour," Mark said clearly and forcefully.

“Very well,” the judge said, “although I must advise that had you entered a plea of guilty, the court would have looked upon your crime with greater leniency. Do you understand?”

“I do, your honour.”

“Good. I call upon the Prosecution to outline their case. Mr Lachlan?”

Brian stepped forward.

“Thank you, your honour. I, Brian Lachlan, was called upon four weeks ago to investigate the circumstances surrounding the appearance of a dead baby Dolphin on the bed of Christopher Smith, a first year acolyte at the Delphinidae College on the planet Earth. In the evidence I shall present to this court, I will demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt how this vile deed was instigated and perpetrated by the Defendant in order to prevent the said student from exposing his mismanagement of that college.”

Murmurings spread throughout the gallery, forcing the judge to call for order.

“I call my first witness, Reverend Mother Lorett.” Lorett stepped forward to the witness box, glancing back at Brian. “My Lady, please tell the court of the events that transpired a month ago.”

“I was working in my office when an aide came to me, reporting a commotion amongst the Dolphins off the beach outside the Temple. I ran down into the water and was told that a human in a boat off the east coast had abducted one of their children. I immediately notified the police, but their aerial patrol found no sign of the boat. There was a report, though, of an unregistered spacecraft leaving Bluehaven shortly after the abduction.”

“Were the Dolphins able to offer any description of the abductor?” Brian asked.

“Not really, only that it was male and had long dark hair.”

More murmurings spread through the gallery before the judge reached for his gavel.

“Has it been confirmed that the deceased Dolphin found on Earth is the missing juvenile?” Brian asked.

“Yes, our DNA analysis has confirmed that.”

“Thank you, Reverend Mother. Your witness, Mr Duffy.”

“Did the Dolphins have any idea of what race the abductor may have been?” Mark’s barrister asked.

“The impression they had was that maybe it was Cornipean, but they weren’t really sure.”

“But we all know the Defendant is not Cornipean.”

“True, but it’s been said Cornipeans and Earthlings have similar traits.” The judge gave her a stern look. “No offence intended, your honour.”

“I would consider the race of the abductor to be a matter of speculation,” he said, “and direct the jury to disregard it.”

“As you wish, your honour. I have no further questions.”

“Mr Lachlan, you may call your next witness.”

“I call Maleena Smith.”

Aaron gave Maleena’s hand a squeeze as she stood and walked down to the witness stand.

“Mrs Smith, could you recount the events leading up to the appearance of the Dolphin across your son’s bed?”

“Chris, that’s my son, arrived home from the college just before dinner, complaining about an essay he’d been assigned by Professor Tibbits. After eating he went straight to his room to begin working on it, and a couple of hours later Mark Collins arrived and went up to see him. Chris had been under considerable stress from his heavy study load and Mark hoped he might be able to help him, but when he returned to the living room he told us Chris wouldn’t talk to him and suggested that perhaps Damon Enderling might be able to help. He tried calling Damon but couldn’t get through to him, so he left in a rather despondent state.

“Aaron and I went to bed shortly after that, but at about four o’clock in the morning Chris screamed and we dashed out to his room. When I turned the light on I saw the Dolphin across his bed. Chris continued screaming and couldn’t be settled, so eventually we called an ambulance. He’s been kept under sedation ever since.”

“Thank you,” Brian said. “I know it must be hard for you to have to relive that experience, but do you think there was any animosity between Mark and Chris that night?”

“They argued, and Mark’s said as much himself, but I think it was just Chris’s stress coming out. They’d always been close friends.”

“You used the past tense. Do you no longer consider them to be close friends?”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all. It’s just that I think it’s the first time they’ve had a serious disagreement.”

“I see. Did you hear any raised voices?”

“No, we had the television on, and it would’ve drowned out anything they were saying upstairs.”

Brian picked up a manila folder from the desk in front of him and handed it to Maleena. “Mrs Smith, do you recognise this?”

“Yes, it’s the essay Chris wrote for Professor Tibbits.”

“Could you read the title to the court?”

“It’s called ‘*Gregory Harrington – Madman or Saviour?*’.”

“Are you aware of its contents?”

“Yes, I’ve read through it.”

“How would you describe it?”

“It, um, presents an argument supporting the actions of Gregory the Dolphin Slayer, but I think –”

“Thank you, Mrs Smith, you’ve been most helpful.”

Mark’s barrister stepped forward. “How did Mark seem when he came down from Chris’s room?”

“He was rather upset and despondent that he’d failed to get to the bottom of Chris’s problems. I think he blamed himself for what was happening.”

“Do you think he was genuinely upset?”

“Of course he was. Mark has a very sensitive nature.”

“How long have you known him?”

“We met when he came to Meridian to depose Morgoth, and that would have been, what, nearly twenty years ago?”

“Indeed. Do you think you’d notice if Mark was putting on an act?”

“Objection, your honour!” Brian said. “He’s asking the witness to speculate on what she might or might not have noticed.”

“Objection sustained. Could we stick to the facts of this case please, Mr Duffy?”

“Of course, your honour. I, um, I have no further questions.”

“You may call your next witness, Mr Lachlan,” the judge said.

“I call Patrick Evans.”

A red-headed man with a freckled face stepped forward. A court attendant handed him a translator headset which he stared at for a few moments before slipping it on.

“I understand you are the Senior Pathologist at the Sunshine Coast Veterinary Hospital,” Brian said.

“That’s correct.”

“Did you conduct an examination of the deceased Dolphin found in the Smith house?”

“Yes.”

“What were your findings?”

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and glanced over it. “The Dolphin’s remains were quite fresh and it couldn’t have been dead more than just a few minutes prior to its discovery. Upon examination of the contents of its stomach, I found a partially digested meal consisting of three flat-tail fish from the seas of Bluehaven, along with a quantity of sea-water matching the mineral content of that world.”

“Did you also examine a sample of water taken from the tank found on Eden?”

“Yes, and it was a perfect match to that found in the Dolphin’s stomach.”

“What was the cause of death?”

“It was caused by a knife wound to the throat, and would have been almost instantaneous.”

“Thank you, Mr Evans.”

“I have no questions, your honour,” Mr Duffy said, and the pathologist looked relieved.

Brian stood once more. “I call Detective Inspector Morris from Earth’s Coolum Beach Police Station.”

The policeman walked briskly to the witness stand while slipping the translator headset on.

“Inspector,” Brian said, “could you please tell the court how you came to be involved in this case.”

“The police were notified by the paramedics who attended the Smith house following the appearance of the deceased Dolphin. I was then assigned to the case.”

“Did you interview the defendant?”

“Yes, we met at the pathologist’s office.”

“How did he react?”

“At first he seemed surprised that the police would be involved at all, and then bristled at any suggestion that Christopher Smith might be under suspicion.”

“And was he?”

“At that stage of the investigation, everyone was under suspicion.”

“Including the defendant?”

“Yes.”

Brian walked over to a large object shrouded by a black cloth, whipping it off like a magician performing a trick. “Do you recognise this exhibit?”

“Yes, it’s the fish tank that was found atop a scaffolding tower on Eden.”

“Were there any fingerprints on it?”

“Yes.”

“The defendant’s?”

“Yes, along with a number of others.”

“How many?”

“Seven that we could positively identify.”

“From where did the fish tank originally come?”

“I believe it was reported stolen from the Delphinidae College approximately one month earlier.”

“Who identified it?”

“The defendant’s wife and the defendant himself.”

Brian walked back over to the table, uncovering a second exhibit. “Do you recognise this?”

“It’s the bucket found on Eden a short distance from the tower. It contained rotting flat-tail fish.”

“Has the bucket been identified?”

“Yes, the defendant’s wife said it came from their laundry at home.”

Mumbling spread through the gallery again, but the judge glared at them and they hushed. Brian stepped over to the table once more and picked up the third exhibit, a long knife sealed in a plastic bag. “Can you identify this please?”

“It’s the murder weapon.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes, the blood on the knife matches that of the Dolphin.”

“So where was this found?”

“It was in the defendant’s office, pushed down between the back of a filing cabinet and the wall.”

This time there was a collective gasp from the gallery and the judge raised his gavel, ready to strike.

“Were there any fingerprints on it?” Brian asked.

“No, it had been wiped clean.”

“You then arrested the defendant and charged him with the murder of the Dolphin?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“Inspector,” Mr Duffy asked, “on what basis did you make the arrest?”

“I believed there was sufficient evidence to warrant charges against him.”

“But surely the evidence presented so far is purely circumstantial, is it not?”

“That’s a matter for the court to decide, but I believe it was sufficient to warrant charges.”

“Whose were the other fingerprints found on the tank?”

“Lorina Collins, Ron Simmons, Mary Simmons, Aaron Smith, Maleena Smith, Jason Collins and Anthony Starling, the college cleaner.”

“So any of those could just as easily have taken the tank?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Or someone else entirely, perhaps wearing gloves?”

“Yes, it’s possible.”

“You said the knife was found in the defendant’s office.”

“Yes.”

“Was that office locked at the time you carried out your search?”

“No.”

“So could someone have planted the knife in an attempt to incriminate my client?”

“That’s possible, I suppose, although it’s my understanding that the outer office is normally attended.”

“Thank you, Inspector. I have no further questions.”

The judge cleared his throat as the inspector left the stand. “I will adjourn proceedings for lunch and reconvene in two hours from now. I will say, though, that I must agree with Mr Duffy regarding the circumstantial nature of the evidence presented thus far, and I would caution Mr Lachlan that unless he can produce further evidence directly linking the defendant to this crime, I would consider entertaining a motion to terminate this trial.”

“We’ve all but won!” Aaron said as he made short work of demolishing his salad. “The judge said he’d consider terminating the trial.”

“That’d be marvellous,” Maleena said. “I mean, really, anyone could’ve put that knife in Mark’s office.”

“Practically anyone except Mark,” Aaron said. “I mean, he’s not exactly stupid, is he? If he was the killer, why would he use his own fish tank, his own laundry bucket and then hide the murder weapon behind a filing cabinet in his own office? It’s ridiculous.”

“Brian’s up to something,” Lorina said. “I’ve known him all my life and he’s too good a lawyer not to have something up his sleeve.”

“But what could he have?” Aaron asked. “I mean, we all know Mark’s innocent, don’t we?”

“Of course, and that means someone’s trying to frame him,” Maleena said. “They’re not stupid either. You know this could even be a trap that Brian’s set for the real killer.”

“Yeah, and with poor Mark as the bait,” Lorina said. “When this is over I’m going to be giving Brian a tongue-lashing so severe he’ll wish he’d never been born.”

* * *

As the man turned and glared at him, Damon could see the malice and cold insanity in his eyes.

“Gregory, what is it?” Chris asked as he looked around. “Oh, hi Damon. What are you doing here?”

“Come to me, Chris,” Damon said, trying not to sound as afraid as he felt.

“Don’t move,” the Gregory-demon whispered, grabbing Chris by the wrist. “Be gone, Damien! We have no need of your kind here.”

It took every last skerrick of Damon’s courage to stop from turning and running away. “Release him, I command you in the name of my sister Lorna!”

Gregory winced slightly, but then laughed. “Your delusions don’t wash with me, fisherman. My descendant Christopher came to me willingly and that makes him mine!”

“Isn’t your sister’s name Cloe, Damon?” Chris asked, looking confused.

On the opposite bank a group of people had gathered to watch, amongst them a tall dark-skinned man who caught Damon’s attention, smiling to him and seeming to give him strength.

“Christopher has sworn allegiance to the Order, and that cannot be lightly turned aside,” Damon said.

Gregory looked at Chris, who shrugged. “Well, did you?”

“I, um, I suppose so,” Chris said.

“Denounce them, then.” Gregory glanced back across the river. “We have witnesses.”

“No, Chris,” Damon said, and then in a flash of inspiration, added, “Remember the shell Mark gave you.”

Chris wavered.

“Denounce them!” Gregory yelled.

“I, um, I don’t know how to,” Chris whispered.

“What is there to know, you fool! Just say you cast aside the Delphinidae and all their stupid teachings.”

“No, Chris, don’t!” Damon said.

“Say it!”

“I, um, Christopher Smith, do hereby cast aside the, um...”

“What are you waiting for?” Gregory yelled. “Finish it!”

Damon’s mind flashed back to his early days at school on Meridian. It was lunch time, and he’d been wandering around aimlessly in the playground when he’d seen an older boy roughing up Pip. His instincts had told him to stay out of it, but something stronger had woken within him that day and he’d challenged Pip’s attacker. The bully had been taken by surprise, and he supposed in hindsight that had helped, but he’d said something totally ridiculous

that had turned the tables that day. He wondered now if the same trick might work again.

“Look!” he yelled as loud as he could while pointing down at the river. “Here comes the Easter Bunyip!”

As both Chris and Gregory turned to look, Damon leapt forward, grabbing Chris by the arm and pulling with all his might. With Gregory’s inner child still imagining the taste of chocolate eggs, his grip on Chris’s arm slackened and he broke free, almost knocking Damon over.

Damon turned and ran back up the slope, pulling his befuddled friend behind him. “Run, Chris, and don’t look back!”

Chris seemed to come to his senses and began sprinting. Damon turned to smile at him, but as he smiled back the sunshine dissolved away and they were consumed by the darkness of Sheol.

* * *

“You may call your next witness,” Justice Franks said to Brian after reconvening the court.

“I call Alice Stuart.”

A tall slender Elvish woman stepped forward.

“You are the Systems Administrator for the archives in the Delphinidae Temple on Bluehaven, is that correct?” Brian asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you recently investigate accesses to a number of restricted documents in those archives?”

“Yes I did, at the request of Kevin Simmons.”

“Could you tell the court what you found?”

“Nine files relating to Gregory the Dolphin Slayer had been accessed on the night in question.”

“Could you identify the person who accessed them?”

“Yes, it was Mark Collins.”

The gallery, now sensing blood, sizzled with excitement. Joshua Franks glared at them and they settled again.

“Your witness, Mr Duffy,” Brian said.

“Um, Miss Stuart, is it possible someone could have been impersonating my client?”

“Not unless they knew his access codes, passwords and challenge phrase responses. Our security is second to none.”

“I see. Could somebody else have obtained those codes?”

“Not unless Mark gave them to him.”

“Okay, um, fine. I have no further questions, your honour.”

“Thank you, Miss Stuart,” the judge said, glancing at Brian.

“I call Harold Tibbits,” Brian said, and Professor Tibbits strode down to the front of the courtroom.

“Professor Tibbits, you’re a teacher in the Delphinidae College at Coolum Beach on Earth, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And prior to that you lectured in Delphinidae History at Washpool University on Cornipus?”

“Yes, that’s also correct.”

“I understand Christopher Smith was a student in your first-year class, and that you set him the assignment on Gregory the Dolphin Slayer.”

“Yes, he’d fallen asleep in my class again, and I thought a little research into the darker side of Delphinidae history might engender a bit more interest in my subject for him.”

“What happened after that?”

“Mark Collins came to see me later that day and asked me to revoke the assignment.”

“Did he give a reason?”

“He said Chris was going through a difficult time and felt my punishment might be counterproductive.”

“Did you agree to his request?”

“Of course. In spite of what my students may think, I’m not a monster.”

The judge glared up at the gallery, silencing the chuckling that had arisen.

“Did he elaborate on what Chris’s problems were?”

“He said Chris had been diagnosed with a psychiatric illness. Schizophrenia, I think he called it.”

“That’s not true!” Maleena cried.

“Silence!” Justice Franks said. “Any more outbursts from the gallery and I’ll clear the court.”

Lorina glanced at Mark, who was gawking bewilderedly at Professor Tibbits.

“Professor,” Brian asked, “do you recall overhearing a conversation between the defendant and Christopher some six weeks prior to this?”

“Yes. It was after classes had ended for the day and I was going to see Mark to discuss a timetabling issue I was having with my third year class, but as I entered his outer office I realised he had a student with him so I waited outside. The student, when he emerged, was Christopher Smith.”

“Could you overhear their conversation?”

“That was not my intent, but as they were speaking quite loudly and the door was open, I couldn’t help hearing what they were saying.”

“What did they say?”

“Please bear in mind that English is not my first language and I do not bear the linguistic abilities of the Delphinidae, so my translation may be less than perfect. In essence, though, Christopher was threatening to disclose what Mark had been doing with the funding he’d received from Bluehaven, and Mark in turn told him there would be dire consequences if he did.”

A collective gasp rose from the gallery, but this time the judge made no effort to silence them. Rather, Lorina noticed, he was smiling, and a chill ran up her spine.

“Thank you, Professor Tibbits, I have no further questions,” Brian said.

“Mr Duffy?” the judge asked.

“Um, Professor, are you quite sure this is what you heard them saying?”

“As I said, I’m not sure of the exact words used, but the essence of their conversation is as I have stated.”

“You’re, um, no, of course not.”

“Do you have any more questions for this witness?” the judge asked.

“I, um, no.”

“Thank you, Professor. You may stand down. Mr Lachlan, do you have any further witnesses?”

“No, your honour. I rest my case.”

“Mr Duffy?”

“I call Sean McDougall.”

Mark’s friend stepped forward onto the stand, donning the translator headset.

“Mr McDougall, for how long have you known the defendant?”

“I’ve known Mark pretty much all my life. We became friends in our first year of school, and have been best mates ever since.”

“How would you sum up his character?”

“He can be a bit slow on the uptake sometimes, but he’s conscientious and tries to do his best. He’s pretty sensitive, too, a bit of a sook sometimes, and he wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“A fly?” the judge asked.

“An insect pest on Earth, you honour,” Duffy said. “So do you think he’d be capable of carrying out those acts of which he’s been accused?”

“No, it’s ridiculous,” Sean said. “Mark would pass out at the mere thought of cutting a dolphin’s throat.” He glanced at Mark, who indeed looked pale and in danger of fainting.

“Do you think Mark could be involved in any financial misappropriation?” Mr Duffy asked.

“Of course not. He’s as honest as the sky is blue.”

“Thank you Mr McDougall. I have no further witnesses, your honour.”

“Very well,” the judge said. “Mr Collins, do you have anything to say in your defence?”

Mark stood, running his hands through his hair while taking a deep breath. “I am innocent of these charges, your honour. I would never do anything to harm a Dolphin, or Chris for that matter, and I would never steal from the college or the Temple. Harry Tibbits is either lying or grossly misunderstood the conversation I had with Chris that day. I, I don’t know what else I can say. Someone is trying to frame me. If Chris were here he’d confirm that.”

“Where is Christopher Smith?” the judge asked.

“I believe he’s on Earth,” Brian said, “in a hospital receiving psychiatric care.”

The judge looked up at the gallery. “Maleena, is this true?”

“Yes, but...”

“Thank you, Mrs Smith. Do you have anything more to say, Mr Collins?”

“I, um, no I don’t, only to reaffirm my innocence.”

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” the judge said, “you have heard the evidence presented to this court, compelling or otherwise, and I ask you now to retire to consider your verdict.”

The jury stood to leave the room while court officials escorted Mark back to the holding cells.

“So now we wait,” Aaron said.

Jason glared at him, before turning and joining Jenny and Maleena who were consoling Lorina.

“What did I say?” Aaron asked the empty space around him, before dashing off after them.

* * *

Chris opened his eyes as Damon released his hand.

“Are you okay?” Damon asked.

Chris nodded. “Thirsty,” he whispered. Sandra dashed off to find a nurse, who returned with a glass of water.

“Sip it slowly,” she said as she handed it to him. “It’s good to see you back with us.”

Sandra stood perfectly still behind her, but as soon as the nurse turned away she leapt forward, grabbing Chris in a bear hug and almost pulling him out of the bed. She planted kisses all over his face as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back, not a Delphinidae peck on the nose but a full-blooded Earthling kiss.

“Thanks, Damon,” he whispered, glancing across at his friend who’d slumped wearily into the chair beside the bed. “I owe you one.”

“No worries,” Damon whispered, closing his eyes.

Chris looked around the room, taking in his grandmother and Ron standing hand in hand at the foot of the bed, and a young Delphinidae man sitting nervously in the corner. But the one person he most desperately needed to speak to wasn’t there.

“Where’s Mark?” he asked.

* * *

Justice Franks looked sternly at the jury as they re-entered the court. “Have you reached a verdict?”

“We have, your honour,” the chairman said. “We find the defendant guilty.”

“So be it,” the judge said, “and I believe you have reached the right decision. Mr Collins, would you come and stand before me?”

Mark stepped forward.

“You have been found guilty of murdering a Dolphin by a jury of your peers. In the past such a crime would have resulted in a mandatory death sentence, however since the fall of Morgoth, the judiciary has been placed under considerable public pressure not to impose capital punishment. The crime you have committed is both cowardly and abhorrent to all who value our close association with the Dolphins, and I therefore sentence you to transportation for life to Huntress, where you will spend your remaining days in service to the galaxy.”

The gallery erupted in chatter, but the judge silenced them.

“Furthermore,” he said, “you are deemed unfit to continue as consort to High Priestess Lorina, and your marriage to her is hereby terminated. It is well that she has not borne a child to you.”

“That’s not true!” Lorina cried. “I’m pregnant! I’m carrying Mark’s child!”

“Order!” the judge shouted as the gallery erupted. “While this is clearly a matter for the Temple and beyond my jurisdiction, I would recommend that the Order’s physicians be asked to terminate the pregnancy.”

He struck his gavel, standing and leaving via a side door while the officials led Mark away. Lorina covered her face and wept as Aaron and Maleena helped her from the court.

Part Two

The City of Towers

Waking the Dead

For the fourth time in succession, Bobby Smith raised the Championship cup above his head as the gallery erupted with cheering and applause. This year the competition had been particularly fierce, with a three-way tie at the top of the leader board after the regulation seventy-two holes. It wasn't until the fifth hole of the play-off that Bobby had hit a lucky eagle which his rivals had been unable to match, and he was declared the winner.

"You're my champion yet again," Hilda said, leaping onto the podium and kissing him on the nose. "I knew you could do it."

He put the cup down and hugged her tightly as the crowd cheered again. It brought back memories of his first day here when Hilda had escorted him across the bridge and rushed him to the divot course. He'd blitzed the field that day and taken the championship with a five stroke lead over his nearest rival. The intervening years had been wonderful, he thought, and yet he struggled to remember anything much at all apart from the championships. He shivered as a chill ran up his spine.

"What's up?"

"Nothing, just a goose walking over my grave."

"*You mean turkey,*" a voice said inside his head, and he shivered again.

"Make that a flock of geese," he said.

"Congratulations, Bobby!" the fat pompous man said into his face while furiously pumping his hand. "Four years running, that has to be a record, I'm sure. It looks like your reign's set in."

"*It looks like this rain's set in.*"

"The farmers will be happy," Bobby said without thinking, and the fat man gave him a puzzled look.

“Folks,” he said, holding Bobby’s hand high after recovering his composure, “I give you Bobby Smith, four times Divot Champion!”

Those remaining in the gallery cheered and clapped, but Bobby couldn’t help noticing that a fair number of spectators had already turned away and were walking back in the direction of the city.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Hilda asked. “You look pale.”

“I’m probably exhausted from the play-off. Nothing a drink or two won’t fix.”

“Come on then, I’ll take you to the club-house.”

Bobby blinked, and suddenly he was seated at the high table in the town hall, with Hilda on his left and the fat man standing beside him holding high a glass of sparkling wine. In front of him sat a half-eaten bowl of soup and the remains of some bread.

“Please be upstanding and join me in toasting Bobby Smith, our divot champion of the world!”

“To Bobby!” the crowd cheered, raising their glasses in salute, while Bobby stood, a little unsteadily at first, before responding in kind.

“What did we do this afternoon?” he whispered to Hilda once he was seated again.

“Um, we had a few drinks at the club, then just lazed around at home before coming here. Why?”

“I don’t remember any of it.”

Hilda looked at him in mild alarm, but before she could say anything the door at the rear of the hall opened and a man in red trousers and a white ruffled shirt strode in.

“Pray be upstanding for His Highness, Lord Morgoth,” he cried, and a moment later a tall, youthful man with olive-coloured skin and dark flowing hair entered the room, escorted by two more red-and-white guards. Morgoth himself was wearing nothing but a golden sword and sheath suspended around his waist, and Bobby had to force himself to stop staring at his impossibly-large genitalia.

“I see the emperor has new clothes,” someone whispered from the front row and Bobby almost burst out laughing.

Morgoth made his way to the front of the hall where he placed himself on the golden throne just to Bobby's right. He was sure it hadn't been there moments before, but unless thrones could magically appear out of thin air, he supposed it must have been.

"My most loyal subjects," Morgoth began, "today we honour one of the greatest sportsmen this city has ever produced. I'm told it takes great athleticism and courage to walk around our beautifully manicured fairways, trying to hit a little white ball fewer times than your opponent, so Bobby, please come forward and allow me to present you with this gold medallion and key to the city."

Morgoth stood as Bobby approached the throne, hanging a weighty medallion around his neck before handing him a blue silk-covered box with a tiny gold key embroidered on the lid. "Use it wisely," he whispered as Bobby accepted it.

A side door opened and a nondescript man in a full chef's outfit entered, pushing a serving trolley ahead of him. Upon it lay a baby dolphin with an apple wedged into its mouth.

"Bobby, would you do us the honour of carving?" Morgoth asked.

As Bobby stepped down to the trolley, the chef handed him a carving knife and showed him where to make the first cut. "They used to call me Gregory the Dolphin Slayer," he whispered, "but nowadays I just cook them and let the younger ones do the slaying."

Bobby recoiled a little as the dolphin's eye seemed to open and glare at him. He blinked...

...and was sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast with Hilda.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Perhaps I have."

"So what did you think of our great emperor? You know he once called himself Morgoth the Enlightened, but now he's dropped that title for some reason and just calls himself Lord Morgoth. Perhaps he's a little bewildered."

"Granddad," a tiny voice said inside Bobby's head, "*this is my friend Mark. The kids at school all call him Mark the Bewildered, but he's really pretty smart.*"

“Another goose crossing your grave?” Hilda asked. “It must have become a regular goose highway, don’t you think?”

“Sorry, but some really weird things have been happening to me since the tournament yesterday. I seem to be having blackouts and hearing voices.”

Hilda looked at him rather seriously. “Finish your breakfast and then we’ll go for a walk along the river. I think the time has come to speak of many things.”

She led him down a series of narrow streets that seemed neither particularly familiar nor unfamiliar. It was as if he was aware of their existence at a subconscious level, but if asked to describe the route to the river he’d have probably stared into space for a while and said something vague like, *‘it’s down that way.’*

Hilda, though, had no problems finding her way, and after rounding a bend they came to the ornamental gateway leading into the parkland along the bank. Bobby stopped for a moment to admire the view across the water, but although the sun was shining brightly and the air was clear, as he raised his eyes and tried to see what lay beyond the grassy slope of the far bank, it disappeared into a blue-green haze that merged with the sky.

“The same thing happens if you look in any direction away from the city,” Hilda said. Bobby rubbed his eyes and stared again into the distance, wondering why he’d never noticed it before.

Taking hold of his hand, she led him down the stone pathway towards the riverbank and the silver bridge spanning the water a few hundred metres to their left.

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” Hilda said.

“Well, I suppose it’s like I’ve been dreaming all my life, and I’m just waking up to find I know nothing about the world I’m in.”

“Do you remember anything of your life before you came here?”

“I, um, I’m not sure I was anywhere before I came here, but a few times since yesterday afternoon I’ve caught odd phrases and voices that I almost recognise.”

Hilda stopped, staring out across the water. Bobby tried to follow her gaze but could see nothing out of the ordinary. Suddenly she said, “It looks like this rain’s set in.”

“The farmers will be happy,” Bobby responded without thinking, but then a vision opened up in his mind’s eye and he found himself in the passenger seat of a car hurtling through torrential rain on a dark and stormy afternoon.

“No they won’t,” someone named Graham said from the driver’s seat. “Farmers are never happy. You watch, by tomorrow they’ll be complaining about the floods.”

Bobby stared out at the rain-swept road as a knot began to form in his stomach. Something about this road disturbed him, something deeply-rooted and powerful he couldn’t quite put a name to. His stomach continued to tighten.

“Are you okay?” Graham asked.

“Yeah, this bit of road gives me the – hey, watch out for that woman!”

A middle-aged lady in a white gown was standing on the road right in front of them, her blonde hair glowing in the stormy light. When the headlights illuminated her face he saw it was Hilda, but that came as no surprise.

“What woman? Where?” Graham asked.

“Are you blind or something?” Bobby yelled as they bore down on her.

“There’s no-one there!” Graham yelled back.

At the last moment, Bobby grabbed hold of the steering wheel, pulling it hard to the left and causing the back of the car to spin out on the wet road. He swung his head around to see if they’d hit her, but as he did the car’s wheels dropped into the ditch, causing it to flip into the air. He put his hands over his face as the world spun around him...

...and found himself back on the riverbank, still with his hands over his face. He slowly lowered them.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?”

Hilda turned towards him, her face drawn and sad. “Yes, everyone here is dead.”

“What is this place? Is it heaven or hell?”

“Neither, actually. It’s like a way-station, a resting-place on the journey to the afterlife, although some liken it more to a honey-pot.”

“A trap then?”

“Perhaps. It was built long ago by people who have since moved on, and its purpose remains a mystery.”

Bobby turned, looking directly into her eyes. “You caused the crash. You killed me.”

Hilda looked back at him, her face even more drawn and sad. “I did what I had to do.”

“Mary and Ron, are they...”

“Yes, they’re together, and happy.”

“I’m glad.”

“You remember everything now?”

Bobby stared out across the river again. “Yes, I think so.”

Hilda reached out for his hand again. For a moment he held back, but on seeing the genuine caring and love in her eyes, he relented and allowed himself to be led along the path towards the bridge. He glanced about at the lush parkland surrounding them, realising with a shock that in all the time he’d been here, he’d never seen it rain. He looked again across the river to where the green bank merged with the sky, and a shiver ran up his spine.

They reached the entrance to the bridge, only to find it blocked by a steel gate and a sign saying: *‘No Admittance, by order Commander Farley.’*

“Was this gate here before?” he asked, sure it hadn’t been when Hilda had first led him into the city.

“No, it’s a recent addition, very recent I think. Someone doesn’t want people leaving.”

Bobby stared back at the sign. “Brian told me about someone named Farley. Is this the same guy?”

“Yes. He was Morgoth’s aide and then afterwards led the uprising against our new government. One of his men was responsible for my death.”

“Brian told me about that too. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all water under the bridge. Literally, I guess,” she said, looking down at the river before them, and laughed.

“It looks like we have a newcomer,” Bobby said, pointing up at the slope on the far bank. A young man, dressed only in white shorts with a green trim, was running down towards them.

“A Delphinidae acolyte, judging by his clothes,” Hilda said. “Not very flattering, are they?”

The acolyte came to a halt as he reached the bridge, and Bobby noticed the far side was also barricaded. Then he saw the large bronze bell hanging from the railing, and another chill ran up his spine.

“Oh God, that’s my grandson!” he cried as he suddenly recognised him. “Don’t ring the bell, Chris, don’t ring it!”

Chris stared at the bell, but then must have heard Bobby’s warning for he turned away and instead scrambled down to the water’s edge.

“Go back!” Bobby yelled, waving him away, but Chris looked up, waving back before plunging into the water and swimming towards them.

“Fascinating,” Hilda said, smiling to herself. “I wouldn’t have thought it possible.”

“What do you mean? My grandson’s dead, and now he’s being drawn into this honey-pot trap of yours along with the rest of us, and all you can say is *fascinating*?”

“No, he’s not dead,” Hilda laughed, “and I doubt he’ll make it all the way across. He’s asleep and dreaming, but his spirit’s come far deeper into Sheol than any I’ve seen. Watch and learn, Bobby.”

Bobby watched as Chris approached the centre of the stream and became ensnared in the whirlpool that formed around him. When he disappeared beneath the surface Bobby cried out in despair, but Hilda reassured him that detached spirits couldn’t drown. Nonetheless Bobby breathed a sigh of relief when Chris’s head reappeared.

“What’s that with him?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It looks almost like a baby dolphin, but I don’t see how, oh.” Before she could finish, both Chris and the dolphin turned to mist and disappeared. “His dream’s ended. Either he’s woken or slipped into deeper sleep, but either way he probably won’t remember anything about this place.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

“I’ve had good teachers. Come and I’ll see if I can introduce you to them.”

Hilda led him away from the river and back into the city, turning into a dark and shadowy laneway that smelt of rats and raw sewage.

“How did you know Chris wasn’t dead?” Bobby asked.

“I knew as soon as he entered the water. Only the spirits of the living can do that; for us dead folk it’s an impenetrable barrier. There used to be a ferryman to carry the dead across, but then Hal Farley, that’s Brett’s father, built the bridge and we could move freely back and forth. Now it seems Brett’s closed it off, and I’d like to find out why.”

Around the next bend the laneway became even narrower and seedier. Ahead were two boys in their mid teens playing cricket, using an old wooden crate as the wicket and a broken fence paling as the bat. The taller of the two, and the one wielding the paling, had short blonde hair and looked reasonably civilised, although his shorts were rather tattered. The other boy, though, with long unkempt brown hair and feet that were almost black with dirt and grime, had an air of meanness about him that caused Bobby to wish they’d taken a different route. The torn denim shorts he wore sagged well below his waistline, revealing much of his posterior as he ran in to bowl. He released the ball, the high looping delivery skimming around the batsman’s legs before thudding into the crate.

“How’s that!” he cried as he leapt in the air, but then he caught sight of Bobby and Hilda and bristled, glaring at them with barely concealed malice. Bobby began backing away, his palms raised in apology for their intrusion, but Hilda stopped him.

“Nice delivery, Pedro,” she said, and the boy’s snarl turned into a broad grin. “You’re controlling the flight a lot better now.”

“I think I need a better bat,” the other boy said as he walked up to them. “Say, you’re Bobby Smith, aren’t you? The divot champion?”

“That’s me,” Bobby said, blushing.

“I’m Jim Hamilton, and the one with the attitude is Pedro Thorpe.”

“Hi,” Pedro said sheepishly, offering Bobby his hand. “I don’t play divot myself but my father does, although they called it golf where we came from.”

“You must be from Earth then,” Bobby said.

Pedro nodded. “Jim’s an Eridanian, though, which is why he’s such a poor batsman.”

Jim grimaced, while Pedro tugged at his shorts which had slipped perilously close to dropping all the way down to his knees.

“Is the boss about?” Hilda asked.

“Yeah, he’s down in the dungeon.”

“Thanks Pedro. We’ll catch up with you later.”

“Not if we catch you first.”

“Nice meeting you, Bobby,” Jim added as Hilda took Bobby by the hand and led him a little further down the alley and into an old dilapidated building.

“It’s a shame those two died at such a young age,” Bobby said once they were out of earshot of the boys.

“They didn’t. Jim was in his late seventies when he passed over, and Pedro, well his is an interesting tale that I must tell you when I have a bit more time.”

“But they only look fourteen or fifteen.”

“I thought you would have figured out by now that we see people here in the way they perceived themselves most prominently in life. Morgoth’s a classic example. When he died he was a shrivelled up old man, but there was a tapestry in his dining room showing him much as he appears now, complete with the enormous appendages.”

Bobby laughed. “I guess they go with his inflated ego.”

At the bottom of a rickety flight of stairs, Hilda knocked on a door that had once been painted white but had now mostly flaked away to a dingy grey. An elderly dark-skinned man opened it.

“Good morning Elko,” she said. “This is Bobby. He’s finally woken.”

“I’m pleased to meet you again,” Elko said, shaking him warmly by the hand. “I think we may have met once or twice in life.”

“Yes, of course, you were Aaron’s friend,” Bobby said. “You, um, died on Genesis, didn’t you?”

“That’s right, but my ashes were scattered in the Emu cave on Earth. They put *‘forever walk in the light’* on my epitaph, but so far I don’t seem to have been doing much of that.”

“Just what is it you do?”

Elko glanced at Hilda, who nodded.

“There are many levels of existence in the universe, both in the physical and spiritual realms. At a physical level there’s the real space

we're all familiar with, plus the intra-galactic and extra-galactic subspaces."

"I was a subspace power technician in life so I know a bit about those," Bobby said.

"Good. Now the equivalent to subspace in the spiritual realm is the place we call Sheol, and within that are also multiple levels. When a person dreams, his or her spirit enters Sheol at the uppermost level, a place I sometimes refer to as the Land of Nightmares, although good dreams as well as bad happen there.

"Below that is the expanse of darkness that has been used by the Dolphins to travel between worlds. There are others who inhabit that realm too, beings young Mark referred to as ogres, but little is known of them and they tend to avoid contact with other sentient beings.

"The spirits of the newly dead pass through Sheol on their way to what is regarded as the true spiritual afterlife. That passage is a one-way trip, though, so nothing is known of our ultimate destination."

"So what's this place here?" Bobby asked.

"What we have here is something of a mystery. It's part of Sheol, there's no doubt about that, but it has all the trappings of the physical world, such as sunlight, grass, the river and so forth. It's all an illusion, though, and a very clever one at that."

"Hilda called it a honey-pot."

"That's a very good description, as it does seem to attract those spirits who feel they have unfinished business in the real world."

"Was it made by Morgoth?"

"Good gracious, no. It's much older than that. Morgoth's predecessor, a nasty piece of work named Thornton, resides here, as do some who predate him. It's artificial, but ancient nonetheless."

"Is there any way out of here?"

Elko again glanced at Hilda. "The river surrounding the city forms a barrier the spirits of the dead can't enter, but there are crossings such as the bridge and the ferry. The ferryman is supposed to only bring people in, but he can be bribed to go the other way."

"*Don't pay the ferryman!*" said a voice inside Bobby's mind, and he shuddered.

"There are other ways as well," Elko continued, "for those who are a bit more adventurous, but we don't discuss them openly."

Bobby pondered this for a few moments. “What’s on the other side?”

“The grassy slope just leads back into the darkness of Sheol.”

“Oh, I see.”

“No, there’s not a lot of incentive to go across but it can be useful at times, like if one needs to contact the living.”

“Or cause a road accident,” Bobby said, giving Hilda a baleful look.

“Sometimes what we have to do is distasteful,” Elko said.

“Sure,” Bobby said, staring at the worn-out furniture in the corner of the room. “My death was pretty distasteful for me too.”

“Brett’s barricaded the bridge,” Hilda said, ignoring him.

“Yes, I know,” Elko said. “I asked him to.”

“What? Why?”

“You saw the boy, didn’t you?”

“You mean Chris?” Bobby asked. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“Your grandson has *everything* to do with this, and it’s crucial he not enter the city yet.”

“You’re not killing him too, no way!”

“Of course not. We need him very much alive.”

Bobby looked stunned.

“You asked me earlier what it is I do,” Elko said, “and so far I’ve avoided answering your question. There’s a wrongness in the universe that stems right back to ancient times, and your grandson and his companions are destined to set it right. My job, and that of Hilda and the others who aid me, is to help facilitate that, and we’d like you to work with us too.”

The door burst open as Pedro charged into the room. “You’d better come down to the river, quick!”

“What’s happening?” Elko asked.

“Gregory’s somehow got himself across to the other side, and he’s with that boy.”

“Chris?” Bobby asked.

“Come on,” Elko said, following Pedro back up the stairs. Bobby and Hilda scurried after them.

Jim was waiting for them next to the bridge, while on the opposite bank, the chef who'd served the roast dolphin in the town hall was sitting with Chris, talking to him about something. Beyond them stood a man dressed in white shorts with a gold trim, a Delphinidae uniform for sure but one Bobby didn't recognise. The man's brow was furrowed in deep concentration.

"Denounce them, then," Gregory said, turning back towards Bobby. "We have witnesses."

"No, Chris," the other man said. "Remember the shell Mark gave you."

"Who's he?" Bobby asked.

"His name's Damon," Elko said, "although he was once known as Damien."

"Denounce them!" Gregory yelled.

Chris spoke, too faintly for Bobby to hear.

"What is there to know, you fool! Just say you cast aside the Delphinidae and all their stupid teachings."

"No Chris, don't!" Damon pleaded.

"Say it!"

Chris again spoke, but his voice didn't carry across the water.

"What are you waiting for?" Gregory yelled. "Finish it!"

Damon stepped closer to them, glancing across at Elko before closing his eyes for a few moments. Suddenly he pointed down to the river, yelling, "Look, here comes the Easter Bunyip!"

As both Gregory and Chris turned to look, Damon leapt forward and grabbed Chris by the arm, pulling him out of Gregory's grasp.

"Run, Chris, and don't look back," he yelled as he pulled Chris back up the bank. Within moments, they merged into the blue-green haziness and disappeared. Gregory turned and glared across at Elko and the others, the madness in his eyes causing a shiver to run up Bobby's spine.

"Chris is safe for now," Elko said. "Come and I'll introduce you to the rest of my team."

Huntress

Mark woke to the sound of the siren denoting the change of shifts. The red glow of Huntress's perennial twilight permeated the room as he dragged himself off his bunk and pulled on his tattered shorts. The cell door swung open and he wandered down to the mess hall for his morning meal.

He'd been dreaming about Lorina again. They'd been walking hand in hand with their daughter on a beach somewhere, a cooling sea breeze tussling their hair and small waves washing over their feet. *'There are no sea breezes on Huntress,'* he thought as he grabbed a tray and joined the queue at the servery. His daughter, destined to become the next Delphinidae High Priestess, had looked beautiful in the dream, with her long blonde hair, bright blue eyes and infectious smile, and Mark had been as contented as could be. But then the raucous siren had shattered all that could have been, should have been, and he'd found himself hunched up on a lumpy mattress in his grimy prison cell.

"You're looking a bit better today," Harriett said as she handed him his bread and cereal.

"Umph," Mark mumbled, and she took that as a yes.

When he'd arrived on this desolate world three months earlier, he'd initially hoped his enhanced immune system, a legacy of the Barefooter genes he'd once carried, would protect him from the toxic atmosphere of Huntress. That hope had soon been dashed though, and as he'd grown weaker and experienced more and more difficulty breathing, he'd finally been forced to consult the facility's physician.

"Your lung damage isn't yet permanent," the doctor had said, "but it soon will be if you let it go untreated. We have a number of drugs

that can help your body adjust to the air, and the success rate is reasonably good.”

“How do you rate success?”

“Survival for more than five years is our standard benchmark.”

“And without the drugs?”

“I’d give you six months at the most.”

“I guess I don’t have much choice then.”

“Not if you want to live long enough for your appeal to be heard.”

His journey through subspace on board the prison transport ship had taken five hours, and his first glimpse of the world that was to become his permanent home had almost broken his heart. He’d read numerous descriptions of Huntress, a desolate world trapped in captured rotation around a red dwarf star, but they did nothing to prepare him for the sight of that planet. Scattered across its bleached sunlit side were lakes of molten rock belching brown and yellow clouds into the air, while in the other hemisphere, puckered craters visible only in reflected starlight lay frozen in perpetual darkness.

“The Colony’s built inside a large crater,” one of the officers told him as they descended towards the narrow twilight zone. “The walls protect it from the worst of the scorching and freezing winds, but the climate’s still pretty wild down there.”

Mark stared from the window, looking for anything remotely hospitable as they swept down towards their destination, but he saw nothing but barren rock and drifting sand. Turning away, he ran his hands through his hair and covered his face as the urge to cry overwhelmed him.

Lorina’s announcement of her pregnancy at the trial had come as a complete shock to him; under any other circumstances it would have been a shock of the most pleasant kind, for their childless state had not been for the want of trying. But the pleasure had turned instantly to pain as the judge had recommended their child be terminated by the Temple’s surgeons, and every time his thoughts turned back to those words, his heart broke again and again until it seemed there was nothing left to break.

Lorina’s lineage had extended back through a continuous succession to Loria, the one who’d been executed by Morgoth for

marrying his eldest son Martyn and bearing his child. Now, Mark thought as he sobbed, that line would finally be broken and, no matter how much his rational mind said otherwise, in his heart it would always, always be his fault.

“Come on Collins, we haven’t got all day,” the shift supervisor, a brutal man named Smithers, yelled from across the mess hall, and Mark hastily swallowed one last mouthful of cereal before dashing across to the airlock door where the rest of the work crew were waiting. He grabbed his canteen of recycled water, the only nourishment he’d have during his twelve-hour shift at the mine-face, and entered the lock.

The group of twenty workers and their guards scrambled across the courtyard and into the waiting bus. The bus at least had filtered air, and every bit less of the planet’s toxic atmosphere they had to breathe increased their chances of survival that much more. Mark made his way right to the back where he always sat alone. Being a convicted Dolphin-killer, and a juvenile Dolphin at that, meant he was mostly ostracised by the other inmates, but as he was in no mood for idle conversation that suited him just fine. He gazed from the window at the brightly lit compound as the bus passed through the gates and rumbled its way into the unchanging reddish twilight.

Huntress’s only export was quartz, the purest quartz in the galaxy according to the sales literature. Beneath the walls of the surrounding crater was a seemingly endless supply, and the days of Mark and his fellow workers were spent cutting it out piece by piece. The work was noisy, dusty and hot, and the casualty rate high. In the short time he’d been there he’d already witnessed five of his fellow workers simply drop dead from exhaustion, and he knew with growing certainty that eventually the same would happen to him. Often times, usually early in the shift, he’d wish that day would come sooner rather than later.

The first death had happened just a week after he’d arrived, and in a way it was his fault. Michael Jasmine was an elderly gentleman who’d taken Mark under his wing and shown him the ropes. Mark had judged his age to be early seventies and was shocked to learn, posthumously, that he’d really been forty-six. Michael had been working alongside Mark, using the pneumatic hammer to extract a

large crystal of quartz from the bedrock, when it had burst open a pocket of gas. In a muffled explosion, the area around them had instantly filled with smoke and dust.

“Hold your breath until it settles,” Michael had said, but in doing so he’d inadvertently taken a deep breath himself. He began coughing harshly, but the cough turned into a rasping wheeze as his face turned red and then purple. Collapsing to the floor of the mine, he took one final choking gasp before his breathing stopped altogether.

Mark immediately called for help, but when none was forthcoming he put his first aid training to work and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Smithers yelled as he came running towards them.

“He stopped breathing,” Mark gasped, almost breathless himself.

“What you’re doing will only force the poison from his lungs straight into the bloodstream. Didn’t they teach you anything?”

Mark shook his head, dazed.

“Help me get him outside,” Smithers said, but by then it was too late. Michael was already dead.

The steep climb from the bus up to the mine entrance was through soft sand littered with slivers of sharp quartz. Mark had been offered boots upon his arrival at the Colony, but after a lifetime of barefooting he’d declined. Having to prise out the occasional piece of quartz sharp enough to penetrate his tough soles was a small price to pay for the comfort and lightness of step his bare feet gave him, and at the end of each shift he’d watch on with a smugness so unlike him as his co-workers emptied piles of sand out of their boots and complained about their aching feet.

He pulled on his mining lamp as he entered the cavern, following the group into a tunnel that glittered dazzlingly like some fabulous cave of jewels from a fairy story. Unlike the fairytale caves, though, this one stank of burnt rock and dust, overlaid with the ever-present sulphurous odour drifting in from the sunlit side of the planet.

“The previous shift has uncovered a fine specimen that’ll fetch a good price if you lot can get it out in one piece,” Smithers said. “I’ll

make it worth your while if you do.” He passed Mark a chisel and hammer, setting him to work on one corner of the crystal.

Mark tapped cautiously away at the soft rock binding their prize, taking great care not to scratch the quartz. It was the largest single crystal he’d ever seen, and although he was no expert, to his untrained eye it looked flawless. He tapped away, and little by little the crumbling wall yielded up its treasure.

A large piece of rock flaked away and the crystal shifted slightly.

“Careful now, Collins,” Smithers said. “Harvey, get your arms under it, that’s right. Now Collins, can you get at that bit of rock right at the back there?”

Kneeling on the floor, Mark reached into the cavity with his chisel and was just about to tap it with his hammer when someone stomped on his foot. The chisel slipped and when the hammer struck it, it dug straight into the crystal, shattering it into half a dozen jagged pieces.

Smithers grabbed him and threw him back against the opposite wall. “You good-for-nothing son-of-a-bitch Dolphin killer!” he yelled as his fist hammered into the side of Mark’s face, slamming his head back against the wall. He slumped to the floor, unconscious and with blood streaming from his nose.

Smithers stepped over to his crumpled form and kicked him in the stomach. “Get the bastard out of here,” he said to the others while kicking him again for good measure.

Mark found himself standing on a grassy slope overlooking a broad river. On the far bank stood a city of white towers, while from across the bridge spanning the water came a dark-skinned man, an Aboriginal Elder by the look of him. Mark dashed down towards him, recognising him as he approached as someone he knew from long ago.

“Elko?” he asked.

“Yes, that was once my name.”

Mark wrapped his arms around him, but Elko gently pushed him off. “Time is short, Mark, and you must listen carefully to what I have to say. Lorina and your unborn child are safe for the moment and you mustn’t fret about them.”

“Safe?”

“Yes, far safer than you are right now. It’s a fine pickle you’ve got yourself into, I must say, but help is on the way for you, too, so don’t despair. There’s a task that must be done, and you have a role to play in that.”

“I didn’t kill the Dolphin, honest I didn’t,” Mark said.

“Of course you didn’t, and if you complete your quest those responsible will be brought to justice.”

Mark tried to hug him again, but Elko held him off. “You must go now. Time is short.”

Elko turned and walked back towards the bridge. Mark stood watching, wanting nothing more than to follow him. “GO!” Elko shouted, and he turned and trudged back up the hill.

The climb was tough and Mark quickly tired. Underfoot the grass had given way to soft sand littered with shards of quartz that spiked his soles, while the sky darkened to a dull reddish glow and the air grew stale with an underlying sulphurous stench. With his head beginning to ache, he collapsed to the ground as pain exploded in his stomach, curling himself up into a ball and closing his eyes as wave after wave of agony washed over him.

“There, over there,” said a voice from out of the gloom, and he tried to lift his head but couldn’t.

Mark opened his eyes. Standing over him were a middle-aged couple, dressed in light brown coveralls and with big woolly boots on their feet.

“I think he’s still alive,” the man said.

“Are you sure it’s him?” his companion asked.

“Positive. Just look at his feet.”

Mark moaned.

“Are you all right?” the man asked.

Mark nodded half-heartedly as he tried to pull himself up, but the pain in his head and stomach exploded and he thought he was going to pass out again.

“Here, let me help you,” the man said, taking hold of his arm and easing him up.

“Drink this, it’ll help,” the woman said, handing him a flask.

“What is it?” Mark whispered.

“Something good.”

He took a tentative mouthful, expecting either the bitter taste of medicine or the bite of alcohol. Instead the liquid had a wholesome earthy flavour, a bit like pumpkin soup, and he drank several more mouthfuls.

“That’s enough,” the woman said. “Too much and it’ll make you sick.”

Almost immediately his pain began to fade as the warmth of the liquid flowed through him. His breathing became easier, too, while the air seemed to lose its sulphurous smell.

“Better?”

“Much, yes,” Mark said. “Thank you.”

“Come,” the man said, “we must get you to safety before those men come back looking for your corpse.”

Mark gingerly stood as his two rescuers helped him up the slope towards the rim of the crater.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Edwin, and this is my wife Val.”

“I’m Mark.”

“Yes, we know,” Edwin said.

“How do you know? Where are you taking me?”

“Too many questions,” Val said. “Now mind your feet, the rocks here can be sharp and treacherous.”

Mark stared down at the ground in front of him as he stepped cautiously forward.

“We’re what the colonists call fringe-dwellers,” Edwin said. “We live on the plains beyond the crater wall, and by and large keep to ourselves.”

Mark nodded. His mind was full of questions, but he thought it best not to ask just now. They climbed in silence, stumbling occasionally as the loose rock gave way beneath them and triggered off small avalanches in their wake, until at last they reached the top of the rim. Mark looked around, and for the first time since arriving on this world, he saw beauty in the landscape.

Stretching all the way from the crater to the horizon was a reddish-brown plain, dotted here and there with smaller craters. To his right the sky was lighter, and in the distance he thought he could see the

tips of mountains glowing in the sunlight of a perpetual dawn. On his left, the sky turned purple as it merged with the land in a misty haze, while just above the horizon a few stars were visible. He breathed deeply, filling his lungs with clean cool air.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, and Edwin and Val both nodded.

“This world can be harsh and cruel,” Val said, “but there’s much beauty too if you know where to look.”

“This way,” Edwin said, leading him along a hidden path winding its way down the outside of the crater.

Mark lost track of how long they’d been walking. It was several hours at least, but for all he knew it could have been days. Here the sky never changed, so telling the time without a clock was next to impossible.

He thought the walk would have tired him, but he seemed to be gaining in strength the further they went. *‘At this rate I could walk all the way round the planet and not raise a sweat,’* he thought, and chuckled.

“The pummel juice is doing you good,” Val said.

“It’s magic,” Mark answered, feeling a spring in his step he’d forgotten he had.

Ahead were what appeared to be dead trees on either side of the track they were following. “Was there once a forest here?” he asked.

“There still is,” Edwin said. “When the rains come, the desert blooms and we collect the pummel fruit we need to survive.”

“It rains here?”

“Not very often, but with the right combination of winds it sometimes buckets down for five or six hours. I hope you have the chance to see it before you leave.”

“Leave?”

“Too many questions,” Val said. They walked on in silence.

The track entered a hidden valley, following what was now clearly a dry watercourse. Interspersed between the pummel trees were bare bushes, some still bearing a few shrivelled leaves. As much as he wanted to go home, Mark hoped he’d have the opportunity to see this place in bloom.

“We’re almost there,” Edwin said, picking up the pace a little.

A village appeared from behind a rocky outcrop as they rounded the next bend. The buildings, made of rough brick and stone, had lights shining behind some of the windows, but that was the only sign of life as Edwin and Val led him down the deserted street and into a cottage on the right. Standing in the doorway was a teenaged boy, similarly dressed in coveralls and woolly boots.

“You found him then?” he asked.

“Yes,” Val said. “Mark, this is our son, Clem.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Clem said.

“Likewise,” Mark said.

The front door opened into a spacious living room with lounge chairs either side of a small table. In the far corner an alcove housed one of the galaxy’s standard ultranet terminals, the flashing images on the screen catching Mark’s attention.

“Homework,” Clem said.

A smell of cooking permeated the room, causing Mark’s stomach to rumble. “Something sure smells good,” he said.

“I hope you like it,” Clem said. “I’m not much of a cook.”

Val led Mark down a hallway to a room at the back of the house. “You can bunk down here for now,” she said. “The bathroom’s the next door on the right if you want to freshen up before dinner. I’ll just grab you a towel.”

In the bathroom mirror Mark caught a glimpse of an ugly beaten-up face caked with dried blood, and for a moment didn’t recognise it as his own. He turned on the shower, letting the clean cold water wash over him before lathering up the soap. The floor of the cubicle soon turned black.

Some ten minutes later he emerged, cleansed and feeling a whole lot more human. He gave his hair another rub before wrapping the towel around his waist and wandering back out to the kitchen. His stomach rumbled again as he smelt the cooking food.

“Ah, so there really was a person hiding under all that dirt and blood,” Val said as she pulled out a chair for him. Clem passed him a plate overflowing with steaming vegetables and a tender white meat, while Edwin handed him a glass of red wine.

“A toast of thanks to my saviours,” Mark said as he raised his glass.

“You should be thanking the old man,” Clem said, and Val raised her eyebrows.

“Later,” Edwin said. “Now dig in, Mark, and there’s plenty more if you want seconds.”

“Or thirds,” Clem added.

The food was the best Mark had ever eaten, or so it seemed at the time. He’d gladly accepted a second helping, and then Val had brought out a dessert made from pummel fruit. As he ate his senses came alive, as if he was experiencing the world anew.

“This pummel fruit is really something special,” he said.

“It’s a native of this world,” Edwin said, “and contains counter-agents to the toxic fumes that drift in from the sunlit side. As long as we have a little each day we’re immune to their effects and can live a normal healthy life here.”

“It doesn’t have any of the nasty side effects that the colonists’ drugs have, either,” Val said.

“So why don’t they just use the fruit?” Mark asked.

“They don’t know about it,” Clem said.

Mark looked at the boy, but he just smiled and turned away.

“Coffee, Mark?” Val asked.

“Yes please.” He hoped it would be as good as the food and the wine, and he wasn’t disappointed.

“You should rest now,” Edwin said, “and tomorrow we’ll show you around the village.”

“I don’t know how to thank you for all you’ve done for me,” Mark said as he stood, “and I don’t understand why you’re doing it.”

“We’re doing it because you’re a good and decent man,” Val said, “and because someone asked us to help you. It’s an honour and a privilege to have you sharing our house and our food.”

Mark blushed. “But who, no, too many questions, right?”

“Right,” Val laughed, and Mark laughed too. Clem gazed up at him, and for a moment it felt like something had touched his mind. He shivered as the words *‘forever walk in the light’* echoed inside his head, but then it passed as Clem got up and cleared away the empty plates.

* * *

Mark had slept soundly, and upon waking had been served a light meal. Breakfast? Lunch? It didn't seem to matter here, where the daylight never varied. They'd eaten more pummel fruit before leaving the house, and once again a feeling of well-being washed through him.

"The fruit gives us vivid dreams," Edwin said as they walked down the road towards the centre of the village. "Sometimes we wander beyond this realm, to a place with a river and a city of many white towers."

Edwin's words triggered something in Mark's mind, like a half-forgotten dream, as a chill ran up his spine. He turned to see Clem watching him, smiling.

"In adults these are but vague images barely remembered upon waking, but our children go deeper, it seems, and can communicate with those who reside there. It was Clem who received the message about you."

Clem looked up at his father, who nodded. "There's an old man I sometimes see," he said. "I suppose he's my contact with that realm. He's kindly and patient, not like our teachers at school, and has told me much over the years."

Val gave him a reproaching look, but he ignored her and kept speaking.

"A few months ago he told me someone dear to him had been wrongfully imprisoned in the Colony, and wanted me to ask my parents if they'd be willing to aid him should the need arise."

"Of course we were happy to offer whatever help we could," Val said. "Our dislike for the colonists is deeply rooted."

"He told me his friend had once been called *Mark the Bewildered*," Clem continued, "and that he'd been wrongfully accused of killing a Dolphin. Of course you were quite famous as the boy who toppled Morgoth, and your trial was headline news a few months ago."

Mark blushed.

“The old man came to me again yesterday, saying you’d been hurt and left to die near the opening to their mine in the crater wall, and when I told my parents they went off immediately to try to find you.”

“I owe you my life then,” Mark said, and this time Clem blushed.

“He also told me to contact a man named Frank Halliday and let him know what was happening,” Clem said. “I did that while Mum and Dad were out looking for you, and he said he’d come here as soon as he could.”

“I know Frank,” Mark said. “He’s helped my family over several generations.”

They’d reached the central square of the village, a paved area surrounding a large pool of water. An island rose from its centre and upon that grew a pummel tree in full bloom, its iridescent yellow flowers glowing in the twilight amongst its dark green leathery foliage.

A few other people were out and about, and whenever Mark turned, he’d see them staring at him in wonder. He staggered a little, suddenly overwhelmed by everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, his vision blurring as tears began filling his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Val asked.

Mark sniffled, his lower lip trembling. “I guess it’s all been a bit too much for me.”

“Come and sit down,” she said, steering him towards a stone bench overlooking the pool and sitting alongside him. Edwin remained standing, while Clem squatted on the ground, staring in awe at the well-padded soles of Mark’s feet.

“We’re a pretty tight-knit community,” Val said, “keeping mostly to ourselves and staying well clear of the machinations of the galaxy, so strangers tend to attract a fair bit of attention, particularly one as famous as you.”

“I suppose I should be used to it by now, but I’m not, not really. I never wanted to be famous and I cringe whenever people say how honoured they are to meet me or stare at me as if I’m some kind of divine being.”

“I understand, Mark, and I’m sorry if we made you feel uncomfortable. Clem! Stop staring at his feet, for Loria’s sake!”

“That’s okay. Everyone keeps telling me I’m too sensitive for my own good, and I suppose it’s true. I thought my stint in the Colony would’ve hardened me a little, but apparently not.”

“And a good thing too,” Edwin said. “A few more sensitive people about would go a long way towards healing this galaxy’s ills.”

Mark nodded while gazing at the pool. Something broke the surface, and for a moment he caught a glimpse of a silvery-scaled fish. “Where’s the water in the pool come from?” he asked.

“Below us is a vast artesian basin which is the source of the water we use for our day-to-day living,” Val said. “There’s a natural spring beneath the pool and the level stays fairly constant, except when it rains and it overflows and floods the greenhouses.”

“Greenhouses?”

“Yes, where we grow our crops. Come and I’ll show you.”

She led him around the pool and onto a road that descended further into the valley, with Edwin and Clem following close behind. Clem had removed his boots and was walking barefoot, his gaze still fixed on Mark’s broad feet.

Beyond the last of the houses stood row upon row of low glass-walled buildings, illuminated from within by bright yellow lights. As they drew closer, Mark could see several of the villagers tending to their crops, while fine mist sprays kept the air humid and the plants watered.

“Further out are small land-holdings raising grain-fed livestock and poultry,” Val said. “We’re pretty much self-sufficient, although I must admit we do take advantage of the occasional passing traders.”

“Who are they?” Mark asked.

“Mostly unregistered subspace ships, too small for the authorities to bother with. They stay away from places like the Colony, but are happy enough to do business with us.”

“Speaking of the traders, here comes one now,” Clem said, pointing off towards a cleared area beyond the greenhouses. Mark squinted and stared in that direction, finally picking out the tiny moving object against the reddish sky.

“Your eyes are a lot better than mine,” he said. Clem looked at him and smiled.

Mark watched as the approaching ship drew closer to the ground. “Why’s it coming in so low?”

“It’s following a blind spot in the Colony’s radar,” Edwin said. “The less they know about the comings and goings here, the better.”

“I can understand all this cloak and dagger stuff going on in the days of Morgoth, but why now? I would’ve thought with the new government everything would be okay.”

“You’re very naïve, Mark,” Val said. “The leopard’s changed its spots, that’s all. The more obvious atrocities committed under the previous administration have disappeared from view, but that doesn’t mean they’ve stopped. All governments have enemies, regardless of whatever veneer they paint on the surface, and so they need places like this to quietly dispose of them. You didn’t think your bashing was an accident, did you?”

Mark looked bewildered again. “But who?”

“I can’t say for certain, but my guess would be Kevin Simmons.”

Mark turned white, and Edwin thought he might be about to pass out. “Kevin’s my father-in-law,” he whispered.

“You mean *was* your father-in-law,” Val said. “Your marriage was dissolved by the court, remember? You’re just an embarrassment to him now.”

Mark placed his hands over his face before running them through his hair. “You’re right. I’m very naïve.”

A cold dagger pierced his heart. *If Kevin was responsible for what had happened to him, could it have been Kevin’s parents, Ron and Mary, who’d framed him with the Dolphin?* They’d certainly had access to his office, and probably his laundry for that matter. He could have sworn they were utterly incapable of anything like that, but he was, after all, naïve. He ran his hands through his hair again, shaking his head in confusion.

“Here’s the ship,” Clem said, breaking the awkward silence that followed. “It’s Brannigan’s by the look of it.”

“Who’s he?” Mark asked, glad for the change of subject.

“They’re a company of livestock breeders from Amber,” Edwin said. “We swap breeding stock with them occasionally to help keep the gene pools diverse.”

Mark couldn't understand why that sort of operation had to be kept hidden from the government, but said nothing. Best not to know.

The ship settled onto the clearing about twenty metres from where they were standing. A ramp unfolded from beneath it, before the hatch opened and the livestock began descending. Mark gaped, for the livestock wasn't the four-legged kind he'd been expecting. Instead, emerging from the ship were Chris, Damon and Pip, followed closely by Frank Halliday.

"We'd better find shelter," Frank said after giving Mark a cursory nod. "It looks like there's some pretty wild weather heading this way."

Politics

Paul Hoskins tapped on Kevin's door before entering with a glass of his favourite Meridian whiskey. Kevin accepted it, nodding his thanks before taking a sip.

"These accursed opinion polls," he said. "They have that Cornipean upstart ten points ahead of me, can you believe that?"

"From the way the media's been carrying on over the dolphin-slaying affair and Lorina's pregnancy, it doesn't surprise me," Paul said, "but I've just received news that might bring all this to an end."

"What is it?"

"Mark's dead."

"What?"

Paul pulled a note from his pocket and began reading. "*Mark Collins, formerly known as Mark the Bewildered, died today as a result of injuries sustained in a mining accident on Huntress. Three months ago, Collins had been convicted in the infamous dolphin-slayer trial and was serving a life sentence in the penal colony on that world. His death brings a much-needed closure to this sordid affair and few in the galaxy will mourn his passing.*"

Kevin took another sip of whiskey. "Good-for-nothing show-pony, good riddance I say. Has this been made public?"

"Not as yet, sir. The Colony wanted to clear the wording with us before releasing it."

"Give them the go-ahead, and I'll prepare a statement on behalf of the Temple."

"As you wish, sir."

Paul turned to leave, but Kevin waved him back. "Have you been able to locate Lorina?"

“Not as yet, sir, although I expect this news will flush her out. I believe she’s in hiding on Earth with your nephew’s friend, a young lady named Sandra Wolfe.”

“Perhaps I should call my parents again. They haven’t admitted it, but I’m sure they know where she’s hiding.”

* * *

Mary hung up the phone before turning to face Ron. She looked ashen.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“That was Kevin. He said Mark was killed on Huntress.”

“What? How? There must be some mistake, surely.”

“He said it was a mining accident.”

“Deaths on Huntress are never accidental. Someone wanted him silenced.”

“But who?”

“I don’t know,” Ron said, but he thought perhaps he did. He’d never tell Mary, though, he just couldn’t.

“Poor Lorina,” Mary said. “She’ll be devastated.”

“Jenny and Jason too. We’d best go tell them.”

Jason took hold of Jenny’s hand and stared down at his feet. For a moment the world seemed to waver out of existence, until a single tear rolled down his cheek and fell to the floor, making it solid again.

“*I will go,*” Mark’s seven-year-old voice echoed inside his head, taking him back to that fateful day on Genesis when his son had been snared by the political maelstrom of that distant galaxy. How he wished he could turn the clock back to that moment, how he wished he’d had the strength to say, “*No, he’s staying here with us, find some other boy to fulfil your goddamned prophesy.*” But he hadn’t, and Mark had gone off to slay Morgoth, and now he was dead. Dead on that hell-hole they called Huntress where the sun never shone and the very air rotted your lungs.

“*You have been found guilty of murdering a Dolphin by a jury of your peers,*” said the Cornipean judge who’d decided Mark was guilty from the moment he’d first laid eyes on him. Mark, who’d

once freaked out when his friend Sean had cut his finger on one of his toys, guilty of cutting the throat of a Dolphin? It was laughable, impossible, yet he'd been convicted and now he was dead.

"The crime you have committed is both cowardly and abhorrent to all who value our close association with the Dolphins, and I therefore sentence you to transportation for life to Huntress, where you will spend your remaining days in service to the galaxy." When Mark had first returned from that galaxy, Jason recalled how a pod of Dolphins had appeared in the bay on Genesis, and he'd swum amongst them as they'd frolicked and rejoiced in the fulfilment of their prophecy. It was a moment Mark had often spoken of in later years. *"A moment of pure bliss,"* he'd said when they'd been camping alone under the stars, *"a moment when I felt the enormous power of the Dolphins' collective consciousness. It was like I'd been alive since the dawn of time and yet was newly born."* Where were those Dolphins when Mark had died? Were they rejoicing now?

Jenny squeezed his hand.

Mark had been drawn back to that galaxy ten years later, when the Dolphins had used Christopher to do their dirty work for them. Chris had killed a man to save him, such was his devotion, and that act had almost cost him his sanity. He'd wept and torn at his hair when told of Mark's conviction, and now had gone off with Damon and Pip on some foolhardy rescue mission. Had they tried and failed? Was that how Mark had died? Was Chris dead too? Jason moaned, and again the world seemed to waver out of existence.

"Honey?" Jenny asked, wrapping her arms around him. "Are you okay?"

Before he could answer, the telephone started ringing. He disentangled himself from her and drifted out to the kitchen to answer it.

"Uncle Jase, it's Chris," the distant voice said, answering one of his questions. *"Mark's free!"*

Jason's mind simply didn't register what Chris had said. "We know, we've just heard the news. How did it happen?"

"News sure travels fast," Chris said, sounding a little bewildered. Now Jason was getting confused. *"I'll put him on and he can tell you himself."*

“Huh?”

“Dad, is that you? This connection’s pretty bad.”

“Mark?”

“Yeah. I, um, look, there’s a storm about to hit here and I can hardly hear you. I’ll call you back later, okay?”

Before Jason could say anything, there was a deafening crash of static and the line went dead. He hung up the phone in a daze.

“Who was it?” Jenny asked.

“Huh?”

“Who was on the phone?”

“It was Chris,” Jason said, staring into space and still trying to comprehend what had just happened. “I, I think he said Mark was free, and then Mark came on and said something about a storm before I lost him.”

“Mark? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, pretty sure.”

“What’s going on?”

“Politics, by the sound of it,” Ron said.

* * *

Kevin stood atop the steps of the new Government House on Meridian, while gathered before him were hordes of reporters and cameramen.

“Four months ago the life of a Dolphin was taken, and that heinous crime has now been repaid with a life. While I have sympathy for Mark’s family and friends, there can be no doubt his death was a just conclusion to this sad and sorry affair. Mark was twice this galaxy’s hero and that cannot be denied or forgotten, but sadly the boy who saved us from Morgoth and Farley didn’t grow into the man we’d all hoped he’d become.

“But let’s now move forward as we begin our new era of peace and prosperity. In the policies I have laid before you are the cornerstones of a strong and sustainable future, a future in which no one need suffer hunger or fear in any of our communities, from the great cities on Cornipus to the most humble of farms on Sontar or the mines on Ignus.

“In education we’ll continue the great work begun by Father Ron Simmons and the late Priestess Hilda, and in our first term of office we’ll establish a minimum of five hundred new schools amongst the poorer communities of Amber, Sontar and Ignus. We’ll also provide additional funding to allow the universities on Cornipus to accept greater numbers of students from those worlds, so that the talented amongst them can return as doctors, engineers, teachers and artists to raise the standard of living in their communities to what we have come to expect on the more affluent worlds.

“Likewise in health care, for the first time in the history of this galaxy we’ll establish a network of clinics on Amber, Sontar and Ignus, offering new hope to the sick and infirm on those worlds. For too long they’ve been second class citizens of our galaxy, to be used and discarded by powerful off-world landlords, and that practice has to stop.

“All this will be achieved without any increased tax burden on the communities of Meridian, Cornipus and Hazler. Our commitments will be fully funded from efficiency savings and by reducing the horrendous waste amongst the military bases on Nimber and Pulper. Indeed, I’m proud to announce today that, if elected, I will work towards the closure of those bases altogether, and return our shipyards to civilian ownership. Let the star destroyers and planet imploders be consigned to the history books!”

He raised his hands to silence his enthusiastic supporters.

“Only by giving us your support in the forthcoming elections can we make this galaxy into a free and open society where effort is fairly rewarded no matter who you are or where you live. I thank you.”

The cheering and applause wasn’t perhaps quite as great as Kevin had hoped for, but it was a positive sign and his campaign needed all the positive signs it could get. He turned to face the media contingent.

“Mr Simmons, won’t your policies on Amber and Sontar lead to higher food and clothing prices here?”

“I’m glad you asked that question,” Kevin said. “Our economists are confidently predicting that any increase in costs will be more than offset by the gains in efficiency that will flow from having an enthusiastic, well-educated and healthy workforce on those worlds. While there may be some initial price rises, these will be short term

only and the benefits of our policies will quickly flow through to all our worlds.”

“What will become of the displaced soldiers from Nimer and Pulper?”

“They’ll be redeployed amongst the civil defence organisations of each world. We don’t expect there to be any net job losses.”

“Where’s High Priestess Lorina?”

Kevin’s smile faded. “She’s currently recuperating at a retreat on Earth. Mark’s conviction and now death has been quite a shock for her, as I’m sure you can appreciate. We expect her to be back performing her duties soon.”

“Will her pregnancy be terminated?”

“That’s a matter for her to decide. The Dolphins have indicated they’ll accept her daughter as her heir and successor, should she decide to continue with the pregnancy, and the Temple has issued no directive to her either way.”

“What will become of Mark’s body?”

“Alas he died in a rock fall and his body couldn’t be retrieved without risking the lives of other workers.”

“Has the Temple chosen a replacement consort for the High Priestess?”

“It’s not the practice of the Temple to choose a consort, however I understand there have been many suitors. I expect Lorina will make an announcement upon her return.”

“Will the Delphinidae College on Earth be closing now?”

“No decision has yet been made, but already many of the students have transferred their studies to Bluehaven. It’s my expectation that it will close.”

“Mr Simmons, how can we be sure your government will be run any better than the fiasco on Earth?”

“The day-to-day operation of the College was largely independent of the Temple. Had we been aware of what was happening there we would have stepped in earlier, I assure you.”

“Can you give us any idea of what this whole debacle has cost?”

“I’m sorry, but no costing has been made at this stage. Let me say, though, that all costs incurred will be covered by the Temple’s own funds and there’ll be no burden on taxpayers.”

“Will you be standing down as Bluehaven Head of State if you lose this election?”

Kevin paused for a moment. “Losing is not my intention.”

“Well that was a disaster,” Kevin said as he sipped his whiskey.

“It could have been worse,” Paul said.

“Not by much.” He drained his glass.

“Another one, sir?”

“Yes, I think so.”

* * *

Lorina was swimming in the sea as a lone Dolphin approached her.

“My Lady, I bring you tidings from the home-world.”

“I am honoured and forever in your debt,” she replied in the customary manner.

“The infidel Mark is dead, and the debt of a life has been repaid.”

“What?”

“The infidel Mark is dead, and the...”

“Yes, I heard you the first time. But, but how?”

“It is reported to have been an accident, and a most fortuitous one it would seem.”

“But Mark was innocent!”

“So was the Dolphin he killed.”

“He *didn't* kill the Dolphin, someone else did.”

“It matters not, the debt has been repaid. Mark fulfilled his role in the prophecy some years ago, and as he is not of the Delphinidae, his life or death is of no consequence.”

“It’s of great consequence to me!”

“I’m sorry, my Lady, I don’t understand.”

“Mark is my husband, and I love, loved him.”

“My understanding is that your marriage to Mark was dissolved, and so he is no longer of any consequence.”

“You’re inhuman!”

“Indeed, but I thought that was obvious. Have I upset you, my Lady?”

“Yes, you have upset me greatly.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. Now go!”

“As you wish, my Lady, but first I must convey a message to you from your father. He would like you to return to Bluehaven at your earliest convenience.”

“Would he now?”

“That is what I said, my Lady.”

“Well you can tell my father if he or the Temple had anything whatsoever to do with Mark’s death, he can find himself a new High Priestess.”

“As you wish, my Lady. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No. Wait, yes. I want Mark’s body returned here as quickly as possible.”

“That will not be possible, my Lady.”

“May I ask why not?”

“Yes, you may ask.”

“Well?”

“Oh, you wish me to answer the question. Mark’s body has not been found.”

“What?”

“Mark’s body has not been found. It is reported he died in a rock fall on Huntress, and his body cannot be recovered without endangering the safety of others.”

“Tell my father to retrieve it himself if he has to, but I want Mark’s body returned here.”

“As you wish, my Lady. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, you’ve done enough already.”

“Thank you, my Lady. I wish you a pleasant day.”

“And I thank you for your tidings.”

The Dolphin bowed his head before disappearing beneath the waves. Lorina stood in silence in the chest-deep water, torn between anger and grief as the tears welled in her eyes. Her hand trembling, she took hold of the golden dolphin that hung around her neck, ripped it from its chain and hurled it as far as she could into the sea.

* * *

“The Cornipean’s now fifteen points ahead,” Kevin sighed. “Curse that Mark Collins; he’s haunting me even in death.”

“Perhaps, sir, if I might suggest, well an acquaintance on Cornipus has heard some interesting stories about their candidate’s leisure activities that, um, might become embarrassing for him should they be publicly disclosed.”

“I see,” Kevin said, stroking his chin. “Have a chat with your friend, Paul, but be discreet. We can’t risk any scandal being traced back to us.”

“But of course, sir.”

There was a cursory knock on the door as Lorett entered, looking like a storm about to unleash its fury on those unfortunate enough to be in its path. She thrust a small golden dolphin into Kevin’s hand.

“What’s this?” he asked. “It’s not Lorina’s, is it?”

“Indeed it is, and she told the Dolphin who delivered it that if you or the Temple had anything to do with Mark’s death, we could find ourselves another High Priestess.”

“But she can’t resign from her post, can she?”

“Technically no, as it’s an inherited title, but she could refuse to perform her duties and that would have dire consequences for the Temple.”

“Do you think she’d go that far?”

Lorett glanced down at the amulet.

“I see,” Kevin said. “I suppose we’d better find her and talk some sense into her. Perhaps after the election might be a good time.”

“Perhaps now might be an even better time.”

“That’s impossible. I have engagements right up until polling day.”

“Reverend Mother,” Paul said, “might I suggest you take Owen Lachlan with you instead. He seems to have established a good rapport with your daughter.”

“Yes, perhaps you’re right. Kevin and Lorina would only end up fighting if he came, I suppose. Very well, I’ll take Owen.”

She turned and left the room, but not before giving Kevin another baleful look.

“How did I get myself into this mess?” he moaned.

* * *

Lorina emerged from the water just as Sandra came running down the sand.

“What’s wrong, my Lady?”

“It’s Mark, he’s, he’s dead.”

“No he’s not. I just had a call from his father, and he said he spoke to Mark not fifteen minutes ago.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“I see.” Lorina ran her hands over her face, wiping away some of her tears. “Where is he then?”

“I’m not sure, but he’s with Chris apparently.”

“I have to speak with him.”

“Jason said they lost contact because of a storm, but Mark said he’d call back.”

“Take me to Jason’s home, then.”

“You’re taking a big risk, going back there.”

“I don’t care; I have to speak to Mark. The Dolphins can no longer be trusted.”

Sandra’s jaw dropped.

“I can’t explain now,” Lorina said. “Just get me to Jason.”

* * *

“Heading tonight’s news, Alistair Blunt, the Cornipean candidate in next week’s Supreme Councillor election, has angrily denied reports that he’s been engaged in the outlawed sport of bunyip baiting, and has accused his opponents of resorting to dirty tricks. True or not, the reports have impacted heavily on the opinion polls, with Blunt and his Bluehaven opponent Kevin Simmons now neck and neck for the galaxy’s top job. For the latest from Cornipus we cross live to our correspondent Richard Spencer.”

“There were angry scenes tonight when members of the Bunyip Protection Society clashed with Alistair Blunt and his contingent as they arrived at a fund-raising dinner in Benzania. Young men and women, dressed in bunyip costumes, hurled fruit and eggs at the

official motorcade as it entered the grounds of the College of Dentistry. Society President, Emily Hindmarsh, expressed outrage at the alleged activities of Blunt and his cohorts. 'Even Morgoth opposed this barbaric sport,' she told reporters earlier today. 'How can we call ourselves civilised when our leaders engage in this sort of activity?' That's the question many voters will be asking themselves come Saturday week."

"In other news, there was high drama on Shimmel today when a luxury star cruiser was forced to make an emergency landing..."

Kevin turned him off.

"Good news at last," Paul said.

"Indeed, and I have you and your friend to thank."

"I'm happy to be of service, sir. Speaking of which, that Hindmarsh woman has asked you to address a rally next Tuesday in support of the bunyips. Do you wish to attend?"

"But of course. You can be sure the media will be there in force, and it'll be a good opportunity for me to unveil my new bunyip protection policy."

"I'll make the necessary arrangements, sir."

"Thank you, Paul. Has there been any word from Earth?"

"Not as yet, sir, but Loretta and Owen would have only just arrived there."

"Yes, I'd forgotten how far away that accursed planet is."

"I'll inform you as soon as I have any news. By the way, Lorina has requested that Mark's body be returned to Earth."

"That's impossible. I understand from the Governor of the Colony that he was swept into a crevice by a rock slide, and even if they could excavate it without causing another avalanche, there probably wouldn't be much left of him anyway."

"That's what I thought. Perhaps we could just send her one of the rocks that killed him."

"Somehow I don't think that'd go down too well with my daughter."

"You're probably right, sir. Can I get you a drink?"

"Thank you, Paul, and help yourself to one as well."

* * *

Lorina put down her knife and fork. "That was delicious, Jenny."

"Thank you. Would you like some dessert?"

"I probably shouldn't, but I will."

"Mary? Ron?"

They both shook their heads.

"I'll get it," Jason said as Jenny started to stand. "You stay here and keep our guests company."

He walked out to the kitchen and was about to open the refrigerator when the telephone rang.

"Dad?"

"Mark? Is that you?"

"Yeah, but the storm's done a lot of damage here and I don't know how long this connection will hold up. Everyone's okay, although we'll probably be stranded here for a while."

"Where are you?"

"Probably best not to say. Is Lorina there?"

"Yes, she's right here."

Lorina almost snatched the phone out of his hand. "Mark, is that really you?"

"Yes, it's really me, and I'm fine."

"The Dolphins told me you were dead."

"It's probably best that they continue to think that."

"What's going on? I'm scared, Mark."

"Stay away from the Dolphins. They're not to be trusted."

"I know. But how? Why?"

"There's a ...and it's...child...danger..."

"You're breaking up, Mark. Mark? I can't hear you."

She handed the phone back to Jason. "He's dropped out again."

"He said they've had a lot of storm damage, wherever he is."

The doorbell rang and Jenny went to answer it, returning a moment later with Loretta and Owen.

"Mum, what are you doing here?" Lorina asked.

"Looking for you, sweetheart," Loretta said as she embraced her daughter. "I'm so sorry for you, so sorry."

Lorina glanced at Jenny who shook her head slightly.

“I don’t know what to do, Mum,” Lorina cried. “Mark’s dead, and I’m carrying his child.”

“I know, honey, I know.”

Jason caught Owen’s attention, beckoning him out onto the deck. He looked deeply into his eyes, weighing up his options before speaking.

“Owen, from what you know of my son, and from any impressions you may have formed from what you heard him say both before and during the trial, do you really, in your heart of hearts, think he would be capable of such a crime?”

Owen closed his eyes and scratched his head. “No, in all honesty I don’t. I know the physical evidence was pretty compelling, but that aside I could have sworn Mark was completely innocent. I must tell you the whole case against him has been troubling me ever since his conviction.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I believe Mark was framed by someone in a position of high standing within the Temple, although I’m still unsure of the motivation behind it.”

Owen gasped.

“Aaron told me it was you who first suggested that the Dolphin may have been flipped over onto Chris’s bed from Eden. Was that entirely your own idea, Owen?”

“Actually it was Kevin’s aide, a man named Paul Hoskins, who mentioned it to me just before we left Bluehaven. He said it seemed an obvious answer to the paradox of how the Dolphin came to be there, and thought it might raise my standing in my father’s eyes if I were to suggest it.”

“I see. What do you know about him?”

“Not much, really. He first appeared about three years ago when Kevin was establishing his office on Meridian. He began as a clerical assistant, but Kevin must have been impressed with his work, for a few months later he appointed him as his personal aide.”

“Keep an eye on him when you get back to Bluehaven, but don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“I can be very discreet when I need to be. Corporate law back home can be very cloak and dagger.”

“Our worlds have a lot in common, it seems.”

“Is there anything else you’d like me to do?”

Jason glanced back into the kitchen, catching Lorina’s eye. She nodded and stepped out to join them.

* * *

“Polling has closed across the galaxy in the election for Supreme Councillor, and it looks like Alistair Blunt has put the bunyip-baiting allegations behind him and taken an early lead. We cross now to the tally room on Meridian for the latest update.”

“Counting is now complete on the inner worlds and they’ve fallen as expected. Cornipus, Hazler, Nimber and Pulper have all gone strongly in favour of Blunt, while Meridian, Bluehaven, Amber and Sontar have supported Simmons. On those figures, Blunt had a ten point lead and with polling suggesting the outer worlds were evenly divided, he would have expected to romp in from there. But early jubilation turned to shock as firstly Shimmel and then Frizian fell strongly behind Simmons, and with counting on Ignus and Huntress also going his way, he now leads by five points and would appear to be in an unassailable position.

“I understand Blunt has arrived at his campaign headquarters on Cornipus and may be about to concede defeat. We cross live there now.”

“People of the galaxy, I thank you for your strong support throughout this campaign, particularly in light of the scurrilous allegations made against me. Unfortunately on this occasion it wasn’t quite enough to get me over the finishing line, and I congratulate Kevin Simmons on his victory today. I accept his assurances that he had no part to play in the lies spread about me, and wish him well in his term of office.”

Kevin walked out onto the steps of Government House to the cheering and applause of his supporters. The shouting intensified as he raised his hands.

“Thank you, thank you. This victory has been mostly your doing and I’m humbled by your support and encouragement. I also thank

my opponent for a challenging and thought-provoking campaign, and wish him well for the future.

“Tonight we celebrate, but tomorrow the hard work begins in earnest. Let us all put aside our differences and pull together towards a better future for the galaxy. It won’t be easy, let there be no doubts about that, but rest assured that with hard work and commitment we can achieve our goals of equality and prosperity for all.”

There was a commotion at the front of the crowd.

“Let us through!” someone yelled, before Loretta came running up the steps, closely followed by Ron, Mary and Lorina. Loretta wrapped her arms around Kevin, while Mary and Ron sandwiched him in on either side.

“Congratulations, son,” Ron said, patting him on the back. “I know you’ve wanted this for so long.”

“I didn’t think we’d get here in time,” Mary said, “but Meridian Control gave us special clearance to land.” She wrapped her arms around her son and smothered him in kisses.

Kevin turned to face Lorina. For a moment her expression was impassive and he feared his daughter would never love him again, but then she smiled and kissed him on the nose.

“Congratulations, Dad,” she said, hugging him warmly before whispering something in his ear.

“Everyone, I have wonderful news,” Kevin said, and the crowd hushed. “My daughter, High Priestess Lorina, has returned from Earth and has an important announcement to make.”

The crowd parted as a tall blonde-headed man pushed his way through them and up the steps.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Lorina said, “I present to you my new consort, Owen Lachlan.”

Seekers of Truth

“The rain’s getting heavier,” Pip said as he turned away from the window. “It looks like it’s set in for a while.”

“The ultranet connection’s dropped out again,” Mark said.

“I’m sure Lorina will be fine,” Frank said. “She’s a strong woman.”

“A lot stronger than any of us realise,” Damon said, and Mark nodded.

“The Dolphins think I’m dead,” Mark said.

“Good,” Frank said. “That gives us more breathing space. You told Lorina to avoid further contact with them?”

“Yes, although I don’t know how long she can keep that up without arousing suspicion.”

“As soon as they touch her mind they’ll know the truth, and then those who oppose us will redouble their efforts to eliminate you.”

“So what do we do now?” Pip asked.

“Dinner’s ready, if anyone’s hungry,” Clem called from the kitchen.

“I guess that answers your question,” Damon said as Edwin and Val came in, ushering them to the table.

Arrayed before them were bowls of steaming vegetables, while Clem served up fillets of grilled fish to each of the guests. He’d dispensed with the coveralls and was now wearing a pair of shorts Mark initially took as those of a Delphinidae acolyte, until noticing the trim was black instead of green. Around his neck hung a small dolphin made of a glossy black stone. It was a combination Mark had never seen before.

“Highness?” Clem asked as he pulled out a chair for Damon and bowed discreetly.

“Thank you,” Damon said, “but, um, I’d really feel more comfortable if we dropped the formalities.”

“As you wish, Highness, I mean Damon.”

Damon grinned. “At any rate this fish smells delicious.”

“I hope you like it. I’m really not much of a cook.”

“Don’t believe him, Damon,” Mark laughed. “At the risk of offending Lorina, the food here’s the best I’ve ever tasted.”

Clem blushed.

“He has a good teacher,” Edwin said, casting a glance at Val.

Mark took a mouthful of fish and the flavour and texture was divine, quite unlike anything he’d eaten either in this galaxy or at home. “Is this a local species?”

“No, we get them frozen and filleted from the traders,” Edwin said. “There are no longer any fish on Huntress.”

“What about the one I saw in the pond?” Mark asked.

Val stiffened. “There are no fish in the pond, Mark.”

“But, but I saw...”

“No you didn’t.”

Clem gave Mark a questioning look.

“Mark is not *The Fisherman*, Clem,” Val scolded. “That’s a fairy story and you’re old enough to know better.”

Now Chris stiffened, casting a worried glance at Damon. “Gregory called you *Fisherman*.”

Mark looked even more confused. “Who’s Gregory?”

Lightning flashed brightly outside and a moment later the house shook with thunder. Wind-driven rain lashed against the walls.

“It’s a wild one, that’s for sure,” Edwin said. “We haven’t had a storm like this since, well, since the day Clem was born.”

“Eat your dinner before it gets cold,” Val said.

It took all of Pip’s self control not to yelp when he saw the black trim on Clem’s shorts and the ebony dolphin around his neck. The markings of *The Black Delphinidae*, as his instructor in the Bluehaven Temple had described them, *heretics of a bygone age*. He struggled to remember what their particular heresy had been about, as there’d been numerous splinter groups in the early days before the

Barefooters had taken control of the galaxy, but he was sure it had something to do with the origin of the Dolphins themselves.

The fact that there were no land mammals on Bluehaven had caused a great deal of consternation amongst zoologists, Pip recalled from his history lessons, for it was argued that the Dolphins couldn't possibly have evolved in isolation. Groups such as the Black Delphinidae had believed they must have migrated there from some other world, but in the end, though, a much simpler explanation had been found.

Elfstar, Bluehaven's sun, was an elderly main sequence star, and a hundred million years ago had begun to gradually expand. As a result, Bluehaven had warmed and the sea levels had risen to the extent that there was insufficient area to support a viable population of land mammals. They became extinct, as fossil records later showed, leaving only the Dolphins behind, and the shrinking islands became the domain of birds, insects and small reptiles.

With the riddle solved, the Black Delphinidae by rights should have disappeared, but instead they became more fanatical and grew in numbers until the government of the day stepped in and declared them illegal. In a period that became known as *The Cleansing*, their leaders were executed and the followers exiled. *'To Huntress, no doubt,'* Pip thought, staring again at Clem. Their eyes met and he froze.

"Do not fear us," Clem said telepathically inside his head. *"We are but humble seekers of truth and wish you no harm."* Clem smiled and winked at him.

"Are you okay, Pip?" Damon asked, causing him to almost yelp again.

"Yeah, sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Dig in," Clem said, "and there's plenty more for seconds." Pip hesitated for a moment before cutting a slice of fish and placing it cautiously in his mouth. It tasted divine.

Damon was confused. The conversation between Mark and their hosts had grown increasingly bizarre, and on top of that something had badly frightened Pip as they'd sat down at the table. Strange, for after a lifetime of suffering at the hands of bullies and pranksters, Pip

was not easily scared. *'Perhaps it's the storm,'* he thought, but didn't really believe it. As a boy, Pip had always been fascinated by storms, and even tonight he'd been sitting by the window watching its progress right up until the call for dinner. *'Scratch the storm then,'* Damon thought, but couldn't see anything else in their surroundings that Pip might find threatening.

"Would you like some more fish, Damon?" Val asked.

"Thank you, you're most kind."

She glanced at Clem, who dashed out to the kitchen and returned a moment later with another fillet. As he was placing it on his plate, Damon again noticed the ebony dolphin he was wearing.

"This is going to sound crazy," Damon said. "I know I'm supposed to be the spiritual head of the Delphinidae, but I'm not familiar with the significance of your amulet."

Again he caught a stab of fear from Pip, but Clem only smiled. "I am a seeker of truth," he said. "Perhaps later we could talk, Highness."

"I would be honoured," Damon said, "for I too am seeking enlightenment."

Chris gasped, while at the same moment lightning struck close by and the lights went out.

"Come to me Christopher," Gregory had said in his dreams back when the madness had begun. *"Come into the darkness and find enlightenment."* Enlightenment, it seemed, depended very much on one's point of view.

The roar of the thunder faded as Chris tumbled helplessly into darkness. "Damon, help me!" he shouted, but all he heard was the echo of his own voice in the emptiness of Sheol. "Damn you, Gregory! Leave me alone!"

Bright sunlight exploded around him as he found himself tumbling down a familiar grassy slope. Below him wound the river with its city of towers glistening on the opposite shore.

He looked up as a shadow passed over him, squinting in the dazzling sunlight. He was amazed at how quickly he'd grown accustomed to the half-light of Huntress.

“So you’ve returned to me,” Gregory said, reaching down to him while Chris tried to back away up the slope. “The dolphin-worshippers are doomed. Why do you struggle against the inevitable?”

“No, you’re wrong,” Chris said. “The Dolphins aren’t evil, they’re just afraid.”

“They’re an abomination!” Gregory shouted. “They have to be destroyed, and it’s your responsibility to carry on my mission.”

“I know the truth now,” Chris said. “I am enlightened.”

Gregory slumped, crouching down before him. “Then you know what must be done.”

“I must go beyond the city and find those who are lost. Only then can the evil be undone.”

“Who are you?”

“I am a seeker of truth.”

The words were coming from Chris’s mouth, but they weren’t his own. Something brushed against his chest, and on looking down he saw it was a black dolphin hanging from a fine chain around his neck. He held it in his hand, staring at it.

“Your fisherman will not return, truth-seeker,” Gregory said.

“But he already has,” said a voice from further down the slope.

Chris looked up as a seedy teenaged boy in torn denim shorts approached.

“You shouldn’t be over here, Gregory,” the boy said wearily. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Piss off, Pedro.”

The boy bristled with contempt. “You should know better than to mess with me.”

In the blink of an eye he grabbed hold of Gregory’s arm, twisting it around behind his back. “Now move it!”

“Bloody bastard!” Gregory yelled as he was marched down towards the bridge. “You have no right! No right!”

“Come, Chris,” a voice whispered from behind him, and as he turned the darkness enveloped him and the sound of rain, wind and thunder returned.

“Are you all right?” Clem asked as Chris opened his eyes. He stared at him, nodding. It had been Clem’s voice that had been speaking through him on the river bank, he was sure.

The lights came back on and a few moments later Edwin entered the room, dripping water onto the floor. “The bloody breaker tripped out again. I’ll get Cedric to check it out next time he’s here.”

He glanced at Clem who was helping Chris up off the floor.

“Anyone for dessert?” Val asked.

* * *

“Could someone please tell me what was going on tonight?” Pip asked as he settled onto his stretcher.

Mark had insisted that Frank have the guest room, while Clem had offered Damon his room and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Edwin had set up four camping stretchers on the living room floor before he and Val bid everyone pleasant dreams and retired to their room.

“Is it the truth you seek?” Clem asked, causing a shiver to run down Pip’s spine.

“I think that’s what we all seek,” Mark said.

Clem motioned them closer to him. Outside, the thunder and lightning had moved on, but wind and rain squalls continued to buffet the house. “Huntress is a dying world,” Clem said. “The boiling lands on the sunlit side are poisoning our air and consuming our oxygen, while the rain storms are becoming fewer and more acidic. The pummel trees are now mostly infertile, and when they die so will we. Many here have lost all hope, and yet the legend has grown of a saviour who will come and set things right. That saviour is called *The Fisherman*.

“*The Fisherman*, they say, will bring fish back to our streams and ponds, and following the fish will be the Black Dolphins who once inhabited this world in the days before the death of our sun.”

“*Black Dolphins*,” Pip whispered, and was instantly transported back to a moment in his early childhood.

The floor of the dark aquarium was refreshingly cool on the soles of his feet, a welcome relief from the oppressive heat and glare

outside. Pip, all of six years of age, stood on tip-toes to peer through the thick glass window into the tank. Before him swam what seemed a countless variety of fish; small brightly coloured ones darting back and forth in front of him, menacing rays with long barbed tails gliding around like underwater hawks, while closer to the surface and silhouetted against the dazzling sunlight patrolled the sharks, eagerly awaiting a child to venture too close to the edge and topple in.

His father crouched down beside him, pointing excitedly through the glass. "Look, Pip! It's a Bluehaven flat-tail! And there's another one!"

The flat-tail was a dull brownish-grey and looked to be the most boring fish in the tank, but Pip was old enough to know that a stifled yawn was not the most appropriate response. "I bet you caught lots of them when you were a kid, didn't you Dad?" he said instead.

"I did, yes." Pip had heard this story at least a dozen times already. "Before the war we lived near the Bringal River and after school I'd often go fishing with my mates. I reckon we caught just about every flat-tail in that river!"

"Those two must have got away then."

"Yes, I guess they did."

"Are there any dolphins in here?"

"I don't think so, Pip. Dolphins are like people, and it's not nice to put them in tanks."

"What about all the other fish? Aren't they like people too?"

"No, fish are different. They're cold-blooded and breathe water, whereas the Dolphins are warm-blooded like us and breathe air."

"But don't the fishes still have feelings?"

"I'm sure they do, but, um, they like being in tanks."

"Oh, okay."

"Come on, and let's see what's in the next tank." Pip's father took hold of his hand, leading him further into the building. In a small tank built into the wall on their right were three crabs, all sitting on the bottom and doing absolutely nothing.

"Crabs," his father said. "Look at those nippers on them! I bet they'd hurt if they bit you on the nose." Pip giggled as he nipped his nose with his fingers.

They moved further down the ramp and around a bend. Set into the floor in front of them, and glowing blue from underwater lights, was a fenced-off pool, and Pip ran down to the edge and peered in. A long black shape swam just below the surface, going around and around as if searching the bottom for something. Apart from the creature, the pool was entirely bare.

“This is the rarest specimen in our entire collection,” a tall red-haired man in a blue jacket said as he strode up behind him. “The stuff of legends, young lad, and in sixty years time you’ll be able to tell your grandkids that you saw one right here at *Ocean World*.”

“What is it?” Pip asked.

“A Black Dolphin.”

“Whoa,” his father said. “Are you serious?”

“On my mother’s life. The only one in captivity in the whole galaxy, in fact the only one known to exist in the whole galaxy.”

The Dolphin’s head broke the surface as it swam as close to Pip as it could.

“They’re real inquisitive, that’s for sure,” Blue Jacket said. “Mind your boy doesn’t put his hand through the fence, though. We wouldn’t want him to lose a finger.”

“It wouldn’t, would it?”

“Too right. Not last week one of the minders got too close while feeding it and damn near lost his whole hand.”

The Dolphin gazed up at Pip, its eyes dark and sad. Pip felt as if he was being drawn down towards it.

“We were the oldest, and now I am the last,” a voice said faintly inside his head. *“You have passed beyond redemption, for the stars grow dim. Remember that, Pip, in your years of sorrow ahead.”*

Pip cried out in agony as his legs seized up with excruciating cramp.

“Pip?” Clem asked. “Are you okay?”

Pip rubbed his legs, but the pain was only in his memory. “I, um, yeah.”

“You may speak freely of what is troubling you, or perhaps you’re not quite ready.”

Pip stared at him as the memory echoed inside his head. *'You have passed beyond redemption, for the stars grow dim. Remember that, Pip, in your years of sorrow ahead.'*

"There's still hope, Pip," Clem said, "if we seek that which is true."

"It knew my name."

"What did?"

"Tell me about the black dolphins."

"Very well, then."

"Should I fetch Damon?" Chris asked. "I'm sure he'd be interested in this."

"No, I don't think he's ready yet for the truth," Clem said.

* * *

Damon stretched out on Clem's bed, still puzzling over Clem's amulet, the ebony dolphin. There was something in his shared memory from Damien, he was sure, but it remained tantalisingly out of reach. Outside the rain beat against the window as the wind gusted again.

Drifting into an uneasy sleep, he found himself at the water's edge on the strange new world that was to become Damien's home. Gulls circled just beyond the breakers, seeking out their dinner in the late afternoon sunshine.

"The water's beautiful and warm," Lorna cried. "Let's go for a swim!"

"Mum said we shouldn't," Damien said.

"Just for a few minutes, it'll be okay. We won't go in far."

"Oh, okay then," Damien said, trotting down to join his sister. She was right; the sea was like a warm bath.

"See if you can catch a wave," Lorna said as she waded further out. Damien, who'd been quite adept at body surfing back on Meridian, took note of where the last wave had broken and made his way to just beyond that point where the sweet spot would be.

As he waited for the next set, the gulls circled low overhead, a few diving into the water close by. He saw one emerge with a fish in its mouth.

“Look over there!” Lorna cried. “What’s that?”

A large grey shape broke the surface about ten metres from them.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it,” Damien said, now trying to wade back in against the undertow. There was a splashing behind him, and he turned to see a grey smiling face looking straight at him. He froze with fear, and yet somehow he knew this creature posed no threat.

It waved its head, as if beckoning him towards it, and he followed, entranced, into deeper water. The creature submerged for a few moments before coming up right beside him with a fish in its mouth. It was a gift, Damien realised, as he cautiously reached out and took it.

The fish flipped its tail, leaping out of Damien’s hands. He laughed, and the creature laughed too. It dived again, returning moments later with another fish. By now Lorna had joined him, and this time she took the fish, holding it against her chest. The creature looked at her and nodded.

“Damien! Lorna! Dinner’s ready!” a voice called from the shore. The creature looked in that direction before turning and swimming back out to sea. Lorna handed the fish to Damien and dashed out of the water, with Damien following in her wake.

“Look, Damien caught a fish!” Lorna said as they entered the campsite alongside the spacecraft that had brought them from Meridian.

“Let me see,” their father said. “That’s a beauty, son! You’re a true fisherman! Wrap it up and stick it in the freezer, and we’ll have it for lunch tomorrow.”

“Don’t be too long,” his mother said. “Your dinner’s on the table.”

After completing his task, Damien sat down and sliced off a piece of the freshly cooked meat. It tasted divine; light and sweet and unlike anything he’d ever eaten back home.

“What is this, Mum? It’s delightful!”

“Your father caught it this afternoon. At first we thought it was a large fish, but it’s actually a mammal.”

Damien and Lorna looked at each other. Lorna screamed...

...and Damon woke, a scream choked in his throat. His gorge rising, he leapt from the bed and ran into the en-suite, reaching the toilet just in time.

Once his retching finally stopped, he splashed water over his face and looked at his reflection in the mirror. He was as pale as a ghost, and with good reason. He recognised now the taste of the “fish” Clem had served them for dinner. They’d been eating grilled Dolphin.

* * *

Frank couldn’t sleep. All his life he’d heard rumours of the Black Delphinidae and the secrets they’d kept since those first turbulent years following the formation of the Dolphin-worshipping creed. Conventional wisdom held that those secrets had gone to the grave with the cult leaders during the Cleansing, and yet here on Huntress of all places, he’d found practitioners of that ancient lore. His head was bursting with a million questions, and yet he knew he couldn’t simply come out and ask them. They were his hosts, and he was a stranger in their midst.

Someone knocked gently on his door, and he opened it to find Edwin standing there. “I hope I didn’t wake you,” he said.

“No, not at all.”

“I, um, I just wanted to say that my son has a rather active imagination, and not to take too much of what he says seriously.”

“I understand.”

“On a world like this, a good imagination is a valuable asset.”

“I can certainly appreciate that. So the Black Delphinidae?”

“A flight of fancy, nothing more.”

“I see.”

“I’m sorry if he’s raised your expectations of some great revelation.”

“What? No, my curiosity was aroused, nothing more,” Frank lied.

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ll wish you pleasant dreams then.”

“Thank you. Oh, just before you go, that fish we had for dinner tonight, was it really fish?”

Edwin stiffened slightly and blushed. “The traders describe it as fish, but really it could be almost anything.”

“Dolphin?”

“I doubt it, but I know what you’re thinking. The Black Delphinidae leaders were executed for consuming Dolphin flesh, but they always denied the charges and I doubt there was any truth to it.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you. The zealots behind the Cleansing were more interested in political power than the pursuit of justice.”

Edwin nodded. “I fear the same thing is happening again.”

“You mean with Mark?”

“I’ve no doubt he was set up in the Dolphin-slaying affair, and I think there were some pretty high-ranking Delphinidae behind it.”

Frank scratched his chin. “I really can’t see Kevin Simmons being involved in anything like that. He’s political, of course, but I doubt he’d go as far as having his son-in-law convicted of delphinicide just to improve his chances in the election. In any case, it hindered rather than helped his cause. It was only that bunyip-baiting business that got him over the line.”

“Yes, something like that is much more Kevin’s style,” Edwin chuckled. “Don’t get me started on politics, though, or we’ll still be going when Clem calls us to breakfast.”

“Well thank you for what you’ve told me. I’ll sleep much better as a result.” Frank escorted him to the door.

“Pleasant dreams, Frank.”

“And you, Edwin.”

Frank had almost climbed back into bed when he heard a commotion outside his room. He dashed out to the sound of shouting and furniture falling over.

“Dolphin eater! Blasphemer! False prophet!” Damon yelled. “How dare you? How dare you!”

Frank entered the living room to see Clem cowering in the corner, his forearms covering his face, while Damon threw wild punches at him. He watched as Pip lunged at Damon, trying to pull him off, but as Damon swung around, his elbow hit him squarely in the nose. Pip squeaked as he toppled over backwards, striking his head on the corner of the table before falling limply to the floor.

All the fury left Damon as he stared open-mouthed at what he'd done to his best friend. He knelt before him, but was thrown aside by Frank as he dashed forward.

"Go back to your room, Damon!" he yelled. "Mark, Chris, come over here and help me."

Damon didn't move.

"DAMON, GO!"

Head down, Damon got to his feet and left the room.

Frank quickly checked Pip's vital signs. "He's still alive, thank God. Mark, take his hand, and you too Chris, and put whatever healing powers you possess to work."

"But I lost all my powers," Mark protested.

"The hell you did!"

"I might be able to help too," Clem said softly as he crept up behind them.

"Thank you, please do," Frank said, wrapping his arms around them. He closed his eyes, focusing his remnant Barefooter healing powers into Pip, but something took hold of their spirits, something of great power, and drew them down into Sheol.

Frank gazed around in amazement as the darkness of Sheol dissolved away into bright sunshine. Before them wound a broad river spanned by a silver bridge, while on the far shore stood a city of gleaming white towers.

"Come quickly!" Clem cried as he sprinted down the slope, with Frank, Mark and Chris following close behind. But as they approached the river, a ferry boat pulled away from the shore, with Pip standing at the stern and looking forlornly back.

"No!" Clem yelled as he reached the bank, hesitating for a moment before leaping into the water and swimming after the boat.

"He's gaining on them," Mark said, but no sooner had he spoken than the water began swirling around him, pulling him into a whirlpool.

"Clem! No!" Chris cried, but Clem's head disappeared below the surface and the water calmed. Chris tried to leap in after him but Frank held him back, placing his arms around his two companions and trying to comfort them as the boat carried Pip further away.

“Look!” Chris said, pointing to the middle of the stream. The water rippled as a black dolphin broke the surface, bounding towards the ferry with Clem riding on its back.

Clem stood, balancing on the dolphin like a surfboard rider, before grabbing hold of the boat’s stern and leaping aboard.

“Give me your passenger!” he yelled as the ferryman turned to confront him.

“What can you give me in return?”

Clem removed the amulet from around his neck, but the ferryman turned away in disgust.

“I don’t want your cursed trinket. Get off my boat and take him with you if you must, but you’re not doing him any favours, believe me!”

Clem took hold of Pip, leaping overboard with him. For a moment they disappeared below the surface, but emerged atop the dolphin which brought them swiftly back to the shore.

Mark and Chris stepped down into the water to help them onto the bank. “That was amazing, Clem!” Chris said, but Clem ignored him as he cradled Pip’s head in his hands. Chris’s jaw dropped as he saw the blood running freely from Pip’s nose and the back of his head.

“Help me,” Clem said.

“How?” Mark asked.

“Place your hands over the bleeding. You too, Chris.”

Frank watched on as his three companions covered Pip’s face and head. Clem began chanting in a language that was unfamiliar to him, and as he spoke their hands began to glow in a soft reddish light. Across the water a crowd gathered, watching on in silence.

The light faded as Clem stepped back and released him.

“Lower him into the water to wash the blood away,” he said to Mark and Chris. Behind them, the black dolphin watched on intently.

Pip stood, and with Chris and Mark’s help, climbed out onto the bank. “How do you feel?” Clem asked.

“Sore and tired, but otherwise okay.”

“Good. We need to get back up the slope before the ferryman changes his mind. Do you think you can make it?”

“I’ll try.”

With Clem and Frank on one side and Mark and Chris on the other, they began climbing away from the river.

“Hey, Halliday!” someone shouted from the opposite bank. Frank turned to see his old nemesis, Brett Farley, glaring at him. “Don’t go too far. We have your room here ready and waiting for you!”

Frank shook his head and turned away. They climbed forward, and after a few more steps the sunshine dissolved into the blackness of Sheol.

* * *

Damon looked up as Frank entered his room.

“How is he? Is he going to be okay?”

“He’s fine, thanks to Clem, but I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do with you.”

Damon bristled. “Clem’s a Dolphin-slayer. He tricked us into eating their flesh.”

“Sit down, Damon, and shut up.”

Damon sat.

“This is going to be difficult for you, I know, but you need to hear what I say. Firstly, Clem’s no more a Dolphin-slayer than Mark is.”

“But that meat he served us for dinner –”

“It was dugong, I’m sure. Highly illegal, of course, but the traders passed it off as prime quality fish and Clem’s too young to know the difference.”

“Sorry, I thought –”

“I know what you thought, and you’re not the first one to have ever jumped to conclusions. So often it’s not what you don’t know that gets you into trouble; it’s what you think you know that isn’t really true.”

“I understand that now.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it, because it’s my belief, based on evidence I uncovered on Meridian and confirmed by what I’ve just witnessed here, that Damien and Lorna were deceived by the Dolphins, and that the entire Delphinidae creed is based on a lie.”

Relics

Frank opened the door, waving Mark, Chris, Pip and Clem into the room. Clem glanced at Damon and tried to back out again, but Pip pulled him forward.

“I won’t let him hit you again,” Pip said.

Damon closed his eyes and ran his hands through his hair.

“The time has come for me to lay my cards on the table,” Frank said. “Tonight a misunderstanding almost had fatal consequences, and I cannot risk that happening again.”

“I’m sorry, Pip,” Damon said.

“It’s Clem you should be apologising to,” Frank said.

Damon ran his hands over his face. “Sorry, Clem, I, um, I’ve brought disgrace upon myself, my colleagues and my creed, and place myself at your mercy.”

“The truth can be hard to accept,” Clem said, “but that doesn’t make it any less true.”

“And nor does thumping the messenger,” Frank said. “But enough of retributions, there are greater things at stake here.”

Mark and Chris made themselves comfortable on the floor while Clem crept closer to Pip. Damon propped himself up on the bed and rubbed his forehead.

“I was born almost two hundred years ago,” Frank said. “My mother died when I was two years old and I have no recollection of her. My father, a Professor of Galactic History at the Shingle City University on Cornipus, was obsessed with the early days of the Delphinidae and the emergence of the Barefooters. I was fifteen years old when I arrived home from school to find him almost jumping up and down with excitement. He said he’d made a discovery that would turn the galaxy on its head, but when I asked him what it was, he told

me that for my own safety it was best I not find out until his work had been published. Naturally I pleaded and begged, but he wouldn't budge. He was a very stubborn man when he had a mind to be.

"The next night three men called late in the evening, taking Dad out with them. He told me he'd only be gone for an hour but that was the last time I ever saw him. The following morning his body was discovered in a rubbish dumpster, and my uncle came and took me off into the countryside. He enrolled me in a small private school under an assumed name, but three months later his house caught fire and he told me I'd have to leave.

"I was taken in by an elderly man who'd been a colleague of my father at the university. He'd spent his lifetime tracing the descendants of the Barefooters, showing me my own family tree going back to a Barefooter named Herbert Douglass who'd disappeared during the War of the Barefooters."

"We saw him in the recordings we watched on Meridian," Pip said.

"Indeed we did," Frank said. "He was arguing against going to war with Morgoth, and ultimately disappeared into Sheol along with the others who remained behind after Gallad fled the galaxy. Apparently he'd fathered quite a number of children in the millennia prior to the war, and I'm the descendant of one of those.

"Anyway, my guardian found me a job as an archivist in the Great Library and in return I aided him in his research. I became hooked, and even after his death some ten years later I continued his work, trying to find clues to the whereabouts of the many Barefooters who'd simply disappeared without trace during the final weeks of the war.

"A hundred years ago a colleague on Bluehaven contacted me with information that the Dolphins had discovered descendants of Gallad and his people on a world in a distant galaxy. He said he could arrange transport for me through the realm they called Sheol, and thus I arrived on Earth and began my study of the Emu people and the Collins family in particular."

"You were spying on us for a hundred years?" Mark asked, sounding aggrieved.

“I wasn’t spying,” Frank said. “I was conducting a perfectly reasonable anthropological study.”

“It sure sounds like spying to me.”

“Very well then, if it makes you happy I was spying on your ancestors, trying to figure out how they came to be carrying the Barefooter genes, and more importantly why those genes were becoming more and more concentrated with each generation. Of course we know now that you were the ultimate goal of this exercise in genetic manipulation, but the question still remains as to who was the manipulator.”

“It wasn’t just chance then?” Mark asked.

“Of course not. The Delphinidae called it the fulfilment of their prophecy, but that’s just a nice way of saying the gene pool was being manipulated. It still doesn’t tell us anything about who was doing the manipulation.”

“Could it have been the spirits of Martyn and Loria?” Damon asked.

“That’s certainly possible,” Frank said, “but I suspect they were just as much pawns as Mark and Lorina are. Why do you think Morgoth was so enraged by their union?”

“He feared any offspring would carry both Barefooter and Delphinidae powers and thus be a threat to him,” Mark said.

“And yet he let their daughter survive and begin the unbroken line of Delphinidae matriarchs,” Frank said.

“There was no threat because she didn’t inherit any of the Barefooter traits,” Damon said.

“There’s none so blind as he who will not see,” Frank sighed. “Lorna’s gift was telepathic empathy while Damien’s was autothermia. Am I correct?”

“Um, yes,” Damon said.

“Yet look at the modern day Elf. They are mostly barefoot, some even claiming shoes are a sacrilege, and the official dress of male acolytes and priests is just white shorts with a coloured trim designating rank. There may not be any obvious subspace receptors in their DNA but the secondary traits of the Barefooters are as plain as day.”

“Are you saying all the Delphinidae are really Barefooters?” Chris asked.

“Of course not, all I’m saying is that some of the secondary traits are apparent to varying degrees. The Delphinidae don’t carry the primary traits of autothermia and extraordinarily long lives, because those traits are only passed on by male offspring.”

“So what Morgoth feared from Martyn and Loria’s union was a male child,” Mark said.

“Exactly. That’s why he executed them but allowed their daughter to live.”

“Could that male child be the one we call *The Fisherman*?” Clem asked.

Frank smiled. “I’d say that’s quite possible. Now the Dolphins didn’t give Damien and Lorna their gifts out of the goodness of their hearts; they expected them to mate and produce a male offspring, not knowing that incest was frowned upon in human society. Not only did that fail, but Damien was celibate throughout his long life. I suspect the Dolphins had a hand in the emergence of the race of Barefooters, and engineered the relationship between Martyn and Loria. That was thwarted by Morgoth, whom I believe suspected the truth, and so the Dolphins laid low and waited for his demise. Now they have an opportunity to try again.”

“What is it the Dolphins want?” Mark asked.

“That I don’t know,” Frank said. “It’s the missing piece in the puzzle.”

“Ahem,” said a voice from the open doorway, and everyone turned to see Val standing there. “Time you were in bed, Clem.”

“Oh, but Mum,” Clem protested.

“No buts, young man. Bed. Now.”

Clem stood and left the room, giving Damon a wide berth.

“I think we should do likewise,” Frank said, yawning. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I need my beauty sleep.”

He ushered Mark, Chris and Pip ahead of him, but as he was about to close the door, Damon called him back.

“Frank, am I this fisherman person Clem speaks of? I think I must be, as I carry both Damien’s and Lorna’s heritages, and when I was

attempting to free Chris from that Gregory demon, he called me *fisherman*. Even my name is High Elvish for fisherman.”

“I honestly don’t know. Everything you say is true, but my gut feeling is that it’s not you. I think you’d be an excellent candidate for the father of the fisherman, as your heritage from Damien is strong, but I don’t think you carry enough of Lorna’s gift to qualify as the fisherman yourself.”

“I’m relieved, I must say, but I guess I’d better be careful who I marry then.”

“That depends on whether you think the fisherman would be a force for good or evil. On that question I’m still undecided.”

“Really?”

“The distinction between good and evil is often blurred, and can even be little more than a matter of perception. Keep an open mind, Damon, and expect the unexpected.”

“I will. Thank you, Frank.”

Frank slept soundly for the first time in many years. It felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, a weight he’d been carrying, he realised now, since the death of his father. At last the secret was out, and the burden was no longer his alone to bear. Sleep came quickly, and when he eventually woke he felt renewed and full of life.

Outside the rain had stopped and the reddish sky was clear. A cold wind was blowing from the dark side of the planet, clearing away the sulphurous under-smell of the sunlit side. He stretched, taking a deep breath.

“Val and I must go and tend to the pummel trees,” Edwin said. “Clem will escort you back to your ship.”

“Thank you once again for your hospitality,” Frank said, “and of course for rescuing Mark.”

“We’re pleased to have been of service.”

Damon stepped forward. “I’m so sorry for my behaviour last night. If there’s anything I can do to make up for it, just name it.”

“Seek the truth, and accept what you find with grace,” Val said. “The fisherman is a prophecy that’s perhaps best left unfulfilled.”

“I understand, and thank you for your wisdom.”

“Go with our blessing, Highness,” Edwin said.

“Don’t call him ‘Highness’,” Pip said. “It only goes to his head.”

“You are wise beyond your years, young Pip,” Val said. “Follow your heart and be true, for the dimming of the stars may yet be averted.”

Pip shivered. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“It’s just a saying we use, that’s all. It means there’s always hope, even in the darkest of times.”

“Thank you, I’m sure.”

Pip scratched his head as he turned away. *‘You have passed beyond redemption,’* the black dolphin had said, *‘for the stars grow dim. Remember that, Pip, in your years of sorrow ahead.’* He shivered again as the cold wind buffeted him.

Mark, Chris and Clem bounded out of the house to join them. Clem was wearing his coveralls again, but his feet were still bare.

“It’s a bit brisk out here,” Chris said, wrapping his arms around himself.

“I have some warm clothes that would probably fit you,” Edwin said.

“No, I’ll be fine once I get moving.”

“What about you, Pip?”

“I’m okay,” he said, hoping the goose bumps on his chest weren’t too obvious. “The ship’s not far.”

“If you’re sure, then. You don’t look too comfortable.”

Pip forced himself to grin.

“Where are your boots, Clem?” Val asked.

“I don’t need them any more.”

“Well come straight back to the house as soon as their ship leaves.”

“Sure, Mum.”

Val and Edwin walked off towards the pummel forest, turning and waving just before passing out of sight. Pip and the others waved back.

“Follow me,” Clem said, leading them towards the village square.

The pond had overflowed in the heavy rain, with pools of water covering the paving stones. Mark stared at it, hoping he might catch another glimpse of the fish. *'There are no fish in the pond,'* Val had said, and yet he was sure he'd seen one. It wasn't the sort of thing he was likely to imagine, he thought.

"I saw the fish too," Clem said, as if reading his mind.

"What does it mean?" Mark asked.

"Your coming has awoken them. You're not the fisherman, I know that now, but you have a part to play in the prophecy."

"Your mother said it was a prophecy best left unfulfilled," Damon said.

"My parents sometimes fear the truth."

"Most people do," Frank said. "It's what gives politicians their power."

"That's so true," Mark laughed.

The stream emerging from the pond had become a raging torrent, with sandbags piled up outside all the adjoining houses.

"The river probably won't peak for another thirty or forty hours," Clem said. "A lot of land drains through here."

"I would never have imagined it when we walked down here yesterday," Mark said.

"The floodwaters rise very quickly, and can be dangerous for anyone caught downstream."

"How often does it flood?" Pip asked.

"Not as often as it used to. It's been three or four years since the last big one."

The turbulent waters spread out beyond the last of the dwellings, covering much of the valley's farmland, while the greenhouses stood isolated on a small island, the water almost lapping at their doors.

"Oh no!" Frank cried, pointing to the opposite side of the river. Wedged against a tree and bobbing up and down precariously was their spacecraft. Before anyone could stop him, he pulled off his jacket and threw himself into the torrent.

"Frank, don't be stupid!" Damon called, trying to jump in after him, but Clem grabbed him by the arm and held him back.

“No, Highness. I can’t allow you to risk your life too.”

Damon tried to break loose, but Clem’s grip was strong.

“Clem’s right,” Mark said. “Let’s hope Frank’s a good swimmer.”

Mark’s hoping appeared to be well founded, as Frank had already reached the middle of the stream and was closing in on the stricken craft. For a moment the water surged and he disappeared below the surface, but when he reappeared he’d halved the distance between himself and the ship.

Frank was about to reach his goal when another surge of water threatened to wash him right past. He dived under it, holding his breath for as long as he could, and then, reaching out blindly in the muddy water, he caught hold of something solid and pulled himself up. Finding himself clinging to the ramp in front of the hatch, he quickly activated the door release and dragged himself on board.

“He made it,” Chris said, but no sooner had he spoken than a wall of water struck the ship, snapping the tree that was holding it against the flow. The ship rolled and turned just as Frank closed the hatch, scraping against the bottom as the current carried it out into the flood.

“Follow me!” Clem yelled as he ran off down the road, trying to keep up with the bobbing ship.

* * *

Pip languished behind, cursing again his useless legs. The ship had almost disappeared from sight now, while the metallic thuds as it struck submerged rocks had become lost in the roar of the water. Still he pushed himself forward, drawing closer to the horizon with each painful step.

‘Closer to the horizon?’ he asked himself. *‘What sort of craziness is that?’*

It was true, though, and then he realised it wasn’t the horizon at all but the edge of a broad waterfall. He rounded a bend, seeing the others standing just ahead of him on a rocky outcrop between the road and the river. Staggering forward with the last of his strength, he finally reached them.

Before him was the edge of a vast escarpment over which the floodwaters poured and disappeared. From far below he could hear the water striking the base of the falls, but nothing could be seen through the swirling mist.

“Did it, did it go over?” he asked.

Clem nodded, putting his arm around Pip’s shoulders.

“How deep is it?”

“Too deep. Much too deep.”

Pip felt suddenly dizzy, and the world turned to grey as he felt himself falling into oblivion.

* * *

Pip woke. He was warm, too warm, and had just had a terrible dream. He opened his eyes to the reddish half-light of Huntress, but as he registered the sound of falling water he realised he hadn’t been dreaming at all.

As he sat up, the heavy cloth of Clem’s coveralls fell away from him and the icy wind froze the sweat on his back, but he didn’t notice or care.

“It’s true then,” he whispered.

“Yes, he’s gone,” Damon said, wrapping his arms around him.

Clem sat a little way off from the others, perched on a rock and staring out across the abyss. As they approached, he suddenly turned and blinked, as if startled out of a trance.

“What do we do now?” Mark asked.

“Huh?”

“I suppose we’re going to have to stay here at least until one of the traders comes visiting.”

“No, he said we must come now.”

“Who did? Come where?”

“How are your legs, Pip?” Clem asked, ignoring Mark for the moment. “Do you think you could walk a little further?”

Pip stood gingerly and stretched. “I should be okay, as long as we take it slowly.” He hobbled over to him, handing him back his coveralls. Clem slipped them on.

“Follow me then.”

He led them around the edge of the chasm and down into a gully where another stream flowed in. The ground was littered with boulders and the going was difficult, but they slowly made their way upstream until they rounded a bend and came upon an ancient stone bridge.

“This was built by the Old People, in the days before the death of our sun,” Clem said. “Not much is left now.”

Many of the rocks that made up the span had crumbled away, and Pip feared it might not support their weight as they began to make their way across. He cautiously inched himself forward, pausing frequently to pick out the stones that looked least likely to move. He was three quarters of the way across and starting to believe he’d make it all the way to the end, when the rock he’d placed his weight on suddenly gave way beneath him and dropped into the stream below. He cried out, more in shock than pain, as his leg slipped into the hole.

“Pip!” Damon cried, trying to turn back to him, but Clem stopped him.

“Move off the bridge, all of you. I’m the lightest, I’ll get him.”

The others had reached the safety of the far bank by the time Clem got to him. Crouching down on his hands and knees, he carefully checked all the stones around Pip before creeping up to him and placing his arms under his shoulders. “Easy now, don’t try to rush it,” he said.

Pip struggled and Clem pulled, but his leg wouldn’t budge.

“I think I’m stuck.”

“Let me have a look,” Clem said, crawling around him. “Yes, your leg’s wedged pretty tightly by this piece of rock here. Let’s see if I can shift it.”

“Careful, Clem, you don’t want to bring the whole bridge down.”

“I won’t if you won’t.”

Pip chuckled in spite of his predicament.

Clem glanced around, searching for something he could use to loosen the rock and settling on a small sharp-edged stone. He began chipping away at the point where the rock was keyed into the one next to it, but after several minutes of pounding he’d barely made an impression.

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” Pip said.

“You’re probably right.” Clem stared at him, trying to weigh up his options. “Look, I really don’t want to do this because it’ll probably mess up your leg pretty badly, but I can’t think of anything else to try.”

“What do you want to do?”

Clem lifted his leg and mimicked stamping on the rock. “If I hit it hard enough, I can probably push it right through.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“No, but apart from leaving you here to freeze to death, I don’t see that we have much choice.”

“Maybe freezing to death isn’t such a bad thing.”

Clem shook his head before raising his leg.

“No Clem, don’t!” Damon yelled as he crawled out along the bridge towards them.

“Go back, Highness,” Clem said.

“No, not this time, Clem. I think I know how to get him out.”

“Really?”

“Pip’s legs swell when he overexerts himself,” Damon said. “I can make the swelling go down, and hopefully that’ll be enough to get him out.”

Clem nodded, while Damon crept cautiously closer.

“We’ve done this before, Pip,” Damon said, “and you know the drill. Just relax and we’ll have you out in a jiffy.” He reached out, placing one hand on Pip’s trapped leg and the other on the back of his neck. “Clem, support him round the chest so he doesn’t slide any further down.”

Damon closed his eyes and grimaced in concentration, while Mark and Chris watched on anxiously from the end of the span, shivering as another gust of icy wind swirled around them.

Pip felt his leg growing cold and numb as the blood seemed to drain away from it, and gradually his recalcitrant muscles began to unknot.

“How does it feel, Pip?”

“Numb.”

Damon wrapped his hands around Pip's leg. "The muscles are nicely relaxed now. Clem, get ready to pull him back on the count of three. One ... two ... three!"

For a moment nothing happened, but then Pip's leg shifted a little. Damon adjusted his grip, pulling a bit harder until, like a cork from a bottle, it suddenly came free, causing them both to fall back onto Clem.

"Careful now," Damon said. "I don't know how much more movement this bridge can take."

Supported on either side by Damon and Clem, Pip crawled along the remaining span, finally making it onto solid ground.

"Let me take a look at that leg," Damon said, crouching down beside him. "Hmm, there's a fair bit of superficial scratching but nothing too serious. Chris, help me to get him up."

"How does it feel?" Damon asked as Pip gingerly stood.

"A bit shaky, but I think I'll be okay."

"Come when you're ready," Clem said. "It's only a little way further."

"What is?" Damon asked. "Just where are you taking us?"

"The relics."

The gully deepened and broadened as they made their way further upstream, becoming something of a canyon. Ahead were what appeared at first to be piles of rocks, but as they drew closer it became clear it was actually a ruined village.

"What is this place?" Mark asked.

"The Old People once lived here," Clem said.

"The same ones who built the bridge?"

"Yes."

"So what happened to them?"

"No-one knows. They disappeared at around the time our sun died."

"You keep saying your sun has died, but it's still shining on the sunlit side of the planet, isn't it?" Chris asked.

"Technically yes, but it's little more than a glowing ember of what our sun used to be." Clem stopped walking and looked around, taking in the desolate and melancholy vista of the ruined village while the

others drew close to him. “Huntress was once like most of the other inhabited worlds in the galaxy, with a bright sun and alternating day and night, but something happened, something terrible. The sun dimmed and the planet gradually stopped spinning. Some say the Old People caused it, but others say it was a natural catastrophe. No-one really knows for sure.”

Pip gasped. “*You have passed beyond redemption, for the stars grow dim,*” he whispered. “Do those words mean anything to you, Clem?”

“They’re part of the Black Dolphin’s curse. Where did you hear them?”

“When I was little, my father took me to an aquarium and they had a black dolphin in a pool right at the bottom. It spoke to me, inside my head, saying those words.”

Clem stared at him in growing wonder. “Are you sure the dolphin was black?”

“It sure looked black,” Pip said.

“Is it still there?”

“I don’t think so. The next time I visited the aquarium it had gone, but they may have moved it. Why did it curse me?”

“Perhaps it was cursing everyone,” Mark said.

“But it knew my name. It said, *‘Remember this, Pip, in your years of sorrow ahead.’* I don’t want years of sorrow.”

“The truth is often sorrowful,” Clem said, “but the curse is regarded by some as a blessing.”

“What kind of blessing is that?”

“Through sorrow we may find the truth, and it is in seeking the truth that our only hope lies.”

“But the Dolphin said I’ve gone beyond redemption, so how can there be hope?”

Clem stared at him, his eyes deep, dark and full of hidden menace. “Perhaps there’s hope for our people, if you find the truth, but not for you.” Pip looked stricken. “But of course,” Clem added, “that’s only one interpretation.”

Another blast of icy wind hit them. “What are we here for?” Damon asked.

“The path to the truth lies close by,” Clem said. “There should be signs.”

“I suggest we spread out and start looking then. I’m autothermic and the cold doesn’t bother me, but Pip and Chris don’t look too comfortable.”

“What are we looking for?” Chris asked.

“I don’t know,” Clem said, “but I guess anything that looks out of place.”

Pip had wandered to the left of the others, staying closest to the stream. Little remained of the buildings other than foundations, and many of those were broken in ways suggesting quakes and ground movement. Occasionally he saw the remains of a wall or two, but they were rarely more than a metre high and badly cracked. He was surprised the gusts of wind swirling around the canyon hadn’t toppled them completely.

The numbness in his leg from Damon’s treatment had worn off and now the abrasions were stinging. His thighs were tightening up again too, and soon the cramps would begin. He sat down on the edge of one of the ruined houses.

‘This place is so old, even the dust has dust on it,’ his mother would have said; it was one of her favourite sayings and had always caused him to giggle when he was a boy. He looked around himself, feeling the enormity of time that had passed and trying to imagine what the people living here might have been like. He closed his eyes, and in his mind the broken buildings became whole again and the streets filled with people enjoying life under a clear blue sunny sky.

Darkness fell as the sun descended below the western rim of the canyon, but no sooner had the first stars begun to show than a blinding white flash filled the sky. People ran into the streets, not knowing what calamity had befallen their world, but the light soon faded and the stars returned. Later in the night, though, a sinister blackness crept across the sky, and one by one the stars dimmed and disappeared. When dawn came, it was little more than a faint red glow, and the people despaired. Some prayed, some wept, while others took whatever they could and fled the village.

Many days passed, but each dawn was darker still until there was little difference between night and day. Hot winds blew, drying the land and killing the crops, but then the river rose as the sea flowed in and flooded the canyon. Instead of people, the streets were now filled with inquisitive grey dolphins, while watching over them in great sadness was a lone black dolphin.

“Watch and bear witness, Pip,” it said, “for you are our only hope.” It swam down the street and disappeared inside a house on the corner. “Bear witness and follow, if you are to find the truth.”

In his mind Pip stood, but before he could take more than a few steps, the village was buried under silt and the sea receded. Millennia passed, and while the days became brighter, the passage of day and night gradually slowed. Wind and rain storms eroded the silt, exposing the village once more, but in the extremes of climate and the shaking of the land, the buildings crumbled and fell. The days and nights became years until at last the world stopped turning, leaving the canyon on the edge of a perennial dawn. Winds blew with fire and ice, raising the dust that had once been walls and roofs and people, and the village grew old in silence.

Pip woke as another icy gust whipped around him. Across the desolate ruins his companions still searched, and he wondered how long he'd been day-dreaming. *“Bear witness and follow,”* echoed a voice inside his head, and he stood, knowing now the answer to the riddle.

“Over here!” he called to the others as he hobbled in agony down the street, coming to a halt in front of the ruined building where the black dolphin had disappeared in his dream. “It’s in here!”

Using the last remaining strength in his legs, he entered the ruin and made his way to where the back wall had once stood. Exhausted, he fell to his knees and there, etched on the rock in front of his eyes, was an eroded but unmistakable outline of a dolphin.

As he stared at it in wonder, his four companions came and gathered round him, each feeling the timeless energy welling up beneath their feet. In spite of the deepening cold, Clem removed his coveralls, revealing once again the white and black shorts that were the uniform of the Black Delphinidae. He knelt on Pip’s right, while

Damon, wearing the white and gold shorts proclaiming him Brother of the Delphinidae, knelt on his left. Mark and Chris, Earth-born but with growing powers of their own, crouched before them, completing the circle.

“Help me clear away the rubble,” Pip said.

Beyond Redemption

“What is it?” Pip asked as he brushed away the last of the rubble in front of him, revealing a metal plate set a few centimetres below the surrounding floor level.

“It’s some sort of manhole cover by the look of it,” Mark said. “Maybe there’s a hidden basement or something.”

“First we have to figure out how to open it,” Damon said, running his hand around the edge and trying to find a way of levering it up.

“Open sesame,” Chris said, but nothing happened. He shrugged as Damon and Pip stared at him. “Well, it was worth a try.”

“There must be a latch mechanism somewhere,” Mark said.

“If there was, it’s probably long since rusted away,” Damon said.

“But the plate hasn’t,” Chris said.

“No, you’re right, it looks as good as the day it was put there. I wonder what sort of metal it is.”

Pip shrugged, turning back to the dolphin engraving on the wall beside the plate. Below it was a faint circle he’d initially thought was carved into the stone, but as he looked more closely he noticed its interior was a different colour and texture to the surrounding material. Without thinking, he began picking at it with his fingernail. A small piece of the circle’s centre broke off, before the whole plug of compacted and dried silt shifted and slid out onto the floor, leaving behind a clean hole.

He picked up the plug, staring at it in disbelief, for it was moulded in the unmistakable shape of a dolphin’s head.

“Let me see that,” Clem said, holding it up alongside the ebony dolphin that hung against his chest. It was a perfect match in both size and shape. “I’ve seen something like this before and think I know what it is.”

He lifted the dolphin and chain from around his neck and pushed its head into the hole in the wall. Immediately a glowing mist began to appear on the surface of the metal plate, building in density until the entire plate disappeared behind a dull shimmering light.

“What is it?” Chris asked.

“I think it’s a portal,” Pip said. “I saw something very much like it in the basement of the Barefooters’ headquarters on Meridian.”

“I think you’re right,” Damon said. He picked up a small rock and dropped it in, but instead of hitting the plate, it passed straight through. “The plate’s not a cover; it’s the actual portal itself.”

“A portal into Sheol,” Mark said. “I should’ve known.”

“The path to the truth,” Clem said.

“That place gives me the willies,” Mark said. “I hate it.”

“I’m not that keen on it myself,” Damon said, “but I don’t think we have much choice but to go in there.”

“Sheol is no place for the living,” Chris said. Damon and Mark both looked at him. “Jim Hamilton’s spirit told us not to return to that place.”

“That’s right,” Damon said, “but I’ve recovered much of Damien’s knowledge of that realm and I’m pretty sure I can lead us through.”

“Where do you intend going?” Mark asked.

“I think we should get you back to Earth,” Damon said. “Lorina’s hiding there with Sandra.”

Mark nodded.

“No, we must find the city of towers,” Clem said. “The path to the truth lies through there.”

Damon placed his hand on Clem’s shoulder. “Your parents told you to come straight back to the house once you’d seen us off, and you would have done so already if our ship hadn’t been washed away. We came here to rescue Mark, remember, and we need to get him back to his wife and family.”

“But the old man said I must bring you to the city,” Clem said.

“We’ll come back here someday soon, I promise,” Mark said, “and then we can all go off in search of the truth together. But first I have to find out who killed that dolphin and framed me for it.”

“There’s only one path to the truth.”

“We know, Clem,” Pip said, “and we won’t forget. In the meantime you need to tell your parents what happened to Frank, and when the floodwaters go down see if you can find his ship.”

Clem stared at him. “You promise you’ll come back, Pip?”

“I promise. The Black Dolphin cursed me, after all.”

“Yes, he did.” Clem smiled. “Okay, I’ll do as you ask then.”

Pip nodded, patting him on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Clem, for all you and your parents have done for me,” Mark said, shaking his hand. “I’m forever in your debt.”

“It’s an honour to have been of service. Travel safely and return soon.”

Clem stood back and watched as firstly Damon, then Pip, Chris and Mark lowered themselves into the portal and disappeared. He wavered, torn between his need to follow them and his duty not to, and without even realising what he was doing, discovered he’d already lowered one foot into the shimmering light. Balancing on his other foot, he glanced over to where his ebony dolphin, a token passed down to him through countless generations, protruded from the socket in the wall.

If he were to follow his friends into Sheol, he would have to leave it behind and that was something he couldn’t bring himself to do. A day earlier he’d offered it to the ferryman in exchange for Pip’s soul, and that was right, it was an honourable sacrifice even though the ferryman had refused it, but he knew now in his heart that he’d be unable to find the path to the truth without it. He sighed, pulling his foot back and carefully withdrawing the dolphin from the receptacle. The portal remained open for a few moments, half a second perhaps, before the shimmering light disappeared and it became just a dull metal plate embedded in the floor.

He turned to leave, but paused for a moment to cover the plate with rubble. *‘Best not to let anyone else find this,’* he thought.

* * *

Light and dark. Light and dark. Light and dark.

Frank opened his eyes, and was almost blinded by the dazzling sunlight shining in through the cockpit window. He turned his head away, but the movement caused his whole body to flare up in pain. The shadows swept across him, making him feel dizzy, before the spinning of his ship once again plunged him into darkness.

He'd swum out to the flooded ship, he remembered now, and had just closed the hatch as it had been swept out into the raging stream. As it had bounced and rolled along, he'd stumbled forward and just reached the cockpit as the falls came into view. Somehow he'd managed to strap himself in and activate the jump to subspace just as he'd been swept over the edge and into a gaping chasm.

Jumping to subspace from ground level in a ship of that size was considered foolhardy even by the most hardy of fools, and Frank now understood why. The ship had spun wildly, propelled by the air rushing in to fill the vacuum it left behind, and he'd come close to passing out from the acceleration forces. He was sure it was only the cacophony of alarms that had kept him conscious.

Fearing his ship may have been about to drop right back to real-space on Huntress, he'd instead forced it across to the other side of the fold, a region of space which he was fairly sure was devoid of stars and planets. He'd held his breath as the ship lurched back into real-space, and that was all he could remember.

Light and dark.

Bright sunshine, bright *white* sunshine. Not Huntress's sun, then. The light from a red dwarf was, well, red. Yet on the other side of the fold from Huntress there were no suns at all; the nearest star should've been three light years away. He pulled himself upright in the chair, grimacing as every bone in his body ached in protest.

The console in front of him was dead. Not good. He pushed the main power switch to *Auxiliary* and the cabin lights flickered on, while the navigation panel came to life and began locking onto the galaxy's subspace beacons. He chanced a smile as the fix on his position narrowed down, confirming he was indeed on the opposite side of the fold to Huntress. The star chart that appeared on the screen confirmed his recollection; the nearest star was three light years away.

He switched back to the navigation screen and began computing his velocity and acceleration vectors. As the data accumulated he would be able to determine the coordinates of the star he was orbiting, although he was beginning to guess what the answer would be. He was wrong, though, very wrong.

His velocity was forty kilometres per second in a direction at right angles to his mysterious sun, and that seemed reasonable as it was near enough to the speed at which Huntress orbited its star. His acceleration, though, which should have given him a direct measure of the mass of his sun, was zero. He watched in stunned amazement as more and more significant digits emerged from the computer, all of them zero.

A bright uncharted star on the opposite side of the fold to Huntress, and with zero mass to boot!

He shook his head in bewilderment. All he needed now was for the Easter Bunyip to dance across the console and his day would be complete. He groaned, turning his attention to the engine management panel.

It was dead. Not even the warning lights were working.

“Only one thing left to do,” he mumbled to himself as he reached across to activate the emergency beacon. He hoped it was working.

* * *

Pip felt totally disoriented as he lowered himself through the portal. On the Huntress side it had been a horizontal hole in the floor of the ruined building, yet the opening he'd dropped out of into Sheol had been vertical. He sat on the floor, trying to figure out which way was up in the total darkness.

“Are you there, Pip?” Damon asked, and Pip turned to see him glowing brightly.

“I'm right here,” he said, wondering why Damon couldn't see him, before glancing down at his own body and realising he didn't share his friend's luminescence.

He stood, but was almost knocked over again as someone bumped into him.

“Sorry,” Chris said.

“Bloody hell!” came the voice of Mark from just behind him. “Who turned the room on its side?”

“I know, it’s like some crazy amusement park ride,” Damon said. “I think we should all join hands before we become separated.”

Pip reached out and felt something that might have been a hand.

“Ouch!” Mark cried. “That’s my nose!”

“S-s-sorry.”

Mark grabbed hold of Pip’s hand, gripping it firmly. “Take my other hand, Chris.”

“Is that it?” Chris asked.

“If that’s you squeezing, then yes.”

Pip took hold of Damon’s glowing hand, completing the chain. “Which way do we go?” he asked.

“We should wait here for a few moments in case Clem can’t resist the temptation of joining us,” Damon said.

“It’s getting cold,” Pip said.

“That always happens when you go into Sheol,” Damon said. “It goes cold for a few minutes and then gets really hot before fading away to nothing. Mark reckons it’s our minds becoming used to being detached from our bodies.”

“If we’re detached from our bodies, what is it we’re each holding onto?”

“Virtual hands,” Chris said. “Our minds are conditioned to think in terms of our bodies, so we create a thought-body around ourselves in here.”

“That’s a good way of putting it,” Damon said.

“I, um, was doing a bit of reading on the subject a few months ago.” He’d been doing a lot more than just reading, he reminded himself, and that was how he’d fallen into the clutches of Gregory back when this madness had first begun. He shuddered.

“So what’s happened to our real bodies?” Pip asked.

“They’re in intergalactic subspace in a state of suspended animation,” Damon said.

“Oh,” Pip said.

“I hate this place,” Mark muttered, breaking the awkward silence that followed.

“I don’t think Clem’s coming,” Chris said.

“Clem, are you in here?” Damon called, but the only response was the echo of his voice as it reverberated around in the darkness.

“I think we should move on,” Mark said.

“This way,” Damon said, pulling them off to the right.

“Sheol is created by consciousness,” Damon said as they walked through the darkness. “Each world that supports sentient life creates a chamber in Sheol, and those chambers are interconnected by a network of passageways. If you know the way and don’t get lost in the dark, you can travel through here to any civilised world in the universe.”

“So why isn’t it used more often?” Pip asked.

Before Damon could answer, the silence around them was broken by a howl that ended in a strangulated scream. “That’s one of the reasons,” he said.

“What was it?”

“An ogre,” Chris said. “Not good.”

Another howl, seeming to come from further to the left, answered the first.

“Damon,” Mark asked, “I don’t suppose you can stop yourself from glowing, can you?”

“I don’t think so.”

They pulled closer together as more howling began on either side of them.

“What do you think they want?” Pip asked.

“Shush,” Chris said.

Ahead and just to the left, a bright light flickered like a dancing flame. Another appeared to their right and then three more behind. Soon they were encircled by the lights.

“Not good,” Chris said again.

“Don’t let them touch you,” Damon said. “They can consume our spirits.”

The flaming torches drew closer, surrounding them and cutting off any possible escape. Mark, as eldest, instinctively reached out and pulled the others close to him.

He'd had a close encounter with an ogre eight years earlier, he now recalled. At the moment when two time lines had merged and the future hung in the balance, Chris had opened a portal into Sheol and pulled him in. He'd expected a Dolphin escort, but instead had narrowly escaped an ogre. *'That sounds like Mark the Bewildered,'* it had snarled, *'and it smells like he has an elf child with him. Give me the elf, Mark, and I'll show you the way out of here.'* In panic, Chris had broken away from him, and he'd run off into the darkness after him and become totally lost.

'This time there'll be no running away,' he thought.

Damon had once said the ogres were the original inhabitants of Sheol, perhaps coming from a world that no longer existed. He said they particularly disliked those of elvish descent, although he didn't know why.

'Be careful, elf,' another voice from Mark's past echoed in his mind. *'Your kind aren't too popular in here, right Maud?'*

'Too right, Harry. They'll eat him alive if they catch him.'

Harry and Maud, the Meridian confectioners whose trapped spirits Mark had encountered on his first journey into Sheol with Peter and Aaron. He'd been only seven at the time and on his way to challenge Morgoth, when Harry and Maud had started heckling them. Mark had thought their warning to Aaron had been just winding him up, but in hindsight it seemed they were deadly serious. Ogres ate elves. He pulled his three elvish companions closer to him.

Chris watched in horror as the flaming torches drew closer. He'd first come across the ogres when he'd led Mark into Sheol in the lead-up to their confrontation with Brett Farley, but it was a much more recent encounter he was remembering now. Six months ago, he'd been drawn into Sheol in his sleep, finding himself wandering through its dark passageways in his dreams. He'd been cornered by the ogres and almost died, but as they'd taken hold of him and begun tearing at his mind, Gregory had come to his rescue and led him down the narrow passageway that opened onto the river. So the nightmare had begun, and he shuddered as he relived those weeks of torment and confusion.

Damien had encountered the ogres in his early ventures into Sheol, and Damon recalled now what had happened. At first Damien had tried to communicate with them, but even though they could speak in a language he understood, they'd left him in no doubt that he was unwelcome amongst them.

They feared the Dolphins, though, and that surprised both Damien and the Dolphins themselves. In the end an uneasy truce had developed, with the ogres staying well clear of him and the Dolphins.

As word of the existence of Sheol had spread across the galaxy and others had started venturing into that realm, reports had filtered through of ogres ambushing and devouring those unfortunate enough to stumble across them. The Dolphins had offered safe passage to the Delphinidae, and in return they'd begun worshipping them as gods.

Damon reached out with his mind, seeking any Dolphins that might be within reach of them, but they were alone.

Pip glanced around as the flickering lights drew closer. He'd heard of the ogres in the course of his studies, but had not paid great attention to them at the time and was struggling now to remember anything of those lessons. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he'd be finding himself in Sheol, surrounded by them, and yet here he was, trying to remember something about them, anything that might improve their chances of survival.

'The realm called Sheol is dark and scary,' he recalled his tutor once saying. *'There are all sorts of nasty critters in there, and some people have even been eaten. The only safe way through that realm is with a Dolphin escort.'*

Now he wondered why the ogres didn't eat the Dolphins. *'Maybe they don't taste very nice,'* he thought, and almost laughed out loud. *'What are you cackling about?'* the voice of Hamish Quarrel, his principal tormenter at school, echoed inside his mind. Hamish didn't appreciate being laughed at by his victims, and that only made Pip's beatings worse, but he couldn't help himself. He had the knack of always thinking of something stupid and funny in the face of adversity, and supposed it was his mind's way of dealing with fear.

“That’s it!” he cried, suddenly remembering the other thing his tutor had said about ogres. “They feed on fear. If we’re truly and honestly not afraid of them, they’ll leave us alone.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Mark said, “but how do we stop ourselves from fearing them?”

“Use your imagination,” Pip said, trying to make it up as he went. “We, um, we can’t see them, right, so we assume they’re big and fierce with long sharp teeth. But perhaps they’re not. Perhaps they’re little midgets with pink hair, pointy noses and knobbly knees.”

“I get it,” Chris said. “Their ears stick out and they’ve got really bad acne, rotten teeth and bad breath, and, um, and they can’t stop farting.”

Pip began laughing and couldn’t stop himself. Damon made a farting noise by blowing against the back of his hand and started laughing too. Mark and Chris couldn’t help but join in.

“Can’t stop f-farting,” Mark said between bursts of laughter, and that set Pip off again.

“Those flames they’ve got,” Chris chuckled, “it’s probably burning methane, from, from you know where!”

“Chris, you’re terrible!” Damon spluttered between howls of laughter.

“They’re gone,” Pip said when he’d finally regained enough self control to look around.

“You’re right,” Mark said. “You’re a genius, Pip.”

“I know. Now let’s get out of here before they come back.”

“Which way, Damon?” Chris asked.

“Um, I’m not sure.” Damon clapped his hands together, listening to the echo. “I seem to have become disoriented during all that and, um, I’m not really sure where we are any more.”

“Oh no,” Mark said. “Have I told you I hate this place?”

“Only about a million times,” Chris said. “Let’s start walking anyway, and maybe Damon will find a landmark or something.”

“Maybe we should’ve stayed on Huntress,” Pip said.

“Shut up,” Damon said, pulling them off to the right. “We’ll go this way.”

* * *

“Unidentified spacecraft, this is the Excalibur,” the voice crackled from the overhead speaker, waking Frank from his dozing. *“Do you require assistance?”*

“I most certainly do,” Frank replied.

“Can you manoeuvre yourself into our hold?”

“No, my engines are totally stuffed.”

“No problem, just sit tight and we’ll pull you in.”

“Thank you.”

“Just for the record, what’s the registration number of your ship? Your transponder doesn’t seem to be working.”

“I, um, I’ll have to find the registration papers.”

“Don’t worry for now, we’ll get them off you once we have you on board.”

Frank sighed.

“What were you doing here?” the uniformed officer standing before him asked. “You do realise this is restricted space.”

“No, I, um, I didn’t know,” Frank said.

“Sir, unless you can provide documentation or give us some answers, I’ll have to place you under arrest.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“In that case follow me.” The officer led him to a holding cell at the rear of the ship. “It won’t be for long, sir. We’ll be back on Meridian in about an hour.”

“I fully understand the position you’re in,” Frank said, “and I’m thankful for your rescue. I’m sure my associates on Meridian will be able to provide you with all the documentation you require.”

“I’m sure they will, sir, and I thank you for your cooperation.”

“Frank, what the hell did you think you were doing flying a stolen ship to Huntress?” Kevin yelled as he paced up and down in front of him.

“The regular flights were all booked out.”

Kevin glared at him.

“I promised Lorina I’d try to find Mark’s body for her,” Frank lied. “It was the least I could do, under the circumstances.”

“And you say you took Damon, Pip and my nephew with you too?”

“They insisted on coming.”

“So where are they now?”

“They’re still on Huntress, as far as I know. We became separated in a storm.”

“I’ll notify the Governor there and see if he can locate them.”

“No don’t, don’t put him to any trouble. I’ll go and fetch them myself.”

“You’re not going anywhere, not for now at least. Just consider yourself lucky you’re not going back there inside a prison ship.” Kevin turned and left the room, the guard locking the door behind him. Frank sighed again.

* * *

“Wait,” Damon said as he stopped walking. “I think we’re being followed.”

“Not more ogres,” Mark moaned.

“No, it’s human, an Earthling I think, or perhaps a Cornipean. They’re very similar, you know.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Ah, there you are,” said a voice from behind them, and as they turned, the space around them began to glow with a dull orange light. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you lot.”

Before them stood a teenaged boy, the perfect caricature of a street urchin with lank unkempt hair, shifty eyes and a look of such utter contempt on his face that Pip almost burst out laughing.

“Where’s the kid?” the urchin asked, tugging at his torn denim shorts that were on the verge of dropping down around his ankles. “You didn’t feed him to the ogres, did you?”

“Who, Clem?” Damon asked. “No, he didn’t come into Sheol. We sent him back to his parents.”

“The boss won’t be happy,” he said, now with his hands on his hips and wearily shaking his head. “What are you doing way out here?”

“We’re trying to get to Earth.”

“Well you won’t find it out this way, that’s for sure. Follow me.” He started walking briskly back in the direction from which he’d come. “Come on, I haven’t got all day!”

“Sheeze,” Mark whispered.

“Where are you taking us?” Damon asked as the path they were following began to descend.

“You’ll see soon enough,” the boy said, picking up the pace a little. “The passageway narrows up ahead and the walls are a bit thin in places so be careful not to touch them.”

“What’s behind them?” Pip asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“You mean more ogres?” Mark asked.

“No, worse.”

“Oh.”

Pip struggled a little to keep up, even though his legs weren’t exactly sore. ‘*Virtual legs*,’ he thought, pushing himself a bit harder. ‘*If I could convince my mind that I wasn’t a cripple I could probably even run in here.*’ He wasn’t game to try, though, not yet. The last time he’d run, which was five years ago, he’d suffered severe cramps for a week and his doctor had warned him not to do it again or he’d risk permanent damage.

The passageway’s descent became steeper as the walls drew in around them. In places they were almost translucent in the orange light, and Pip thought he could see things moving on the other side. Horrible things, no doubt. He turned away and concentrated on Damon’s feet pounding in front of him on the featureless grey floor.

Although the others had noticed it earlier, it wasn’t until Pip looked up again that he realised the light had changed. A white mistiness now surrounded them, swirling above their heads and beginning to overwhelm the orange glow the boy was generating. The

air smelt cool and slightly damp, a pleasant change from the nothingness of Sheol.

Just ahead of them shafts of sunlight began breaking through the mist, while underfoot the grey floor gave way to a thick carpet of grass. After a few more paces the fog lifted, and they found themselves standing on a sloping bank overlooking a broad river.

“What’s that?” Damon asked, pointing at the city on the opposite bank.

“We call it the City of Towers,” the boy said.

“This is the place Gregory brought me to,” Chris said.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s safely locked away for now.”

“Who are you, and why have you brought us here?” Damon asked.

“You can call me Pedro, and I was told to bring you here. Follow me and I’ll introduce you to the boss.”

He led them down the slope to a silver bridge that had been barricaded with steel mesh. Pulling a large key from the pocket of his drooping shorts, he unlatched an equally large padlock and dragged the barricade open enough for them to squeeze through.

“Hurry across,” he said. “The less people who know you’re here, the better.”

The span was longer than it looked, and Pip had been badly unnerved by his experience on the old stone bridge on Huntress. The water looked a long way down and he was sure it’d be icy cold and filled with elf-eating fish. When a dark shape broke the surface directly below him, he almost screamed.

“What was that?” he asked nervously.

“Never you mind,” Pedro said. “The water’s out of bounds to everyone here, even me.”

An elderly dark-skinned man pulled open the gate for them at the far end of the bridge. Mark stared at him, thinking he looked familiar but not quite able to place him.

“It’s been a while, Mark,” the man said. “Eight years if I’m not mistaken.”

“Elko!” Mark cried, dashing forward to embrace him. The old man hugged him tightly.

“Where’s Clem?” Elko asked as he glanced around at the others. “Didn’t he come with you?”

“They sent him home to his parents,” Pedro said, again with his hands on his hips.

“I see. That’s unfortunate, for he’s just as much a part of this as you four are, perhaps even more so.”

“Just what is this thing we’re all a part of?” Mark asked.

“All in good time,” Elko said. “First I must introduce you to the others. Follow me.”

He led them along a stone path winding through the parkland adjoining the river, then across a road and into a narrow laneway. Waiting outside an old dilapidated building was a blonde-headed boy the same age as Pedro and similarly attired in just shabby denim shorts.

“This is Jim,” Elko said.

“Pleased to meet you,” Mark said. “You’re Eridanian, aren’t you?”

“Yes, you’re right. How’d you know?”

“It’s the feet.”

Pip glanced down. At first he wasn’t sure what Mark had meant, but then he realised Jim’s middle toes were the longest, making his feet look a bit like elongated hands.

Damon nudged him. “Don’t stare,” he whispered.

“I once knew your grandfather,” Jim said to Mark. “Is he still keeping well?”

“Yes indeed.”

“And Peter?”

“He’s fine too. You’d never believe they were pushing eighty.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Is everyone here?” Elko asked, interrupting them.

“Yes, they’re all downstairs,” Jim said.

“Good. We’d best not keep them waiting any longer then.”

Bobby Smith looked up as the sound of voices drifted down from outside. Certain it was his grandson, he leapt out of his seat as a blonde-headed boy entered the room, and almost called out to him before realising it was Jim.

“Only four of them are here,” Jim said.

A cold blackness gripped Bobby's heart. *There were supposed to be five. Did one of them fall? Was it Chris?*

Another blonde head appeared behind Jim, but Bobby knew straight away that this wasn't Chris either. He'd seen him helping Chris's spirit on the opposite bank a few months ago. *'Damon or Damien or something,'* he thought.

Another head appeared, this time with black hair and a darker complexion. There was no mistaking Mark Collins, as he'd known him quite well in life. Mark glanced at him, grinning, and Bobby grinned back.

The next to appear was blonde and a little shorter than Mark and Damon, but Bobby was pretty sure he wasn't Chris either. Whoever he was, he seemed nervous and out of his depth.

After what seemed an eternity, the fourth visitor finally appeared in the doorway and this time there was no mistaking his grandson. He'd been only thirteen when Bobby had died, but had grown as tall as Mark in the intervening years, taller even than Aaron, he thought. When Chris turned towards him it was Mary's eyes he saw, and he almost choked with sadness and regret.

"Granddad?"

"Oh Chris," Bobby sniffled, stumbling towards him and wrapping him in his arms. "You're here, you made it."

It took Bobby a few minutes to notice it, but once he did it was unmistakable. The four visitors were *alive*. They had a glow and depth of colour about them that the other inhabitants of the city lacked, something he simply hadn't noticed until now. Everyone else looked almost monochrome by comparison, and another wave of sadness and loss washed over him.

"What's wrong, Granddad?" Chris asked.

"Nothing, really, it's just that seeing you and your friends makes me realise how dead we all are here."

"I'm just so happy to see you at all," Chris said.

Bobby looked at him while plucking up the courage to ask the question that had been on his lips since he'd first known of his coming. "So, um, so how's your grandmother?"

“She’s fine.” Chris’s expression darkened a little. “Um, she married her friend Ron soon after you died, but he seems a nice enough bloke. I hope you don’t mind too much.”

“Not at all, I’m pleased they’re together, really I am.” As much as he wanted to convince himself of that, though, deep in his heart of hearts he wasn’t. He was as jealous as all hell, if the truth be known. “So how’s school going?”

“I finished last year and I’m now studying at Mark’s college, or at least I was until they arrested him and sent him to Huntress.”

“Yes, I heard about that. A terrible business, that’s for sure.”

“I still can’t believe Brian was fooled into charging Mark with the crime,” the woman standing beside Bobby said.

“I’m sorry,” Bobby said, “I should’ve introduced you earlier. Chris, this is Hilda. She was a Delphinidae Priestess in life and worked on Sontar setting up schools for the poor.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Chris said.

“Bobby’s told me all about you,” Hilda said. “He’s very proud of you.”

Chris blushed. “Um, you’re not the Hilda who was married to Ron Simmons, are you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“What a small world. Ron’s now married to my grandmother.”

“I know.”

“I think Hilda planned it that way,” Bobby said, and Chris saw something in Hilda’s eyes telling him that was dangerously close to the truth.

“Come and meet our other two conspirators,” she said, leading him over to the couple who were talking to Mark. “Chris, these are Michael and Rachel, Pedro’s parents.”

Both looked to be in their mid thirties, which Chris thought was about right given Pedro’s age, but then the shock of recognition hit him and he stared at them in disbelief.

“You’re not, no, you couldn’t be, could you?”

“Yes,” Michael laughed. “We’re Peter Thorpe’s parents. Peter and Pedro are kind of twins I suppose. It’s a long story.”

“Age means nothing in here,” Hilda said. “People appear as they saw themselves most prominently in life.”

“Or when they were most happy,” Rachel added. “Pedro and Jim only knew each other in life when they were fourteen, which is why they’ve chosen that age in here, and Michael and I have gone along with their time frame.”

Chris shook his head in bewilderment as Elko stepped up to them with Damon and Pip in tow. “Sorry to interrupt, Rachel, but there’s one other I must introduce our visitors to.”

“No, that’s quite all right,” Rachel said. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of opportunity to chat with Mark and Chris later.”

“Come with me,” Elko said, leading them back up the stairs. “I’m guessing by the confused look on Chris’s face that you’ve figured out who Rachel, Michael and Pedro are.”

“Peter’s in for a shock when he finally passes over,” Mark said.

“Yes, I suppose he will be,” Elko laughed.

They emerged from the lane and into a broad tree-lined plaza, passing an ornate fountain before entering a golden tower on the opposite side.

“This man has only recently joined my team,” Elko said as the lift took them up to the top floor, “but he’s been a veritable fountain of knowledge. A most enlightened gentleman, I must say.”

The lift doors opened onto a great hall made of polished marble, where two guards in red trousers and white frilly shirts nodded to Elko before leading them forward.

“His Lordship is expecting you,” the taller of the two said.

Before them were clusters of leather armchairs set around low tables made of a dark stained wood, while on either side between drapes of the finest cloth hung paintings depicting heroic battle scenes. Above them a diamond chandelier cast rainbow patterns across the white domed ceiling.

Covering the far wall was a huge tapestry of a youthful man with flowing dark hair and olive skin, standing naked and brandishing a golden sword. Below it and seated on a lavish throne was that very same man.

“Come,” he said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“My Lord,” Elko said, “may I introduce Damon Enderling and Pip Ingle of Meridian, and Christopher Smith and Mark Collins of Earth.”

“My grandson, yes, the boy who killed me,” Morgoth said, now standing and placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. “We meet again, young Mark.”

Part Three

Absolute Power

In the Dead of Night

Lorina screamed herself awake. For a moment in the darkness of her bedroom, she didn't know where she was.

"What's wrong?" Owen asked. "Is it the baby?"

"No, just a bad dream."

"Tell me about it."

"It was Mark. Morgoth cut his head off." She drew in a deep breath, covering her face with her hands.

"Morgoth?" Owen asked.

"Not the shrivelled-up old thing we knew but a youthful Morgoth like in that tapestry he had in the palace. Mark had been brought before him, but when Morgoth saw him he said something about him being the boy who'd killed him, and then just whipped out his sword and cut his head off."

"I can see now why you screamed."

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"Not at all. This is a very stressful time for you."

"I'll just be glad when it's all over. How are you going with Mark's appeal?"

"Very well, actually. Chris's admission that he used Mark's authorisation to access the restricted archives will help greatly, as will his rebuttal of the conversation Harry Tibbits claimed to have overheard him having with Mark, but we'll only get one shot at this and before we push ahead we need to find out who really did kill that baby dolphin."

"Jason seemed to think Paul Hoskins may have been involved, but I haven't come across anything incriminating him yet."

"I need to speak to Professor Tibbits, but he hasn't been returning any of my calls. I'm starting to think I might have to go to Cornipus and track him down personally, but with the workload I have at the

moment that's going to be difficult without arousing suspicion. If nothing else, Mark's case has been good for business; I'm snowed under now with clients."

Lorina glared at him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"No, that's okay. I guess I'm still a bit shaken by the dream."

"Speaking of clients, someone called me from Meridian last night just as I was about to leave the office. They want me to represent an elderly man who's been charged with taking a stolen ship into the restricted space on the opposite side of the fold to Huntress."

At the mention of that planet a shiver ran up Lorina's spine. "Do you know who he is?"

"No, but I'll be flying to Meridian first thing tomorrow for a briefing."

"Do you think it could be Frank?"

"I doubt it." He took hold of her hand. "They're all fine, I'm sure. Don't worry about them."

She nodded and tried to smile, but still couldn't shake off the sound of Mark's severed head dropping onto the floor of Morgoth's palace.

* * *

Owen flicked through the brief as he followed the guard down the narrow corridor and into a cell on the right. He sat down in front of his client as the door was locked behind him.

"Frank, I think you'd better tell me everything that happened."

"Is it safe to talk in here?"

"Yes, they got rid of the bugs after Morgoth's demise."

Frank ran his hands through his hair. "Well the good news is that Mark's free and in reasonably good health, considering what he's been through."

"Yes, Jason and Lorina spoke with him briefly before a storm disrupted communications."

"The storm, yes, that's when everything came unstuck. The ship I'd borrowed from one of the small-time traders on Amber got swept

out into a river, with me on board, and I had to do an emergency jump to subspace to avoid going over a waterfall.”

“On Huntress? I didn’t think it ever rained there.”

“It’s pretty rare, from what I gather, but when it does it really lets go.”

“So what happened?”

“Jumping from ground level pretty much wrecked the ship, or perhaps bouncing along the rocks on the stream bed did that. Either way, I had no option but to drop back to real space on the other side of the fold and call for assistance. I honestly didn’t know it was a restricted area, and I didn’t know the ship I’d borrowed was stolen either.”

Owen shook his head. “So what happened to the others?”

“They’re still on Huntress with the family who rescued Mark.”

“That’s something I suppose. At least they’re not implicated in any of this.”

“I’ve already told Kevin they’d gone with me to help retrieve Mark’s body.”

“That was probably unwise.”

“It was all I could think of at the time. I gather he’s now got the governor of the Colony out looking for them.”

“Do you have any way of contacting the family they’re staying with?”

Frank took Owen’s pen and scribbled down the details.

“Thanks,” Owen said. “I’ll warn them to expect trouble and give them your cover story. I suppose with Damon corroborating what you’ve said it might help get you a lighter sentence.”

“There’s no hope of just a slap on the wrist, then?”

Owen shook his head. “If it was just the trespassing thing, but, well, the stolen ship puts a much more sinister complexion on it.”

“What about bail?”

“I’ll be applying on your behalf, of course, and Lorina will go guarantor so that should be no problem, but you’ll probably be confined to either your home or the Temple on Bluehaven. Now if you were to identify the person who loaned you the ship...”

“No, I couldn’t do that. Any crackdown on the underground traders would put too many people at risk. Let’s just say I picked it up from a vendor in the Azarath street market.”

Owen again shook his head. “I’ll need a date and time as well as a rough description of the vendor.”

Frank scratched his chin. “I went to the market on the seventeenth, which is true, and the seller was a heavily-built Cornipean with short black hair. He was wearing shabby blue coveralls and spoke with a husky voice. Will that do?”

“Yes, it probably describes at least half the traders in Azarath.”

“Talk to Anton. He can probably rustle up a few witnesses for you.”

“I will. Now don’t speak to anyone else, especially not Kevin or Dad, without having me present, and I’ll see about getting you out on bail this afternoon.”

“Thanks Owen.”

* * *

“Hello,” Clem said, answering the ultranet call.

“Hello, it’s Owen Lachlan calling from Bluehaven. Could I speak with Damon Enderling please?”

“Um, Damon’s not here any more.”

“What do you mean?”

“He left with Chris and Pip.”

“What about Mark?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure who you mean.”

“It’s okay, I’m calling on behalf of Frank Halliday and I know about Mark.”

“But, but Frank’s dead. His ship got washed over the falls.”

“No, he managed to jump to the other side of the subspace fold, but was arrested for entering a restricted area in a stolen ship. He told the authorities he took Damon, Pip and Chris to Huntress to retrieve Mark’s body for Lorina, but was separated from them in a storm.”

Clem paused for a few moments while trying to work out how much to reveal. “They, um, went through a portal into the place they call Sheol and were returning to Earth with the object of their search.”

“That’s good that they’ve all left. The governor of the Colony will be looking for them.”

“In that case no-one in the village saw them. They must have landed somewhere else.”

“Yes of course, you’re right. Thanks for all your help.”

“I’m pleased to be of service, and happy to hear that Frank’s alive. He’s a great truth-seeker.”

“I’m sure he is. Goodbye and thanks again.”

Clem closed the ultranet connection before dashing off to find his parents.

* * *

Lorina stood as Owen led Frank into her office.

“You were right after all,” Owen said. “This is my mysterious client.”

“I see,” she said, looking at Frank expectantly. “So where’s Mark?”

“Damon’s taking him back to Earth through Sheol,” Owen said.

“I thought that realm was off-limits.”

“It’s supposed to be,” Frank said, “and with good reason. I can’t understand why they went in there.”

“You weren’t with them then?” Lorina asked.

“No, we became separated in the storm and I had to flip the ship across the fold to avoid being washed over a waterfall.”

Lorina glared at him.

“It’s a long story,” he sighed.

“What about Chris and Pip?”

“They went into Sheol too, I gather,” Owen said. “You’d better let Jason know to expect them.”

“I will. Do you think they’ll be all right?”

“Damon possesses much of Damien’s knowledge of that realm,” Frank said. “They’re probably safer in there than if they’d stayed on Huntress.”

“You don’t sound entirely convinced.”

“It’s true, there are dangers in there, particularly for Pip and Chris, but Damon is strong and I don’t believe Mark entirely lost his Barefooter heritage when he set off the pulse that killed Morgoth.”

To his surprise, Lorina nodded. “I’ve noticed some things about him that have made me wonder about that.”

“There’s no doubt his autothermic DNA was destroyed, but there are other more subtle characteristics of the Barefooters I think he may have retained.”

“Such as his healing powers?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“I thought as much. About a year ago I pulled a muscle in my back. It was as painful as hell, but a quick rub from Mark fixed it completely.”

Frank nodded. “Pip was badly hurt in an accident on Huntress, and I watched on as Mark, Chris and an amazing young boy from the village cured his injuries. I don’t know how much of it was Mark’s doing, but I’m sure he played a part.”

“I wonder what other Barefooter powers he’s retained,” Owen said.

Frank stared into space for a moment as a large piece of the puzzle seemed to slip into place. “I think the answer to that question may very well be at the heart of this whole business.”

* * *

Jason parked his car in the narrow laneway opposite an old disused warehouse in Brisbane’s southern suburbs.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Jenny asked.

He nodded, pulling a set of keys from his pocket. “*I’ll give you these for safe-keeping,*” Frank had said to him three years ago. “*They’re for a warehouse I own in Brisbane that was my place of business back in the 1950s. I think you know the place I mean.*” Jason knew it well.

Five years earlier, he and Chris had been brought here on the back of a motorcycle by a man named Anton, having been told Mark’s life was in danger. Anton had stood outside the warehouse, smoking a

cigarette, and in his mind Jason could still smell the stench of burning tobacco.

He unlocked the door and pulled it open, its hinges squealing in protest after long years of neglect. This time it was stale dust rather than tobacco he smelt, a smell he disliked almost as much as the smoke. It brought back memories of an abandoned farmhouse on Eridani, when he and his parents had been kidnapped following the wedding of Todd and Elissi. He shook his head, trying to dispel those thoughts.

“There’s a lot of glass and stuff on the floor,” he said to Jenny. “Are you sure you want to come in?”

“I’ll be fine. My feet are pretty tough.”

“Chris said the same thing when I offered to carry him the last time I was here.”

“I don’t doubt it. He can walk on just about anything without so much as a flinch.”

Jason smiled as he led her forward into the gloomy interior of the building. Something scurried overhead; probably just a possum or an owl, but all the same he didn’t like it. More farmhouse memories, he supposed.

“It’s over here,” he said, moving cautiously across to the far wall. Before him stood a large steel door, which he opened with another of Frank’s keys. Concealed behind it was a rectangular frame filled with a dull shimmering light.

Lorina had called Jenny two hours earlier, telling her that Mark and his companions were travelling to Earth through Sheol. Jenny had thought Jason would be pleased, but he’d just shaken his head and groaned when she’d told him.

“Going into Sheol is easy,” he’d said, “but finding the exits is almost impossible unless you know the place backwards. Even Anton relied on markers painted on the floor.”

“But doesn’t Damon have Damien’s knowledge of Sheol to call upon?”

“In theory he might, but he said himself they’re more impressions of things than real memories. In any case I’m not sure if Damien ever came to Earth.”

“Is there anything we can do to help them?”

It was then Jason had remembered the warehouse and the keys Frank had given him.

“I’m going to project my consciousness through the portal to see if I can find them,” he said, placing his hands on either side of the frame. “I did it before with Damon when we were trying to create that shortcut to Bluehaven.”

“I know, and I remember how that turned out,” Jenny said.

“At least I won’t have Pedro to worry about this time.”

“Well be careful anyway.”

“I’m always careful.”

“I know, but I don’t want to lose you too.”

Jason turned, looking deeply into her eyes. “I’ll be fine, I promise, and with any luck Mark and Chris will come popping out of here before you know it.”

Jenny nodded. “Good luck,” she whispered.

Jason closed his eyes, and in his mind pushed himself forward and through the portal. He felt his eyes open again – virtual eyes; his real eyes were still in Brisbane – but it made no difference in the darkness of Sheol. He could sense from the subliminal ambience around him that he was on the edge of a vast chamber, created in Sheol by the collective consciousness of Earth. Last time he’d sensed Damon’s presence through a passageway on the opposite side, so he moved himself in that direction.

“Damon! Mark! Chris! Anyone!” he called out into the darkness, but the echo of his voice was the only reply. No murmuring voices this time, and no bagpipes either; Sheol was deserted as far as he could tell. He continued pressing forward in what he thought was the direction of Bluehaven, reasoning that the portal to Huntress wouldn’t be far from there.

Another chamber opened around him. An inhabited world, somewhere in the universe, but he knew not where. There’d be hidden portals in the chamber leading out onto that world, but now was not the time to go exploring. In any case, he reminded himself, his physical body was still in real space back in Brisbane, so if he

emerged through one of the portals he'd be a fully detached spirit, a ghost. *'Time enough to be a ghost when I'm dead,'* he muttered, and pressed on.

He moved to the left, sensing something sentient in that direction. Soon the walls of the cavern began closing in around him, judging by the ambience of his footfalls, although he felt a strong disinclination to reach out and touch them. He quickened his pace a little as a slithering, sucking sound came from just behind him.

The passageway gradually began to descend. He'd heard no more sounds other than his own, but his sense of unease had grown. He was almost half-jogging through the darkness now and forced himself to slow down. Except the darkness was no longer complete; the air itself, if you could really call it air in Sheol, seemed to be glowing slightly.

As he continued to descend, the glowing mist swirled around him, letting through occasional shafts of watery sunlight. Another step forward and the mist dissolved away, leaving him standing on a grassy bank overlooking a broad river and a city of towers beyond. It was a place he'd been before.

Sensing the radiance of Damon's consciousness from across the water, Jason dashed down the slope towards the bridge, but pulled up as he realised its entrance was barred. Fearing trouble was brewing on the other side he scrambled down the embankment and into the water.

The river was broad but there was little current and he swam easily out to the centre of the stream. He seemed to pass through a psychic barrier, for suddenly his mind made contact with Damon's.

"Jason? Is that you?"

"Yes. Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"Are Mark and Chris with you?"

"Yes, but..."

The connection broke as the waters around him began to swirl, drawing him under. Directly beneath him on the river bed was a giant flower, and he watched on helplessly as its stamen reached up and wrapped itself around his ankle. He tried pushing it away with his

other foot, but that only made it tighten its grip. For a moment his head broke the surface, allowing him to draw breath, but then the swirling water closed over him once more.

Suddenly he was fourteen years old again, drowning in the pool outside the cave on Genesis. He and his parents had been taken to that world by his aunt Elissi, searching for the cradle of galactic civilisation and the beings whose spirits his father and Peter Thorpe carried. He'd slipped on the rocks outside the cave and fallen into the pool, where a vine had wrapped itself around his ankles and held him down.

He struggled to pull himself free, all the while his lungs screaming out for air. His heart pounded in his head as his vision began to darken, but then a woman's voice spoke to him.

"Jason? Can you hear me? Are you okay?"

In a final moment of clarity he wanted to say, *'No, I'm not okay. Can't you see I'm drowning?'*, but before he could stop himself, he'd opened his mouth and tried to draw breath, instead fatally filling his lungs with – water? No, something else...

Dust, stale dust. He coughed as he opened his eyes, finding himself lying face down on the dusty concrete floor of the warehouse.

"Honey, are you okay?" Jenny asked. He tried to sit up, but his head ached something terrible and he slumped back down again.

"I'm fine," he tried to say, but broke into more coughing which in turn amplified his headache. He groaned.

"What happened?" Jenny asked. "Did you find them?"

"Yes and no," Jason said as he sat up, his headache now receding a little. "They're in a city of towers."

"What? Where?"

"It's a part of Sheol, I think. I've been there before, when Ron got me to help Brian Lachlan after he'd been shot on Bluehaven. There's a river and the city is on the other side. I tried swimming across but something in the water grabbed me and pulled me under. It was like I was back in that pool on Genesis." He shivered and Jenny held him tighter.

"Are they okay?"

“Damon said they were, but he didn’t sound too confident. I don’t know, I only made contact with him for a few moments before that thing grabbed me.”

Jenny helped him to his feet. “I think we should go and have a talk with Ron and Mary. Maybe they know something about that place.”

* * *

“More bad news for the household budget as Consolidated Holdings, the company behind most of the galaxy’s food and clothing wholesalers, today announced an across-the-board thirty percent increase in prices. ‘This is a direct result of the abolition of slavery on Amber and Sontar,’ a spokesman said, ‘and we can’t rule out further price rises in the months ahead.’

“‘This will have a devastating effect on the very families the new employment conditions were supposed to help,’ Meridian’s Mission House spokesman Michael Trueheart said. ‘Many are still struggling to recover in the aftermath of the war. They’ve lost breadwinners and loved ones, and now these latest price hikes will push them to the wall.’

“So far Supreme Councillor Simmons has declined our requests for an interview.”

“Your father won’t be too pleased,” Owen said as he switched off the broadcast.

“No,” Lorina said. “For the last few weeks he’s been in meetings with his economic advisers and the wholesalers trying to avert this, but apparently to no avail.”

“Running the galaxy isn’t perhaps as easy as he thought when he stood for office.”

“I’m sure he never expected it to be a walk in the park, but I don’t think he thought it would all start falling apart this quickly.”

“Perhaps he’s beginning to appreciate some of the tough decisions Morgoth had to make.”

Lorina glared at him.

“Sorry, that was a terrible thing to say. What I meant was, things can’t be easy trying to run a galaxy like ours. No matter what you do, you’re going to upset someone.”

The telephone rang, providing a thankful interruption to their conversation. Lorina glanced at the caller ID and saw it was the secure channel from the college on Earth.

“Hello, Mark?” she asked.

“No, it’s me, your grandmother,” Mary said.

“What’s wrong?”

“*Have you ever heard of a place inside Sheol with a river and a city of towers?*”

Lorina scratched her chin. It was the last thing she was expecting her grandmother to ask about. “I, um, I remember something about a place like that from our ancient history course. They called the river Styx or something, and the city beyond it was Hades. The Dolphins know about it but they’re afraid of that place.”

“*Jason thinks Damon, Mark and Chris are in that city.*”

Lorina’s jaw dropped.

“*Honey, are you there?*”

“Hades is the city of the dead, and the river is a barrier that keeps the dead in and the living out. If they’re in there, then, then...”

“*Oh honey, I’m so sorry, so sorry.*”

“Do you know, do you have any idea what happened?”

“*Wait, I’ll put Jason on.*”

Owen, sensing it was bad news, came alongside Lorina and took hold of her hand. She looked into his eyes, squeezing his hand back in return as a tear ran down her cheek.

“*Lorina, it’s Jason.*”

“Oh Jase, is it true? Can they really be dead?”

“*I don’t know, honestly.*”

“Tell me everything.”

“*Very well. When I heard that they were returning to Earth through Sheol, I opened Frank’s portal in the Brisbane warehouse and projected my spirit in there, hoping to find them and guide them through. I sensed Damon’s presence, and that led me down a narrow passageway opening onto a grassy bank overlooking the river. Damon was in the city on the other side and I tried swimming across*

to him, but something in the water stopped me and sent my spirit back into my physical body.”

“That would’ve been the Guardian that according to legend stops the living from crossing the river. It’s supposed to take the form of an underwater flower that creates a whirlpool and draws wayward spirits down into itself.”

“That’s exactly right. Its stamen grabbed my legs and pulled me under.”

“There’s no doubt then.”

“I guess not, but I did make contact with Damon briefly and he said they were okay.”

“The dead often don’t know they’re dead.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Do you have any idea what happened to them?”

“No, none at all, although Sheol is a dangerous place and we were warned to stay out of there.”

“They should have, should have known better...”

Lorina held the phone away as a sob wracked her. Owen wrapped his arms around her, but she straightened herself and put the handset back to her ear. “I’m sorry, Jase. It’s so sudden, that’s all, and just when I thought everything was going to be okay.”

“I know, and I wish there was something I could do. Look, I’m sure they didn’t go into Sheol without very good reason. None of them were fools.”

“You’re right, of course.” She blew her nose. “Thanks for calling, Jase, and if there’s anything I can do for you and Jenny...”

“Yes, we’ll be in touch, I promise.”

She hung up, letting herself collapse into Owen’s arms.

* * *

Frank felt as if the ground had been pulled out from under him as Lorina told him what had happened to Mark and the others.

“This is all my fault,” he said. “If only I hadn’t tried to play the hero and swum out to the ship, they would never have gone into Sheol.”

Lorina braced herself, trying not to say what she was thinking. “Don’t go blaming yourself,” she finally said, “you weren’t to know what would happen.”

“I saw that city when we were trying to save Pip,” Frank said. “His soul was being taken across the river by a ferryman, but Clem swam out and rescued him before they reached the opposite bank.”

“Didn’t the Guardian try to stop him?”

“Yes, but a black dolphin came to his aid and he rode it like a surfboard rider.”

“He sounds like an amazing young man.”

“Yes indeed. I really need ...”

He paused as his mind raced on ahead of himself. He knew now what he had to do, but he couldn’t involve Lorina or Owen this time. There was enough blood on his hands already.

“Need what, Frank?” Lorina asked.

“Oh, nothing. Look, I know it’s easy to say, but don’t give up hope entirely. There’s a lot about Sheol we don’t understand.”

“Thanks Frank, but I’d, I’d rather not cling to false hope only to have it dashed again, or to pine away in uncertainty for the rest of my life.”

“You’re a brave young lady, Lorina.”

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on the nose.

* * *

Kevin stood as Lorina and Owen entered his office, knowing straight away that they carried bad news. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Lorina glanced at Hoskins.

“Paul, could you leave us for a few moments?” Kevin asked.

“Certainly, sir.” He smiled at Lorina as he left the room, but it was a smile she didn’t trust.

“Oh Dad, we think Damon, Chris and Pip might be dead,” she cried once she was sure Hoskins was out of earshot.

“What? How?”

“They were taking Mark’s remains back to Earth through Sheol,” Owen said, “but they never made it.”

Kevin began pacing up and down. “Are you quite sure of this?”

“It seems pretty certain.”

“What in Loria’s name were they doing such a damn fool thing like that for?” He slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “The loss of Damon will cause me irreparable harm.”

Lorina looked stunned.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. Of course, they were your friends.”

“They were taking Mark back to Jason and Jenny,” she sniffled, “for a proper burial.”

Kevin continued to pace. “I don’t know why Jason didn’t go and do it himself. Why drag Damon into it?”

“It was Damon who offered to go,” she said.

“Damned accursed Earthlings! Why’d they have to go and meddle in our affairs? You know I’ve half a mind to...”

“To do what, Dad?”

“Oh, nothing,” Kevin said. “I’m sorry, honey, you’re grieving and I’m being an ogre.” He reached out, wrapping her in a hug. “This whole business has been a terrible ordeal for you.”

Lorina wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “I hear you’ve been having a bit of a rough trot yourself.”

“The wholesalers? Oh, that’s just a storm in a teacup. In a few months everything will have settled down again, I’m sure. Leave the politics to me.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Owen and I were both worried.”

“No, it’s nothing I can’t handle. Say, why don’t the two of you go and spend a couple of weeks on Shimmel, and get away from all this stress for a while?”

“That’s a wonderful suggestion, Dad,” Lorina said, looking up at Owen.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “I’ll make all the arrangements straight away.”

Lorina kissed Kevin on the nose as Owen took hold of her hand.

“There are good times ahead, I promise,” Kevin said as they left the room.

“Did I hear her say Damon’s dead?” Paul asked as he stepped back in.

“You really must stop listening at doors,” Kevin said.

“I’m afraid it’s an old habit that’s hard to kick.”

“Never mind. Yes, it seems Damon, Chris and Pip have been lost in Sheol while trying to take Mark’s remains back to Earth for burial.”

“What a waste of three young lives, and for such an absurd gesture too. Mark will be just as dead buried on Earth as he would’ve been left lying in the rubble on Huntress. Those Earthlings sure have some strange customs.”

“Sometimes I wish I could just take one of Morgoth’s old planet imploders and do away with that accursed world.”

Paul scratched his chin. “Perhaps that’s a bit drastic, sir. Um, what’s the population of Earth, do you know?”

“About ten billion I think.”

“And it’s a fertile world from what I’ve heard, well suited to food production?”

“Yes, I believe they’re now exporting a fair amount of their produce to other planets in their galaxy. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just an idea, sir, and you should bounce it off General Gallagher on Nimber before saying anything, but it could be the answer to our problem with the food wholesalers.”

“Tell me what you have in mind.”

* * *

Jason tossed and turned, trying in vain to get to sleep, but his mind kept going back over everything that had happened that day. *‘The River Styx and Hades,’* he thought. *‘Just how did Greek mythology end up in Delphinidae lore? Had the ancients from Earth gone roaming through Sheol? And what had happened to Mark and the others? Was there any chance, any chance at all, that they might still be alive?’*

He thought back over what he’d seen and heard on his quest to find them. *The narrow passageway descending (into hell?), the slurping sound he was sure he’d heard behind him, then the opening onto the grassy bank and the view across the river to the city. White towers, mostly, with parkland along the bank. The river itself, a*

barrier to keep the dead in and the living out, but there was something else, something he'd forgotten.

He rolled over again, pulling the pillow over his head. He'd never get to sleep at this rate. *The grass, the river, the city, and something else.* What was it, and why was his mind so reluctant to cough it up?

He'd run down the slope to the water's edge and leapt into the stream. No, that wasn't quite right. *He'd paused before entering the water. Steel mesh, a barricade...*

"There was a bridge!" he cried out loud as he sat straight up in bed.

"Huh? What did you say?" Jenny asked.

"There was a bridge over that river. It was barricaded, but even so, Mark and the others could have used it to enter the city, and the guardian in the water wouldn't have been able to stop them."

"You think they could still be alive?"

"It's a long shot, I know, but it means there's still a glimmer of hope. I have to go back there."

"Oh no you don't!"

"But Jenny, what if Mark's in danger?"

"He's got Damon, Chris, and that other one, Pip, to help him. I don't want to lose you too."

Jason paused, deep in thought. "I should at least call Lorina."

"No, don't. There's no point building up her hopes only to have them dashed again, at least not until we have something more concrete to go on."

"You're right," he sighed. "Is there anything we can do then?"

"Well we could get a good night's sleep for starters, and then see what we can come up with in the morning."

Jason kissed her as she wrapped her arms around him. "I'm sorry to be such a wet blanket, honey," she added. "I know you mean well."

"No, you're right. I just hope I'm not clutching at straws."

"Me too."

Discontent

“One more time, heave!”

The lock broke. The warehouse doors were well-made but had never been designed to withstand the marauding youths of Emerald as they forced their way in, grabbing as much as they could before fleeing into the night. By the time the police arrived, little was left but empty shelves.

On the other side of the city, the sound of shattering glass echoed across the empty streets moments before flames erupted in the regional offices of Consolidated Holdings. The fire brigade responded within minutes, but too late to save the building and its contents.

In Azarath, where dusk was still several hours away, protesters marched on the town hall, demanding an end to the exorbitant food prices. From their offices high above the street, government officials watched on nervously. It was a testing time for the new administration.

Kevin strode out onto the steps of Government House, flanked by two armed bodyguards. The crowd jeered, but he raised his hands and smiled.

“Citizens of the galaxy, I bring you good tidings in these troubled times. After lengthy negotiations with the board of Consolidated Holdings, they have agreed to return food prices to their previous levels and to maintain those levels for a period of twelve months while an independent enquiry is conducted. I’m pleased to announce that this enquiry will be headed by the esteemed Brian Lachlan.”

He paused, expecting applause and cheering, but the crowd remained unnervingly silent.

“I’ve been assured that food prices in retail outlets across the galaxy will drop to their previous levels within two or three days, and the Business Ethics Commission has empowered its inspectors to prosecute any businesses that fail to comply.”

A journalist close to the front raised his hand. “Mike Wilkins from the Cornipean Argus. Supreme Councillor, what concessions did your government make to Consolidated Holdings in return for this gesture?”

“They have been offered a level of taxation relief, which will also be reviewed by the Lachlan Enquiry.”

“Can you give us more details?”

“I’m afraid the specifics of this arrangement cannot be disclosed at this time as they are commercial in-confidence.”

“So much for open government.”

Kevin turned away from him. “Are there any other questions?”

“What assurance can you give that there won’t just be an even bigger price rise in twelve months time?”

“It would clearly not be in the government’s interest for that to happen.”

“So what are you going to do to prevent it?”

“All in good time,” Kevin said, smiling his best politician’s smile. “Now if you’ll excuse me...”

He turned and re-entered Government House, closely shadowed by the two bodyguards.

* * *

“How are you feeling?” Owen asked as he led Lorina into the rainforest glen. They’d arrived at the Contessa Resort on Shimmel the night before, but because of a mix-up with their booking it had been almost midnight before they’d been able to get into their room and unpack. Just as they’d been going to bed, a clap of thunder shook the building, followed moments later by a torrential downpour, but they’d slept soundly in spite of the storm and woken to clear skies and a warm fragrant air that couldn’t help but cheer them up.

“Good, I’m feeling really good,” Lorina said, taking in the lush forest surrounding them. A small stream, swollen by the rain,

splashed past them on its way to the sea, while from up ahead, but as yet unseen, came the roar of falling water. Birds fluttered high in the canopy, their constant squabbling over territorial boundaries occasionally pierced by the mournful cry of a mountain hawk, while colourful butterflies, so big they were barely able to remain airborne, dominated the understorey as they flittered from bush to bush. This was life at its most intense, and Lorina breathed deeply, filling her lungs with its essence.

Owen stood facing her in silence for a few moments before brushing her hair away from her face. She smiled. "Come on," he said, "I think the waterfall's just around the next bend."

It wasn't, and they had to walk a further two kilometres before reaching it, but it was well worth the effort. Cascading down over more than thirty metres of cliff face, the curtain of water splashed over broken boulders at its base, sending up swirls of rainbow-coloured mist into the box canyon surrounding it. Owen led her through the slippery rocks to stand under the falls, and she laughed in pure bliss as the cold water flowed down over her, saturating her gown.

"Mark would have loved this place," she said, stepping back out of the water. "You know in all the time we were together, we never had a proper holiday. I always had my duties as High Priestess and he was snowed under trying to get the college accredited. Yeah, he would've loved this place."

Owen looked into her eyes, unsure what to say, while the water continued bucketing down over him.

"I'm sorry," she said, "this is supposed to be *our* holiday. I promise I won't mention him again."

"No, it's all right, really it is, and if he were here now I'd gladly step aside for him." She looked at him quizzically. "I mean that. I've never mentioned it to anyone before, least of all my father, but Mark was my, my hero."

"You're a gem, Owen," Lorina said, taking hold of him and kissing him on the nose, but at that moment his foot slipped out from under him and he landed on his backside in the water, pulling her down on top of him. She laughed, smothering him in kisses.

“There’s supposed to be stairs carved into the rock that go right to the top,” Lorina said as she disentangled herself from him.

“Over there I think,” Owen said, pointing to the wall of the canyon just to the left of the falls. “It’s a long way up, though. Do you think you’ll be okay?”

She glanced down at her belly, which was slightly swollen with the child she was carrying. “I’ll be fine as long as we take it slowly.”

The forest thinned above the falls, with rocky ground sloping gently uphill to the mountain peak in the distance. A dusty pathway followed the stream towards it, but they paused to catch their breath before going any further.

“What’s happening with Frank’s trial?” Lorina asked.

“It’s set down for the week after we get back. The prosecution now want to charge him with gross negligence leading to the deaths of Damon, Pip and Chris.”

“Do you think they’ll succeed?”

“There’s every chance, yes, I’m afraid.”

“And then what?”

“He’ll most likely be sentenced to life on Huntress.”

Lorina looked down at the dust. “At this rate *everyone* will end up being sent there.”

“Look, don’t give up hope just yet. I’m not that bad a lawyer, you know.”

She laughed. “Of course not. I’m sure if you’d been representing Mark instead of that idiot Duffy, he’d have been acquitted.”

Owen blushed. “So, um, who recommended Duffy for the defence, do you know? He struck me as an odd choice at the time.”

“I’m not sure, but I think it might have been my father. You don’t think, no, surely not?”

“Your father didn’t have a very high opinion of Mark, did he?”

Lorina looked into his eyes. “Promise me you won’t tell this to anyone.”

“I promise, of course.”

“Dad was jealous of Mark. When he was young, he knew Morgoth was after him and his mother, and thought it was because he was going to be the boy in the prophecy. It was silly, of course, but when

that boy turned out to be Mark, Dad could never really shake off the feeling that he'd been cheated out of his rightful destiny.”

Owen took hold of her hands. “You don't have to answer this, but do you think his jealousy could have gone as far as to have Mark framed for the murder of the baby dolphin?”

Lorina shook her head. “Dad didn't hate Mark. If anything, Mark's arrest and conviction hurt his electoral campaign, and that was far more important to him than any childish resentment. No, it was only ever a slight coldness towards him, that's all. Motive enough for him to recommend a lawyer like Duffy, though, I suppose.”

Owen nodded. “I understand, and I'm sorry I asked.”

“Not at all; if the truth be known I'm glad to get it off my chest.” She stood and stretched, glancing towards the mountain top in the distance. “Do you know who the judge will be in Frank's case?”

“No, that's a closely guarded secret until the morning of the trial.” Lorina gave him another quizzical look. “It stops them being assassinated by whichever party thinks they may gain an advantage from having a different judge.”

“Surely not,” she said, but Owen nodded.

“It seems our legal profession has few scruples about going outside the law.”

Lorina sighed. “Well I hope it's not that dreadful Joshua Franks.”

“I'd say that's pretty unlikely.”

* * *

“All stand please for his honour, Justice Franks,” the clerk of the court said as the judge entered and made his way onto the podium, scowling at Frank over the top of his spectacles.

“Francis Halliday, it is alleged that you entered the restricted space surrounding the prison colony on Huntress, using a ship registered as having been stolen from its rightful owner on Cornipus, while taking with you Damon Enderling, Pip Ingle and Christopher Smith, and in so doing contributing, through your negligence, to their presumed death. How do you plead?”

Frank looked up to Lorina in the gallery, mouthing, “*Forgive me,*” before turning back to the judge.

“Guilty, your honour,” he said, lowering his head. Owen gaped.

“Um, I see,” Justice Franks said, seemingly caught off guard. “That is of course commendable, and shows a degree of sense that was absent in your earlier escapade.” He cleared his throat.

“I am given to understand that the reason for your journey to Huntress was to attempt to retrieve the remains of Mark Collins, for transport back to his parents on Earth, and while that is a laudable motive, your actions have proven to be foolhardy in the extreme and have cost the lives of three valiant young men.

“You carry a heritage going back to the Barefooters, giving you a lifespan several times that of most of us, and a man of your years should by now have acquired some modicum of common sense. Sadly that has proven not to be the case. Is there anything you wish to say before I cast sentence?”

“No, your honour.”

The judge cleared his throat again. “As you were so eager to go to Huntress, you should be pleased that I am sentencing you to twenty years imprisonment on that world.”

He banged his gavel, then stood and left the court while Frank was escorted away by two officials.

“Did you know he was going to plead guilty?” Lorina asked Owen outside the court.

“I had no idea, but I think the deaths hit him quite badly. He’s a broken man, and I doubt he’ll survive one year in that hell-hole on Huntress, let alone twenty.”

“It’s so unfair. We now have four people dead, a fifth as good as, and the bastards who started all this by killing the baby dolphin are walking free.”

Owen took hold of her hands. “We’ll get them, even if it takes the rest of our lives, I promise.”

“Sometimes I wish I had your confidence.”

“Sometimes I wish I had it too,” he laughed.

* * *

“Mr Wisemonger, please come in,” Kevin said, ushering his two visitors into his office.

“Thank you, Supreme Councillor. This is my associate, Peter Pennyquick.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Kevin said. “Can I offer you gentlemen a drink?”

“Um,” Wisemonger said, eyeing the drinks cabinet. “I say, that’s not a bottle of Gold Label, is it?”

“Indeed it is. One of the rigors of office, I’m afraid. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t dream of it, but the administration, you know...”

“Yes, of course,” Wisemonger said, taking the offered glass of Meridian whiskey. “To the health of the empire.”

“And to yours,” Kevin said, raising his glass. “So what can I do for you today?”

“I’ll come straight to the point,” Wisemonger said. “The deal you announced with Consolidated Holdings has left the landholders of Amber and Sontar as the meat in the sandwich, so to speak. On the one hand we’re required to pay exorbitant wages to our former slaves, and yet we are now unable to pass on those costs to the wholesalers.”

“I understand,” Kevin said, smiling, “and I appreciate your concerns.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Pennyquick asked.

“Well I’m afraid there’s not a whole lot I can do until the Lachlan enquiry completes its work. Of course you’re most welcome to put forward a submission yourselves.”

Pennyquick stood, seething, but his companion placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back down. “By then many of our members will be bankrupt,” Wisemonger said. “You leave us no option but to present you with this petition, calling for a referendum on Amber and Sontar to secede from the empire.”

Kevin took the weighty document from him, flicking through it before dumping it unceremoniously on his desk.

“You’re aware, no doubt,” Wisemonger continued, “that under the present constitutions of those worlds, only landholders are entitled to vote.”

“Of course,” Kevin lied, making a mental note to push for an amendment to the constitutions at the next session of the full Council.

“We represent ninety percent of those landholders, and the motion to present the petition was passed unanimously.”

“You have thirty days to do something,” Pennyquick said, still looking like he might at any moment leap across the desk and bite Kevin on the nose. “Thirty days.”

“Thank you for coming, gentlemen,” Kevin said, smiling his best smile as he stood. “I assure you I’ll give this matter my utmost attention.”

“Thank you, Supreme Councillor,” Wisemonger said, shaking his hand before pushing Pennyquick ahead of him and out the door. Kevin sat back down and poured himself another whiskey.

* * *

Frank pressed his face against the window as the prison transport ship dropped out of subspace into orbit around Huntress, but it wasn’t the planet he was looking at. Rather, the focus of his attention was the red dwarf star around which it orbited. His interest wasn’t so much the star itself as the region of space surrounding it, and he hoped the rotation of the ship would cause its wing to momentarily eclipse the star’s dazzling light. After several tense minutes that moment came, and he nodded in satisfaction at what he saw.

A black featureless region surrounded the solar disc out to about five times the star’s diameter, but beyond that, and sharply delineated from it, was a brightly glowing halo of gases.

A moment later the star reappeared from behind the wing and the vista was lost once more in the glare, but he’d seen enough for one large piece of the puzzle that was Huntress to fall into place.

“What’cha lookin’ at, Halliday?” the guard asked, crouching down beside him.

“Just curious about this planet’s red sun, that’s all.”

“Well you won’t be seeing anything of it where you’re headed, that’s for sure. Perpetual twilight, that’s what you’ve got to look forward to. Never changes down there, it doesn’t.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Frank said.

“Drives some of ’em mad, it does. Mad as bunyips what’s eaten Frizian honey.”

Frank nodded, even though he'd never heard that particular turn of phrase before. He made a mental note to look up Frizian honey on the ultranet when he got the chance, before realising he could have to wait many years for that chance to arise.

The ship turned again, decelerating as it dropped towards the planet's surface. He gazed out the window once more, hoping to gain a better idea of the lay of the land surrounding the Colony's crater, but their angle of approach made it difficult.

Frank almost jumped out of bed as the siren sounded. *'Must be morning,'* he thought as he glanced out the window, taking in dawn's first light, before reminding himself that here the dawn never came. He pulled on the coveralls and uncomfortable heavy boots he'd been issued with, before sitting back down on the corner of the bunk to collect his thoughts.

He wondered if Mark had worn the boots, but quickly decided he wouldn't have. *'His Barefooter heritage was too strong,'* he thought. *'Damn it, I'm a descendant of a Barefooter too!'* He pulled them off and threw them into the corner of his cell.

"Another new fish," the wizened old woman behind the counter said. "What can I get you, dear? Let me see, we have cereal and, yes, there's cereal too."

"In that case I'll have cereal," Frank said, grabbing an orange as well from the bowl on the side of the counter. "Um, where do we get our pummel fruit?"

"Hey Smithers," she said, calling one of the guards who was standing nearby. "I've got another one asking about pummel fruit."

Smithers stiffened. "There's no such thing as pummel fruit."

"Oh, I see, but I was told it helps us cope with the poisonous air here. Perhaps it's known by a different name."

"The only fruit here is those oranges we get from Amber."

Frank nodded and turned away. The guard was lying, he was sure, and that caused him to wonder what other secrets might be hidden here, secrets he could exploit to his own advantage.

"All right," Smithers yelled. "Everyone over here."

Frank took a final mouthful of the stale cereal before walking towards him with the other prisoners.

“Hey, old man,” the guard said, pointing at Frank’s feet. “Didn’t you forget something?”

“I’m a descendant of the Barefooters and don’t wear boots,” he said, although for much of his life he’d worn custom-made dress shoes.

“Well suit yourself. We had another of your lot here a few months back, prancing about with no boots on and giving himself airs. He soon learnt his lesson, though. Ended up dead, he did, on account of his bare feet.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Frank said.

“I’m Gordon,” the wiry middle-aged man said as he sat alongside Frank on the bus, offering him his hand. “I heard what Smithers said to you in the air lock. Did you know Mark Collins?”

“Yes, we were good friends.”

“Is that how you wound up here?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“I thought as much. When you’ve been in this hell-hole as long as I have, you can soon pick the crims from the political prisoners. Mark was a gentle lad, through and through, and there was no way he would’ve killed that Dolphin.”

“So how’d he die, do you know?”

Gordon glanced around, making sure there were no guards within earshot. “Smithers killed him. I was there and saw what really happened.”

* * *

“So are you really going to let those landholders go ahead with their referendum?” Lorina asked her father.

“Their petition is perfectly valid under the law as it stands and I have no choice in the matter. Hopefully common sense will prevail when it actually comes to the vote.”

“You wouldn’t consider military intervention to keep Amber and Sontar under your control, would you?”

“Of course not, that’d be ridiculous.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” she said, kissing him on the nose. “I was beginning to wonder if being Supreme Councillor might have gone to your head.”

“Never, sweetheart. So how are you and Owen getting along? I haven’t seen him around for a few days.”

“Everything’s fine. He’s gone to Cornipus for a conference on commercial law reform.”

“Just like his father,” Kevin laughed. “You know he really doesn’t have to continue his practice now that he’s your consort.”

Lorina stiffened slightly. “I’ve told him that but he likes to keep his hand in, and anyway, I’m glad he has an interest outside the Temple.”

“I was the same after I married your mother, although for me it was politics. We all need an interest, that’s for sure.”

She laughed. “Owen always has wonderful stories to tell me about his clients. You wouldn’t believe some of the things people think they can get away with!”

“I’m afraid nothing would surprise me about the citizens of our galaxy. Huntress would be overflowing if I had my way.”

Lorina gasped, and he turned and held her again. “I’m sorry; I’ve gone and put my foot in my mouth again, haven’t I? They call it politician’s disease, did you know that?”

She nodded, kissing him on the nose.

“Politician’s disease,” he muttered as she left the room, shaking his head.

* * *

Owen stepped from the lift and glanced up and down the corridor, trying to figure out where the Department of Delphinidae History was. He saw what looked like a reception desk to his right and headed towards it.

“Can I help you, sir?” the elderly woman asked.

“I hope so. I’m looking for Professor Tibbits.”

“I’m afraid you won’t have much luck. The Professor took sabbatical leave immediately after that dolphin-slaying trial.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“I have no idea, although I can leave a message for him to contact you if you like.”

“I’ve been trying that myself for the last few weeks.”

“Oh, you’re the man who’s been calling from Bluehaven.”

“That’s me.”

“Well I’ll send him another message, Mr, um, Lachlan, but I really have no idea where he is or when he’ll be back.”

“Thank you.” Owen turned to leave.

“Wait, there was a man who came to see him a lot just before the trial, and perhaps he can help you. He was a military man, I’m sure, although he wasn’t in uniform.”

“What makes you say he was military?”

“It was the way he spoke and his mannerisms. I once worked in a bar opposite one of Morgoth’s bases, and can recognise those people anywhere.”

“Do you know his name?”

“I should know it, but no, it won’t come. I’ll give you a call if I remember it.”

“Thank you, you’ve been of great help.”

“The Professor’s not in any trouble, is he?”

“No, there’s just something I need to clear up about what he said at the trial, that’s all.”

“I’m glad to hear it. There’ve been other people looking for him too, and none as pleasant or well-mannered as you.”

Owen blushed.

* * *

“Heading tonight’s news, the twelve principal worlds of our galaxy are now down to ten, following today’s secession of Amber and Sontar from the empire. Andrew Wisemonger, head of the Landholders Association and now interim President of both worlds, said it was a necessary move towards a sustainable future. ‘We need independent governance out here,’ he said. ‘The recent debacle over food prices is a prime example of Meridian running roughshod over the poorer worlds.’

“Mr Wisemonger also announced that slavery would be reintroduced in order to ensure the continuing viability of their farms. The newly created farm-workers union has yet to respond.

“In other news, police on Cornipus are investigating the death of Delphinidae History Professor Harry Tibbits, whose remains were found earlier today by bushwalkers in the Mount Pleasant National Park. Professor Tibbits was in the public eye three months ago when he presented damning evidence at the Mark Collins Dolphin-slayer trial, and his death is being treated as suspicious.”

Unrest

The warm breeze rustled through the heads of grain, breaking the silence of the night. Across the fields the insects had gone quiet, as if anticipating the calamity that was about to unfold.

Voices whispered in the darkness as shrouded figures crept amongst the crops. “Put one here, and another over there.”

“Ouch!”

“What?”

“I think I stepped on a wolf beetle.”

“Idiot.”

“Give me the spray.”

A hydrocarbon smell, a blend of ethanol and something else, something aromatic and volatile, drifted on the breeze.

“That’s enough.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll spray you in a minute if you don’t shut up.”

“Yes, sir.”

A light flickered, followed shortly by a shower of sparks and the crackling of burning leaves. The wind caught the flames, causing a flaring and more sparks.

“It’s taken hold! Let’s get out of here!”

“No, this way, you fool!”

Running footsteps, barely audible over the roar of the fire, quickly disappeared into the darkness.

The voluptuous woman lay beside him, quivering in anticipation. He twirled her dark flowing hair in his fingers as she held his head against her bosom.

“Take me, Andrew, take me now,” she whispered in that dry husky voice that sent shivers down his spine. He thrust himself

forward, but a trilling sound, faint at first but growing louder and more demanding, interrupted his dream.

“Wisemonger here, and this had better be good.”

“It’s Pennyquick, sir.”

“What’s wrong? Why are you ringing at this hour of the morning?”

“There’s another fire on Sontar, a big one.”

“How big?”

“Devastating. They say half the southern hemisphere crop’s gone.”

“You’re joking; please tell me you’re joking.”

There was only silence on the other end of the line.

“All right then, I suppose we don’t have any other choice.”

“Not unless you’re going to cave in to their demands.”

“The more they burn, the less likelihood there is of that.”

“That’s what I thought. Shall I call Simmons then?”

“Yes, go on. Let’s get this over with.”

“You want me to do what?” Kevin asked.

“Send the armed forces to Amber and Sontar, and place those worlds under military rule,” Wisemonger said. “It’s the only way.”

“I can’t do that without authorisation from the full council.”

“You can if you declare a state of emergency.”

“Do you think that’s warranted?”

“Another week and the galaxy’s food supplies will be nothing but ash.”

Kevin smiled. “I’ll let you know my decision.”

* * *

Owen was about to leave his office when the telephone rang.

“Owen, I’m glad I caught you. It’s Scott Davies here.”

“Scott! How are you going? Are you still with the Sontar police force?”

“Yes, worse luck. Things are pretty chaotic here, as you’ve no doubt heard.”

“The fires have been headline news for the past week. You’re not caught up in it, are you?”

“Yes, I’ve been leading the forensic investigations and have found something decidedly odd. That’s what I’m calling you about.”

“What is it?”

“In almost all the fires an accelerant has been used, and we’ve found enough traces to positively identify it as ethyl-dimethyl-amine.”

“What?”

“I didn’t expect you to have heard of it. It’s a highly flammable hydrocarbon that’s only ever been used as a coolant in the subspace power modules of military spacecraft.”

“Really?”

“Yes, the older star destroyers to be precise. They stopped using it in the newer craft because of the fire danger.”

“So you think the military might be involved in setting the fires.”

“In a word, yes, but I don’t know who I should tell.”

“You did the right thing calling me. Look, for your own safety say nothing to anyone else. This may have a bearing on another matter I’m investigating.”

“You mean the death of that Cornipean professor?”

“Nothing much ever escapes your attention, does it?”

“I try to keep my ear to the ground. Would I be right in assuming that whoever’s behind this also framed Mark Collins in the dolphin-slaying affair?”

“I believe so. Maybe we should get together and compare notes.”

“I’ll be in Azarath next Tuesday if you’d like to meet me then.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Come to the Blue Bunyip café at two o’clock.”

“See you then.”

* * *

“People of the galaxy,” Kevin said from the steps of Government House. “President Wisemonger, on behalf of the Amber and Sontar Alliance, has declared martial law on his worlds and imposed a dusk to dawn curfew. At his request, I have now instigated a state of emergency across the galaxy and deployed our armed forces to maintain the peace on those worlds. Our primary goal is to protect the remaining crops and ensure no further fires are started, and I’ve been

assured our forces will receive full cooperation from the Amber and Sontar police.

“All non-essential transport to and from those worlds is now suspended, and will remain so until such time as the unrest is resolved and the normal function of government is restored.

“In spite of our best efforts, it’s likely there’ll be shortages in some food lines as a result of the fires, and these events have demonstrated a need to diversify our food sources. For far too long we’ve been content to look inward, trading amongst ourselves as if the rest of the universe didn’t exist, but clearly that cosy arrangement cannot be allowed to continue.

“I’m therefore pleased to announce tonight that I’ll be leading a trade delegation to the Milky Way, with the aim of securing an agreement to obtain foodstuffs from the peoples of that galaxy while opening up new market opportunities for our own manufactured goods. Such trade, if negotiated on a firm footing, can only serve to enrich the lives of all our people.”

Kevin turned to face the group of reporters.

“Supreme Councillor,” one of them asked, “you can be sure the people of the Milky Way will be well aware of our current food crisis. Don’t you think that’ll give them the upper hand in any negotiations?”

“You’re right of course, but we have other leverages we can employ to ensure that any deal is fair and reasonable.”

“What would they be?”

“Obviously revealing our tactics at this time would be counterproductive, but you can rest assured we won’t be entering into any agreements that aren’t to our advantage.”

“Sir,” another reporter asked, “what impact will this have on the farm workers of Amber and Sontar?”

“Those worlds are no longer part of the empire and you should raise such questions with President Wisemonger. That said, we will of course continue to welcome trade with them once the present unrest is resolved, and our educational and health care initiatives remain in force.”

“This is becoming quite a juggling act for you, isn’t it?” the reporter from the Cornipean Argus asked.

“No comment,” Kevin said, joining his four bodyguards as they escorted him back inside.

* * *

The interior of the café seemed dark and gloomy after the summer glare outside. A bell atop the door tinkled as it slammed shut behind Owen, cutting off the sound of the traffic. He looked around but there was no sign of Scott yet.

“Can I help you, sir?” asked the waitress who’d materialised beside him, causing him to jump a little.

“Um, yes, a table for two thanks. My friend should be along shortly.”

She led him past a fading tapestry of two dancing blue bunyips and deeper into the gloom. Beside him, a young couple whispered excitedly about their plans for the evening, while at another table an elderly man sat alone, sipping dark coffee and squinting at his newspaper. Owen sat and glanced over the menu.

“Can I get you anything while you’re waiting?” the waitress asked.

“Just some water, thanks.”

The bell on the door tinkled again as a police officer entered. He spied Owen through the gloom and smiled.

“Scott!” Owen said, standing and waving him over. “Long time no see.”

“Good to see you too,” Scott said, shaking his hand.

The waitress reappeared with another menu. “I’ll give you a few minutes to decide.”

“I believe congratulations are in order,” Scott said.

“Why? What have I done?”

“Only married the Delphinidae High Priestess. Not bad for a bookworm like yourself.”

Owen blushed.

“Funny, you never struck me as the religious type at university.”

“I’m not, not really. Being consort is more a political position.”

“Ah, I see. Did your father have anything to do with it?”

“No, not at all, although I think he’s pretty pleased with how it turned out.”

“I’m sure he is. He led the prosecution in the Mark Collins case, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and I assisted with the investigations on Earth.”

“Yet you don’t think Mark was guilty.”

“No. At the time I was too shocked by the evidence I’d found and then by Harry Tibbits’ testimony, but thinking back, I’m pretty sure he was framed.”

“And now both Mark and Professor Tibbits are dead.”

“As is Christopher Smith, my star witness for the appeal.”

“You really must take better care of your witnesses.”

Owen blushed again.

“Are you ready to order?” the waitress asked, having suddenly reappeared behind them.

“I’ll have a long black,” Scott said. “What about you, Owen?”

“A latte, thanks.”

“Anything to eat, gentlemen?”

Owen glanced at Scott who shook his head. “No thanks, just the coffee.”

He half expected the waitress to just flick her fingers and disappear, but instead she turned and walked back behind the counter. A coffee machine roared into life a few moments later.

“So what do you know about the death of Harry Tibbits?” Scott asked once their coffee had been delivered and he was sure the waitress was out of earshot.

“Not a lot, only that he received numerous visits from a man of military bearing just prior to the trial, and disappeared, supposedly on sabbatical leave, soon afterwards.”

Scott nodded. “Have you ever heard of the Black Delphinidae?”

“No, never. Who are they?”

“They were an ancient sect who believed the Dolphins had an ulterior motive in giving Damien and Lorna their gifts. They were ultimately accused by the Delphinidae hierarchy of eating Dolphin flesh and put to death.”

“Ah yes, now that you’ve described them it does ring a bell, but I thought they were only a myth.”

“No, they were quite real, and there are even records of The Cleansing if you delve deep enough into the Delphinidae archives.”

Slowly Owen began to see the connection. “Harry Tibbits was a professor of Delphinidae history.”

“Precisely, and I believe his friends in the military are members of a secret Black Delphinidae sect.”

Owen sipped his coffee while trying to fit this new piece into the puzzle. “But what does this have to do with Mark Collins?”

“The Black Delphinidae believed the Dolphins’ ultimate goal was to breed a male child bearing both their gifts, a child of great power they called The Fisherman.”

“But to what purpose?”

“Only the Dolphins can answer that, and I gather they refuse to even acknowledge the question.”

“Lorina said the Dolphins can no longer be trusted.”

“Did she now? That’s a brave thing for the High Priestess to say.”

“She didn’t say it *publicly*, and please don’t repeat it to anyone else.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“But I still don’t see...” Owen’s jaw suddenly dropped, and Scott smiled.

“Mark was a full-blooded Barefooter before he set off the subspace pulse that killed Morgoth, and Lorina is a direct descendant of Loria. If they were to produce a male offspring, he might just turn out to be this Fisherman fellow.”

“So they wanted to get Mark out of the way before it could happen.”

“Or after it happened. Lorina’s carrying Mark’s child, isn’t she?”

“Oh my God! I’ve always assumed the child would be a girl, the next High Priestess. Could it really be a boy?”

“Baby boys are born occasionally, you know.”

Owen shook his head. “Since Loria, each High Priestess has only ever produced a daughter, her successor. It’s an unbroken line.”

“Until now.”

Owen shook his head again. “So what’s with the fires on Sontar? How are they connected to this?”

“I’m only guessing, but I think they’re trying to destabilise the civilian government and re-establish military rule. Whether it’s to aid the Fisherman or defeat him I really don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s unclear from the mythology of the Black Delphinidae as to whether they saw the Fisherman as a force for good or evil. Perhaps they themselves didn’t know.”

Owen stared into space for a moment. “There’s a man in the Temple who I think may have been involved in the baby Dolphin incident. He’s Kevin’s aide, Paul Hoskins.”

“Hoskins, Hoskins, now that name rings a bell for some reason.”

“He’s an elderly chap, probably late sixties.”

“There was a Lieutenant-Commander Hoskins in the old imperial forces, I’m sure. Do you remember Brett Farley?”

“My mother was having an affair with him before she died in battle.”

“Oh, I’m sorry mate.”

“No, it’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

“I’m pretty sure Hoskins was Farley’s second-in-command, but according to the records, he was killed in the collapse of the palace.”

“Could he have escaped?”

“I suppose it’s possible. Do you have any hard evidence against him?”

“No, it’s just that he sometimes seems to know more than he should. Do you know what I mean?”

“Of course; a lot of police work starts from those sorts of impressions. It makes a lot of sense, though, if your man Hoskins is one of the imperials.”

“In what way?”

“I have reason to believe that Morgoth himself may have been a Black Delphinidae.”

* * *

Frank crept down the stairs, hoping his residual telepathic senses were still working. His Barefooter heritage was well diluted, but in his younger days, and with much practice and training, he’d

developed enough telepathy to be able to detect the presence of people nearby. It had been many years since he'd put that skill to the test, though, and he wasn't sure he could trust it.

In the three weeks since his arrival in the Colony, he'd been watching the comings and goings of the guards, trying to figure out where their secret cache of pummel fruit might be hidden. He was fairly sure now it was in the basement, and in the hours preceding the change of shift when most of those resting were asleep, he thought it as good a time as any to go exploring.

The basement was unlit, but there was enough light coming in through the small high windows for him to find his way around. He'd hoped it might have been reasonably well organised, perhaps even with a shelf marked *Forbidden Fruits*, but that slim hope turned to dismay when he reached the bottom of the stairs and found himself surrounded by chaotic piles of crates and cartons; some opened, some not and others upended with their contents scattered across the floor.

He picked his way around the room, mindful of what he was stepping on, while seeking out anything remotely resembling a container of fruit. He found plenty of other booty amongst the detritus; dusty bottles of whiskey, explicit magazines, sex aids, even an inflatable woman, but no pummel fruit.

He stiffened, sensing something, and a moment later heard a creaking on the stairs. He ducked down behind a stack of wooden crates just as two guards entered the basement.

"So Peterson said *eat mine too*," one of them said, and the other laughed. It must have been a good joke, whatever it was.

"He's quite a character, I'll grant him that. So what do you make of that old bloke who came in a few weeks back?"

"Holiday or Halliday or something? A bit cagey if you ask me. Always watching you out the corner of his eye, and sneaking around all over the place with no boots on, like that Collins bastard."

"There are rumours going round that Collins was innocent, and was framed by the Supreme Councillor himself."

"You're kidding!"

"No bull."

"Smithers had better watch himself then, if the prisoners get wind of it. Killed him dead, he did, or so I've heard."

“At the Gov’nor’s request too, no less.”

“Aye, he’s got a cold heart, that one.”

One of the guards bent over, pushing aside a battered cardboard carton and opening the trapdoor hidden beneath it. “How many do you want?”

“Just one for now. They give me indigestion if I eat too many.”

“Suit yourself.”

Frank watched as the guard pulled out three small objects, pocketing two and giving the other to his companion.

“This place is a pig sty, it really is,” he said as he closed the hatch and pushed the carton back over it. “Half the stuff in here’s well past its use-by date.”

“Don’t complain too loud or you’ll end up down here with a mop and bucket.”

“Well it’d sure beat supervising them lot in the mines.”

The voices trailed off as they ascended the stairs and closed the door behind them. Frank counted to three hundred before easing himself up and stepping cautiously over to their hidey-hole.

“What’s this?” Gordon asked as Frank offered him a piece of fruit. They were sitting on the edge of the mine during the mid-shift rest break, and Frank had made sure there were no guards within earshot.

“Try it and see what you think.”

He took a small bite and nodded. “Very tasty. What is it?”

“It’s called pummel fruit. Do you notice anything?”

“Not really.”

“What about the smell?”

“What smell?”

“Exactly.”

Gordon took a deep breath. “Hey, the sulphur smell in the air’s gone. Did the fruit really do that?”

“It does more than just get rid of the smell; it gives us immunity from the toxins in the atmosphere.”

“That’s amazing. Where’d you get it from?”

“The guards have a stash of it hidden in the basement. That’s why they never suffer any ill effects out here.”

“So why don’t they just give us the fruit instead of those drugs?”

“That’s a very good question.”

Another of the prisoners wandered over to join them. “What you got there?”

* * *

The old man folded his newspaper and pushed aside the rest of his coffee.

“They went left, towards Day Street,” the waitress said as he strode out the door, handing her a brown envelope as he passed the front counter. She snatched it from him, pushing it down the front of her dress before going and clearing up the coffee cups.

He stepped from the café just in time to see his quarry turning into Day Street, and hurried after them.

“Can I offer you a lift back to the spaceport?” Scott asked.

“No, I’ve got four hours to kill before my flight so I thought I’d wander down through the markets,” Owen said. “It’s been years since I’ve been there.”

“Well I hope you find some good bargains.”

“You never know, I just might. Thanks again for all you’ve told me.”

“There are still many unanswered questions, so stay in touch, okay?”

“Sure, and good luck with your investigations.”

Owen waved as Scott pulled away from the kerb, then waited to cross the road towards the markets.

“Excuse me, sir,” someone said from behind him, and he turned to find himself face to face with the old man from the café. Before he could react, the man thrust a wad of cloth over his nose and mouth, and the last thing Owen remembered was the all-pervasive smell of chloroform.

Owen woke with a splitting headache. He tried to rub his forehead but his arm wouldn’t move, and for a moment he feared he’d been paralysed. In a way he had, he thought to himself, as the cause was

pretty obvious once he looked down. Several loops of rope around each wrist were holding him securely to his seat.

His headache receding a little, he glanced around, finding himself to be the only passenger in a small subspace cruiser. Reddish sunlight flashed through the windows as the craft turned and began to descend. He looked out to see a yellow pitted landscape below, and although he'd never been here before, he had a pretty good idea of which planet it was.

“New fish! New fish!” the prisoners shouted, and Frank looked up from his breakfast as the guards led the latest inmate into the common room. He almost choked on a flake of wheat when he saw who it was.

“Owen?” he asked. “I thought you were supposed to be working on my release, not joining me here.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Go and grab some cereal, and you can tell me on the way out to the mine.”

“Who’s your friend?” Gordon asked.

“He was my attorney, and also happens to be the consort to the High Priestess.”

“Well, well, well, we’re certainly being blessed with celebrities these days. I suppose the Supreme Councillor himself will be joining us tomorrow.”

“I wish. Owen, this is Gordon,” Frank said, introducing them as Owen sat back down with his bowl of cereal and an orange.

“Dig in,” Gordon said. “We only have a few minutes before the bus.”

“Bus?” Owen asked.

“Didn’t they tell you? You’re about to become a quartz miner.”

* * *

“Dad?” Lorina asked as she burst into Kevin’s office.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Oh Dad, Owen’s missing.”

“How, what happened?”

“He went to Azarath to meet a policeman friend, and he, he never came back.”

“Have you spoken to this friend?”

“Yes, he said Owen was going to wander through the markets before catching his flight, and that’s the last anyone saw of him.”

“Look, I’m about to leave with the trade delegation to the Milky Way, but I’ll ask Paul to make enquiries. I’m sure everything’s fine, though.”

“I can’t bear to lose him too,” she cried, and Kevin held her tightly.

“Hush now, sweetheart, hush. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Paul, do you know anything about Owen’s disappearance?” Kevin asked his aide after Lorina had left.

“Um, yes, sir, I believe he’s being held in protective custody.”

“Protective custody? Where? Why?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Probably not. Is he safe?”

“Yes, he’s safe for now, as long as he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“Well just you make sure nothing happens to him while I’m away. It was bad enough trying to deal with Lorina after that good-for-nothing Mark got himself killed.”

“Of course, sir. Will that be all?”

“For now, yes.”

* * *

“There was an eccentric old man here a couple of years ago,” Gordon said to his fellow prisoners as he passed around the pieces of pummel fruit. “He said he was a pharmacist on the outside and got sent here because of some taxation irregularities, but he reckoned the drugs they were giving us were actually more toxic than the atmosphere. No-one took him seriously, though, and a few weeks later his lawyers won their appeal and he left. Now I wonder, though, could he have been right?”

“I think it’s quite likely,” Frank said. “How many people have survived here for more than a few years?”

“I’ve been here ten,” one inmate said, “but the way I’m going, I reckon I’m unlikely to make eleven.”

“I’m second-longest to him, and I’ve been here six,” another said.

“This is outrageous!” Owen said. “As soon as I’m released I’ll be raising such a stink they won’t know what hit them.”

“You don’t really think you’re going to be released, do you?” Gordon asked. “You know too much, that’s why you’re here in the first place, and you can be sure they’re planning a little accident for you, like what happened to your friend Mark.”

Owen turned white.

“Don’t worry,” Frank said. “When it happens, we’ll be waiting for them.”

“Hey Lachlan, over here!” Smithers shouted. “You’ve got long arms, see if you can get in there and reach that bit of rock, will you?”

Owen knelt, peering into the narrow opening surrounding a particularly large piece of quartz. “That bit in there?”

“Yeah, see if you can shift it with your chisel, but whatever you do, don’t break the crystal.”

Owen crouched lower, twisting himself around while trying to position the chisel. Satisfied, he raised his hammer and was about to strike it when someone stomped on his foot. He let out a string of expletives as the chisel slipped and embedded itself in the quartz.

Smithers grabbed him by the shoulder, pulling him up. “You useless piece of dolphin-worshipping shit! That’s cost me three months wages!” He raised his fist ready to strike, but someone grabbed him from behind.

“Not this time, Smithers,” a voice whispered in his ear.

“You’re dead meat,” Smithers snarled as he turned to face whoever had been stupid enough to touch him, but before he could react, a large piece of rock struck him on the back of the head and he slumped to the ground.

“That was for Mark,” his attacker whispered.

“Grab his weapon before the other guards get wind of what’s happened,” Frank said.

“Here they come,” Gordon whispered.

The two remaining guards saw the slumped form of Smithers and raised their weapons as they ran towards him, but they didn't see the length of dark cord stretched across the passageway. The leading guard tripped, and before he could stop himself, the second one fell on top of him. Within moments, a dozen pairs of hands had hold of them, forcing their weapons from their grasp.

"If you want to live to tell your grandchildren about this," Frank said, brandishing Smithers' gun, "you'll do exactly as I say."

Owen untied the cord from the rocks on either side of the passageway and used it to bind their hands.

"Sit here nice and cosy while you count to a thousand, and if either of you poke your head out of the mine entrance before then you'll be wearing a hole in it," Frank continued. "I was a pretty good shot with one of these in my younger days."

Both guards nodded.

"When you eventually get back to base, tell the governor that the dimming of the stars has begun. Can you remember that?"

They both nodded again.

"Good. Now close your eyes and start counting, and if Smithers comes around before you're finished, suggest to him that it might be wise for him to wait with you."

The first couple of prisoners emerged from the mine entrance and began scrambling down towards the bus.

"No, wait!" Frank shouted, and they slid to a halt on the loose rock. He shouldered the rifle, taking careful aim at the bus. Two shots rang out, causing it to list to one side as its nearest tyres deflated.

"Great shooting!" Owen said, coming up behind him.

"Everyone," Frank shouted, "grab as much water as you can. We're going up over the crater wall."

"You're joking, surely," Gordon said. "They say the winds outside will either fry you to a crisp or freeze you solid within minutes."

"And you believed them?"

Gordon blushed.

"There's a village a day's walk north of the crater. They grow pummel trees and also raise their own grain crops and livestock. Yes,

the weather can get a bit wild at times out there, but nothing a bunch of hardy fellows like yourselves can't handle."

The prisoners looked at each other in confusion.

"We're with you all the way, Frank," Gordon said.

Owen grinned, punching the air with his fist. "Right on!"

Annexation

With his hands in his pockets, Barrad gazed out the window at the planet below. From his vantage point in space, little could be seen of the great mines, even though from here would come much of the fractal crystal ore needed to fulfil the galaxy's growing energy and transport needs.

It had been thirty-six years since he'd last stood here, back when the mines had been his; thirty-six years since the boy Jason Collins had driven the demon from him and redeemed his soul.

Long ago, when Barrad had been a brash young man, he and his friend Elko had ventured into a canyon on the planet now named Genesis, but there the spirit of an ancient shaman named Astel had seized him and driven him into serving the Enemy, Astel's former master, Morgoth the Enlightened.

Under that spirit's influence, he and his Barradhim supporters had spread terror and mayhem throughout the galaxy, using the mines as both their source of crystals and a place of concealment. Many plots had been hatched in those tunnels below the surface, some successful, some not. It was a place of bitter memories for Barrad, a place he'd have preferred to leave in his past.

He thought again of Elko, now eight years dead. It had been at his friend's request that he'd handed the mines over to the government of Eridani, a world he'd once tried to destroy, and now that same government had invited him back to officiate at the opening of its newest facility. In spite of his own misgivings, it was a request he'd been unable to refuse.

He turned away from the window, stepping over to the lectern before beginning his speech.

“We are truly at a crossroad in the history of our galaxy. In the last few decades much has changed, for we have discovered our origins and re-established contact with the galaxy from which our forebears once came. For me personally it has been a time of great enlightenment, and of sadness too, but it is also a time when we must look to the needs of the future and ensure those needs are met.

“The new mines you have built here are truly an engineering marvel. With your projected outputs, we can be sure of meeting the needs of future generations with capacity to spare, and on behalf of the Eridanian High Council, I congratulate you all on your effort and dedication.

“It gives me great pleasure to unveil this plaque and officially declare the Burrumbulla mines open.”

A plump man in an expensive grey suit rose and stood beside him as he performed the ceremony.

“Thank you, Barrad, and we hope we can live up to your expectations. I would ask, though, that you convey our thanks to the High Council for the assistance they arranged from the mining engineers of Ignus in our sister galaxy. Without their technology and expertise, we would never have been able to reach the rich reserves we’ve now tapped into.”

Barrad stumbled backwards, as if he’d been hit in the stomach. *Ignus; the world he’d visited ten thousand years ago and from where he’d returned with the matter imploders that had destroyed Eridani’s twin.*

“Barrad, are you all right?” Grey Suit asked.

“The technology you speak of, can you describe it for me?”

“They call it a matter imploder. It allows us to bore deep within the crust without leaving any residue and it –”

“You fools!” Barrad said, turning back to the window. “Have you learnt nothing of the history of our galaxy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Eridani’s twin planet was destroyed by mining technology based on matter imploders. Please tell me you haven’t started using them yet.”

“But we have; they’ve been operational for some months now.”

At that moment, a technician in a white coat nervously entered the room. "I'm sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but the board's lit up with alarms from right across the surface. It looks like massive seismic activity on a global scale."

"Fools!" Barrad said again, but as he watched the planet below, its surface features disappeared under swirling clouds of dust billowing higher and higher into the atmosphere.

Before he could draw another breath, the invisible residue from the imploders, super-massive chunks of compacted neutrons, collapsed under their own weight to form a miniature black hole, and the resulting burst of radiation turned him and the orbiting platform into nothing but primeval plasma.

* * *

Kevin stood before the Eridanian High Council.

"Thank you for your kind invitation to come before you," he said, "and please allow me to pass on my government's condolences over the unfortunate accident at Burrumbulla. Of course we are only too willing to offer any assistance we can."

"Your offer is most welcome," the High Councillor said. "The implosion of that planet has left us in a dire predicament, as there's high demand for subspace power transducers and transport drives on many of our worlds and we simply can't meet that demand from our indigenous ores."

"As it happens, I'm in a position to put forward a proposal that may at least alleviate your immediate concerns."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Our mines on Ignus currently have surplus capacity, whereas, as you may have heard, we have something of a crisis with our food supplies at the moment."

"You're proposing an exchange?"

"Yes, I'm offering enough fractal ore to meet your requirements, in return for control of the food output of one of your minor worlds."

The councillors murmured for a few moments, with some nodding their heads. Kevin smiled.

"Did you have any particular world in mind?"

Kevin looked down at his notes. “I believe it’s the one called Earth.”

The High Councillor stood. “Earth is hardly one of our minor worlds! Your request would have to be considered by the governments of that planet, and I would suggest you approach them through the appropriate trade channels.”

“So much red tape, and so little time, for either of us,” Kevin said. “I can arrange immediate dispatch of intergalactic transport vessels from Ignus that will keep your factories running, but those vessels will need to return loaded with foodstuffs.”

“You want our blessing to just barge in and take Earth’s food from them?” one of the councillors asked.

“If you want to be so blunt, then yes, that’s precisely what I’m proposing. Unless you can suggest another world, Eridani perhaps, that might be suitable for meeting our needs.”

More animated whispering broke out amongst the councillors.

“Mr Simmons,” the High Councillor asked, “would you mind allowing us a few moments in private to discuss this matter?”

“Not at all,” Kevin said, stepping from the room and smiling like the proverbial bunyip that’s found the honey pot.

He wandered down the corridor a little, looking around to make sure he was unobserved, before pulling out his ultranet phone.

“It’s touch and go here, Paul,” he said. “Have General Gallagher place his forces on standby.”

“I’m afraid it’s outside our jurisdiction to simply hand over control of Earth to you,” the High Councillor said after inviting Kevin back in.

“Of course,” Kevin said, “and perhaps I was a little rash in asking for such a handover. Governments can be persuaded, though, and in return for a guaranteed supply of ore, I would be prepared to accept an agreement from you giving me free rein to persuade those on Earth of the benefits of our proposal.”

The High Councillor looked around at the others. “If there are no objections, I believe we would be agreeable to that.”

“In that case,” Kevin said, pulling a document from inside his jacket, “if you would care to sign this, I’ll ask my officials on Ignus to release your first shipment of ore.”

* * *

“What you’re proposing is nothing short of annexation of our planet,” the Secretary-General of the United Nations said. “It’s preposterous!”

“May I remind you that your civilisation here originally came from Meridian, courtesy of the vanquished Barefooters, so at the very least you owe us your allegiance,” Kevin said. “Now we need your food, and you need our ore. What could be simpler than that?”

“Earth is self-sufficient in fractal ore. We don’t need any of yours flooding our market.”

“Very well then, we need your food and the rest of your galaxy needs our ore. It’s still simple.”

“For you it might be. Our answer is no.”

“I have authorisation from the council on Eridani to use whatever persuasion necessary to secure a deal. Now I’m a reasonable man, so I’ll give you warning that the next tool in my box of persuasive devices is military in nature.”

“Are you threatening us?”

“No, just warning you. Thank you for your time, Secretary-General.”

Kevin pulled his ultranet phone from his pocket as he left the room. “General Gallagher, please. General, you may begin Phase One.”

* * *

“What’s that up ahead?” Owen asked.

“It looks like trees, but surely that’s impossible,” Gordon said.

“It’s the pummel forest,” Frank said. “We’re almost there.”

They’d been walking for many hours since reaching the plain at the base of the crater wall, but just how many no-one was sure. They were hungry, undoubtedly, and most of their water was gone, but the

sight of the forest brought unexpected hope to the band of fugitives, on a world where hope was a commodity in such short supply.

“How come nobody knows about this place?” Gordon asked.

“The Governor almost certainly does,” Frank said, “and probably at least some of the guards as well.”

“Do they get their pummel fruit from here?”

“I very much doubt it, as the people here have a strong dislike for the Colony. No, I suspect the Governor has his own plantation somewhere.”

“Where did the trees come from?” Owen asked. “I’ve never heard of them anywhere.”

“They’re a native of Huntress, a relic perhaps of a time long ago when this world was a lot more habitable. They’ve evolved to survive in the toxic atmosphere, and eating their fruit passes on the immunity to us.”

“How long have there been people living here?” another prisoner asked.

“A very long time, I believe,” Frank said, thinking again of Clem’s claims about the Black Delphinidae, “perhaps dating back to the first colonisation from Meridian.”

Frank called the group to a halt as his early warning telepathy began to tingle. Moments later, four young men dressed in coveralls and brandishing weapons emerged from behind the boulders lining the road.

“What business brings you here?” the tallest of the four asked, raising his weapon towards them.

“I’m a friend of Edwin and Val,” Frank said, trying to sound nonchalant, as if they were just out for a walk in the countryside.

The man whispered to one of his colleagues, who turned and ran back towards the forest.

“Are you from the Colony?” he asked Frank.

“We’re escapees.” Frank thought there was no point in lying.

“Well you’re not the first, and I doubt you’ll be the last. How is it you know Edwin and Val?”

“I met them prior to my incarceration, when I was, um, conducting some business here.”

“You were with the traders?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“Brannigan’s?”

“Um, yes.”

“You’re not the fool who got busted in one of his ships, are you?”

Frank nodded, and the man laughed.

“Come with me then,” he said, turning and leading them into the forest.

“Frank!” Val cried, running towards them with Edwin following closely behind. “I couldn’t believe my ears when they said you were here!”

“I’m so glad to see you again,” Frank said as she wrapped her arms around him and gave him a big hug.

“We meet again,” Edwin said, shaking his hand. “Who are your friends?”

“This is Owen Lachlan, consort to the High Priestess and now a political prisoner on the run, and these other fine gentlemen were also guests of the Governor before we took our leave earlier today.”

“Welcome to our village, then.”

“You don’t mind us coming here?” Owen asked.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Owen turned pale.

“Just ignore him, Owen,” Val laughed. “We don’t make a habit of killing visitors here, particularly those fleeing the atrocities of the Colony. Come to the tavern and get some food into you, and then you can tell us what you’ve been up to.”

“I need to speak with Clem,” Frank said.

Val bristled slightly. “He’s doing his schoolwork right now, but perhaps after dinner.”

“Thank you.”

* * *

“Governor, can you explain how half your prison population just casually walked out?” Paul Hoskins asked.

“To be honest, I’m surprised they went over the crater wall. We’ve constantly drummed into everyone that the winds outside will fry them to a crisp or freeze them solid within minutes.”

“Men with nothing to lose will often do extraordinary things. Now please tell me Halliday and Lachlan weren’t with them.”

“I’m afraid they were, Commander. According to Smithers, Halliday was the ringleader.”

“Bring him in here.”

The governor pressed a button on his desk and a few moments later the head guard entered the room.

“Mr Smithers,” Paul said, “please sit down and tell me what happened.”

“One of them bastards hit me over the head with a rock.”

“How did this come about?”

“I was going to rough up that new fish Lachlan a bit, just like the Governor ordered, but someone snuck up behind me and hit me.”

“You were doing what?” Paul yelled. “I gave strict orders that Lachlan was to be unharmed!”

“I wasn’t going to kill him,” Smithers said.

Paul shook his head and sighed. “What about the other guards? Where were they?”

“Apparently Halliday had it all planned. He tripped them up with a rope as they ran to my aid, then disarmed them and shot the tyres out on the bus. We had to walk back here to raise the alarm, and by then they’d gone over the crater wall. They’ll all be dead out there by now, though, won’t they?”

“We can always hope. You said you thought Halliday was the ringleader.”

“That’s right, sir. He was a real trouble-maker, that one, and even knew about the pummel fruit.”

Paul nodded, even though he had no idea what pummel fruit was. “Thank you, Smithers, you can go now.”

“I almost forgot,” the Governor said after Smithers had closed the door. “Halliday told the guards to tell me that the dimming of the stars has begun. Does that mean anything to you?”

“That man knows far too much for his own good,” Paul said, scratching his chin. “As for you, I’m relieving you of duty effective immediately, and if you have a quiet spot in the galaxy where you can live out the rest of your days in obscurity, I suggest you go there as soon as you can. This planet is now under military rule.”

“As you wish, Commander.”

* * *

Frank accepted the cup of coffee from Clem and settled back into his armchair. He and Owen had returned with Edwin and Val to their home while the other prisoners remained in the tavern celebrating their newly-found freedom. Clem had been all but bursting with excitement as soon as they’d entered the house.

“Could you tell me what happened to Mark and the others?” Frank asked him.

“I, um, after your ship went over the falls, I led them to the old ruined village. The path to the truth was supposed to be around there somewhere and I’d hoped we might find it.”

“And did you?”

“Yes, well at least Pip did. It was a portal into Sheol, built into the floor of one of the buildings.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“They wouldn’t let me. They said they needed to get Mark back to Earth, and that I should return to my parents.”

“You did the right thing, Clem. If you’d gone in too, none of us would’ve known what had become of you.”

“I guess so.”

“Do you remember the river and the city of towers in that place we all went to when Pip was injured?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve wandered there many times in my dreams.”

“What do you know about it?”

“The path to the truth lies through there.”

“Anything else?”

“There are only dead people in that city, but they’re not all bad.”

“Do you think you could find the way there from that portal?”

“I, um, I think so. Are we going in search of the truth then?”

“If I can convince your parents to let you come with us.”

“Dad probably would, but not Mum.”

“Let me work on her tonight, then, and we’ll see in the morning, okay?”

“Thanks, Frank. I have to come; it’s my destiny and calling.”

“I know. Now run along to bed and leave the rest to me.”

“Are you serious about taking the boy into Sheol?” Owen asked once Clem had left the room.

“He’s the key to this whole venture, I’m sure. Did you see the ebony dolphin hanging around his neck?”

“Yes, but what does it mean?”

“Have you ever heard of the Black Delphinidae?”

Owen gasped. “My friend Scott Davies was telling me about them just before I was abducted. He said there’s a Black Delphinidae cult within the military that’s behind all the present unrest.”

“Did he really?”

“He also said Morgoth may have been one of them too.”

Frank nodded. “I’ve suspected as much for some time now.”

“So what does this have to do with Clem?”

“The ebony dolphin he wears is the symbol of that creed.”

“But that makes him the enemy, doesn’t it?”

“I honestly don’t know who’s right and who’s wrong any more, but what I do know is I have to follow him on his path to the truth.”

“Where do you think it’ll lead?”

“To the Lost Barefooters, I suspect, and ultimately to the truth behind the corruption of the Dolphins.”

“Lorina said they weren’t to be trusted any more. Is this all connected?”

Frank just nodded and sipped the rest of his coffee.

“I need to take Clem with me into Sheol,” Frank said to Edwin and Val.

“I’ve been afraid of that,” Val said.

“If for no other reason, he’ll be safer away from here for a while. Once the authorities figure out where I’ve led the escapees, this place will be crawling with them.”

“He’s right,” Edwin said.

“What about us?” Val asked.

“I’m sure you’re more than capable of dealing with them.”

Frank had snookered her, and she knew it. She sighed. “I suppose he’d only go running after you if I tried to stop him.”

“He’d be torn with guilt, but yes, I think he would.”

“All right then, but promise me you’ll keep him out of trouble.”

“I’ll do my best, but there are dangers everywhere these days.”

“You’re not wrong there,” Edwin said. “Take him with our blessing and best wishes, both of you.”

“Um, actually I was planning on leaving Owen here for now.”

“What?” Owen said.

“I want you to lie low for a while, and I’ll contact Anton before I leave and get him to move both you and Lorina to somewhere safe.”

Owen looked crestfallen.

“You’re supposed to be Lorina’s consort, in case you’ve forgotten, and she and her unborn child need your protection.”

“That reminds me, Scott Davies said Lorina’s child could be a boy, and if so, he might be the fulfilment of the Black Delphinidae’s prophecy or something.”

“You mean that child could be the Fisherman?” Val asked.

“That’s what Scott said. Who exactly is the Fisherman?”

“According to folklore, the Fisherman is supposed to lead the Black Dolphins back to Huntress and restore this world to its former glory,” Edwin said.

“There are others who say the Fisherman will bring only death and suffering,” Val said.

“The dimming of the stars,” Frank said, and Val nodded.

“That’s what you said to that guard as we were leaving the mine!” Owen said. “What does it mean?”

“We’ll find out soon enough, I’m sure,” Frank said. “Now if everything’s settled, I think I might retire. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day for all of us, I fear.”

* * *

“What is this place?” Owen asked as the gully opened out before them into a broader canyon.

“Relics of the Old People,” Clem said. “They used to live here before the death of our sun.”

The last time Clem had been here, a cold wind had been blowing, but now it was dead calm and the silence amplified the enormity of time that had passed since the village had been inhabited.

“They say it predates the first settlement from Meridian,” Edwin said, “but I don’t see how that could be.”

“Perhaps we’re a bit presumptuous about being the only people to have ever lived in this galaxy,” Frank said.

“No wonder you ended up in prison,” Val said, “sprouting ideas like that.”

“I’m not the only one,” Frank said, casting a glance at Clem. “Do you think you can find the portal again?”

“Yeah, sure, it’s just down through there, over towards the river.”

“Lead on then.”

“Help me clear the rubble away,” Clem said, crouching down in the corner of the ruined building. “It’s under here.”

“How did you ever find it in the first place?” Edwin asked.

“Pip found it, but I’m not sure how. He sat down to rest a bit further up while the rest of us were hunting around way over there, but then he suddenly leapt up, yelling that he knew where it was, and he was right.”

Frank stared into space for a moment before squatting beside him and helping to uncover the metal plate.

“How do you activate it?” he asked once all the rubble had been shifted.

“There’s a socket in the wall there,” Clem said, pointing to the hole just below the dolphin engraving. “It responds to my amulet.”

He removed the black dolphin from around his neck and pushed it into the hole. Once again the metal plate began to shimmer as the portal opened.

“I won’t even bother asking how you figured that one out,” Frank said.

“We’ve found other artefacts that can be activated by the amulet,” Edwin said. “None of them ever really did much, though, as far as we could tell.”

“Amazing,” Frank said. “My father would’ve had a field day here.”

“Was he interested in archaeology?” Val asked.

“Uncovering the ancient truths was his life’s work, and ultimately the cause of his death I believe.”

“That’s so sad.”

“I hope that by going on this quest I might in some way avenge him,” Frank said. “It in turn has become my life’s work.”

“Well good luck, and take care of our son,” Edwin said.

“I will, I promise. One thing, though, before we go through. I have a feeling Clem’s going to need his amulet in there, but I’m not sure how we can manage that if it’s needed to keep the portal open. You don’t have another one, do you, by any chance?”

“No, we don’t,” Val said.

“I don’t think it’ll be a problem,” Clem said. “Last time the portal stayed open for a little while after I pulled my amulet out of the socket.”

“Let’s hope you’re right then,” Frank said. “Are you ready?”

Val gave Clem a big hug. “Do exactly as Frank says, you hear me? Don’t go trying to play the hero; remember this is not a game.”

“I understand, Mum.”

Edwin wrapped his arms around his son. “Find the truth, Clem, and do us proud.”

“I will.”

“Good luck, both of you,” Owen said.

“And you,” Frank said. “Anton will be here as soon as it’s safe for him to land. Take good care of Lorina for me.”

“I will.”

Clem shook Owen’s hand as Frank lowered himself into the portal.

“Whoa,” he said. “This does a ninety-degree bend as you go through. Give me your hand, Clem, and get ready to pull the amulet through with the other one.”

Clem eased himself into the opening, holding his right arm high with his fingers wrapped tightly around the amulet’s chain. When

he'd gone as far as he could, Edwin pulled the amulet from the socket and threw it down into the portal. "Go!"

Clem's hand and the amulet disappeared a moment before the portal closed and became just a dull metal plate. Owen bent down to help Edwin cover it again with the rubble.

"I hope we've done the right thing," Val said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sure we have," Edwin said, standing again and wrapping his arms around her.

Into Darkness

The train driver put the radio handset back down; still no response from the signal box. It had been an hour now since he'd pulled up at the red light on the outskirts of Werris Creek, and he was starting to get an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

'This signal must not be passed at stop without authority from the signaller,' the reflective sign said, and he knew it would cost him his job if he disobeyed. There was no offence greater than passing such a signal at stop without authority, and with good reason. The catch points would derail his train if he did, and that would mean lots of mess to clean up and mountains of paperwork to do. He reached down for the radio again, giving it a thump for good measure.

"Werris Creek Box, this is FC763. Do you receive, over?"

No response. He climbed out of the cabin, scrambling down over the ballast to the trackside phone. It had been dead earlier, and still was.

Only one thing left to do. Returning to the cabin, he grabbed his portable radio, reflective vest and torch before starting to walk down the centre of the tracks towards the junction.

The night was clear, and when he looked up he could see the slowly moving points of light crisscrossing the sky. It had been two weeks since the blockade had begun, cutting off all space transport into and out of Earth. The invaders were nothing but thorough, he mused.

The ultranet had been one of the first casualties, relying as it did on orbiting satellites to carry most of the traffic. Some of the terrestrial radio and television stations were still operating, but their transmissions were spasmodic and unreliable. The news they carried was only going from bad to worse, he thought, so perhaps it was better being kept in the dark.

He jumped as something moved in the undergrowth alongside the track, almost falling over backwards with fright. Swinging the torch around, he caught a glimpse of a possum scampering up a tree before disappearing out of sight. Swearing under his breath, he shook his head and was about to start walking again when another sound broke the silence.

Faint at first but rapidly growing louder, a harsh rushing noise filled the air, and he turned to see flashes of blue light all around his train. Having seen the news reports of similar raids, he had no doubt what was happening, and, dropping his radio and torch on the tracks, he ran as fast as he could into the night.

* * *

“They’ve raided another freight train,” Jason said as he walked into the bedroom where Jenny was brushing her hair. “This time at Werris Creek.”

“Where’s that?”

“About a hundred kilometres south of Narrabri on the line to Sydney. There’s not a lot there apart from the railway junction.”

“Much damage done?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad. Apparently they emptied the entire train before melting it onto the tracks, and they reckon it’ll be a month at least before the line can be reopened.”

“The supermarket shelves are becoming rather bare already. I think things are going to get a lot worse before this is resolved.”

“Maybe Ron and Mary have heard something,” Jason said. “Are you ready to go?”

“How do I look?”

“As stunning as when I first met you.”

Jenny’s smile quickly turned into a frown. “I was laid out on an intensive care hospital bed when we first met.”

“I meant after that.”

She kissed him on the nose. “Of course you did. Now come on, let’s go.”

“Come in, come in,” Mary said, giving Jason and Jenny each a big hug. “We’re glad you could make it.”

“Come on through,” Ron said from behind her. “Aaron and Maleena are already here.”

“Have you been able to contact Kevin?” Jenny asked him.

“No, all the off-world communications are down. I still have trouble believing he’s doing this. He was always ambitious, I’ll grant you that, but it’s almost like he’s, well, picked up where Morgoth left off.”

“If only he’d talk to us,” Mary said.

“Now don’t go blaming yourself, Mum,” Aaron said as he stood to greet Jason and Jenny. “If you ask me, I reckon he’s being used by those behind that dolphin-slaying business.”

“Speaking of which,” Jason said, “has anyone heard how Owen and Lorina are going with their investigations?”

Everyone looked at each other, but no-one spoke.

“I guess that’s a no then. I hope they’re all right; perhaps I should go to Bluehaven through Sheol and find out.” Jenny glared at him. “It was only a suggestion.”

“That place is too dangerous without a Dolphin escort,” Ron said, “and you said yourself the Dolphins can’t be trusted.”

“Is there anything else we can do?” Mary asked.

“The government’s contracted our company to try to find ways of countering the weapons the raiders are using,” Jenny said. “I have a team of researchers working on it, including Billy and Peter who’ve come out of retirement to help, and while there’s nothing concrete yet, we’re still hopeful of coming up with something.”

“Perhaps I could help you with that,” Maleena said. “I had a bit of weapons experience when I was working for Gallad. That was a long time ago, I know, but from what I’ve seen, I don’t think their technology’s changed very much since then.”

“Thanks, that’s great! Drop into work any time you like and I’ll show you what we’re doing.”

A beeping from the kitchen interrupted them. “Stay there Mum, I’ll get it,” Aaron said, waving Mary back down as she started to rise.

He dashed from the room, closely followed by Maleena, and returned moments later carrying a dish of lasagne in gloved hands.

“Careful, it’s straight out of the oven and the dish is very hot,” he said as he gingerly put it down on the coasters. Maleena brought in a bowl of steaming vegetables and placed it alongside.

“At least allow me to serve,” Mary said.

“Now who could that be?” Ron asked as the doorbell rang, pushing aside his dinner as he went to answer it. Two policemen were standing there.

“Mr Simmons?” the older of the two asked.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“May we come in?”

“Yes, of course. Follow me.”

“Well, well, well, who do we have here?”

“This is my wife Mary, my stepson Aaron Smith, his wife Maleena, and our friends Jason and Jenny Collins.”

The policeman glanced at his notebook.

“This is indeed a fortuitous gathering. Mr and Mrs Collins, you are free to go, but as for the rest of you, I have warrants for your internment for the duration of the current hostilities. Could you come with us please?”

“Now wait just a minute,” Aaron said. “We’re not enemy agents or anything. You have no right to do this!”

“I’m afraid we have every right, sir.”

“But Aaron was born on Earth,” Jason said.

“His mother was Mrs Simmons, though, and that makes him alien enough for us.”

“This is bullshit,” Aaron said, standing and working his way around the table, but Ron took hold of his arm and held him back.

“No, Aaron, don’t make it any harder for us. They’re just doing their job.”

“That’s right, thank you, sir. This is for your own protection as much as ours, and you’ll be treated with the utmost respect during your internment.”

“We’ll do whatever we can to get you out,” Jason said.

“I’ll have our lawyers working on it first thing tomorrow,” Jenny added.

* * *

Owen stood at the sound of the front door opening and closing, beginning his dash from the living room towards his hiding place.

“Relax, it’s only me,” Edwin said.

“What’s happening outside?” Owen asked once he’d returned to his armchair.

“Everything’s calm. Word is the governor of the Colony has been sacked and the military have taken over command there.”

“On account of our breakout?”

“Apparently.”

“I suppose that means we’ll have soldiers crawling all through the village before long.”

Edwin glanced at Val, who nodded ever so slightly.

“That’s not likely,” he said. “We have, how should I put it, an arrangement with certain high-ranking military personnel not to come near the village, and the new acting Governor has indicated he’ll honour that agreement.”

Owen was bewildered. “You’ve spoken with him?”

“Not me personally, but a representative from the village has. You and your fellow escapees are safe provided you stay here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The politics of this planet make for strange bedfellows,” Val said.

Before Owen could respond, a knocking sounded on the front door. He stood again to leave the room, but Edwin waved him back down.

“These will be a couple of friends of yours, I think,” he said as he went to answer it, returning a few moments later with a man and woman.

“Anton! Lorina!” Owen cried, standing again to greet them. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, silly,” Lorina said, giving him a big hug and kissing him on the nose.

“Thanks for coming,” Owen said as he shook Anton’s hand. “Frank said you were going to take us somewhere safe.”

“I’m thinking right here is about as safe as anywhere else,” Anton said. “Really the last place anyone would go looking for an escaped prisoner is right next door to the prison.”

“He’s right,” Edwin said, “and you’re both most welcome to remain as our guests for as long as necessary.”

“At least until the baby’s born,” Anton added. “After that, well hopefully some of the political tension will ease.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Owen said.

“And perhaps that’s just as well,” Anton said. “Remember ignorance is bliss, okay?”

“Sit down and I’ll get you something to eat,” Val said, dashing out to the kitchen.

* * *

“Supreme Councillor, it’s Hoskins here, sir.”

“What news, Paul?”

“Lorina and Owen are both in a safe house on Huntress.”

“What about the poisonous atmosphere there? Won’t that harm them?”

“The villagers grow a fruit that gives them immunity if eaten regularly. They’ll be fine, I can assure you. Frank Halliday’s man, Anton, is watching over them.”

“I’m glad to hear it. What of Halliday himself?”

“He’s gone off on another of his escapades, apparently.”

“Keep an eye on him. He’s a loose cannon in all of this.”

“I will if I can find him. How are your, um, negotiations progressing?”

“Very well indeed. We’ve dispatched the first shiploads of food back to Meridian and there’s plenty more to come.”

“That’s great news, sir.”

“General Gallagher expects to push ahead with the second phase of our operation in a few days, and after that it should only be a matter of time before the annexation agreement is signed.”

“I look forward to your triumphant return, sir. Do you wish me to inform the Council?”

“No, not as yet, other than to say that more food shipments are on the way.”

“As you wish, sir.”

** * **

Jason emerged from darkness onto the grassy slope, his sense of impending doom increasing with every step forward. He sprinted down towards the river, pulling up at the entrance to the bridge.

The last time it had been barricaded, but not now. He looked around, worried he might be walking into a trap, but with no obvious threat he ventured out onto the span.

The crossing was longer than it looked, and for a while the far end didn't seem to be coming any closer, but as he finally neared the shore he picked up his pace and was sprinting again by the time he set foot on land.

A narrow laneway led him uphill away from the river. Tall buildings on either side cast uneasy shadows that merged into an almost impenetrable gloom, and while he could see no-one, he was certain undead eyes were watching him through the grimy windows above.

As he turned a corner, the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise. Ahead the laneway opened onto a plaza surrounding a fountain long run dry, its once ornate stonework now mutilated and covered in graffiti. But his eyes were drawn beyond that to the golden tower, the place he feared most and yet knew he must enter.

It was dark inside, darker than it should have been, while all around hung cobwebs, spun in Hades by the ghosts of long-dead spiders no doubt. Lift doors hung open like waiting mouths, but he turned away from them, seeking the stairs instead.

Climbing up and up until he was sure he'd gone way past the top of the tower, he finally emerged through a doorway and into a palatial hall. At first he thought it was empty, but then he saw two men poised facing each other at the far end of the room. Without warning, the taller of the two, dark-haired, olive-skinned and completely naked, pulled out a golden sword and sliced off the head of his opponent.

It bounced across the marble floor – thump! thump! thump! – before coming to rest at Jason’s feet, and he cried out in horror as he recognised the face frozen in shock as that of his son.

Jason sat bolt upright in bed. *Thump! Thump! Thump!* He could still hear the dreadful sound of Mark’s head bouncing across the floor. *Thump! Thump! Thump!*

“What is it?” Jenny asked as she woke.

“Mark’s head,” he began to say, before realising it was somebody knocking. *Thump! Thump! Thump!*

He stumbled out into the hallway and opened the front door. “Dad? What’s wrong?”

“Sorry to wake you,” Billy said, standing on the porch in the predawn grey. “Is Jenny awake too?”

“Yeah, come on in,” Jason said.

“What is it?” Jenny asked as she stepped out of the bedroom, pulling a dressing gown around herself.

“Our offices have been raided,” Billy said.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked, his mind still foggy after the nightmare.

“The building’s been broken into and set on fire. The brigade’s there now, but it doesn’t look good.”

“Let me put some clothes on and we’ll come straight down,” Jenny said.

The fire brigade were still pouring water onto the smouldering ruins as Billy pulled up with Jason and Jenny. They wandered across to where Peter and Julia were talking to a man in a shabby suit, but as they drew closer, Jason recognised him as the policeman who’d arrested Mark and thus begun his living nightmare. He shuddered as his thoughts turned back to his latest dream and the thumping of Mark’s head across the floor.

“Inspector,” Peter said as he saw them approaching, “here they are now. Jenny’s the official proprietor of the business.”

“Inspector Morris, isn’t it?” Jenny asked.

“Yes, we’ve met before,” the inspector said. “I heard what happened to your son, of course, and I can appreciate how hard it must be for you.”

Jenny could sense Jason tensing up, and squeezed his hand.

“So could you tell me a little about the work you were doing here,” the inspector continued. “I understand it was subspace research, but could you give me a little more detail?”

“We’ve been engaged by the government to investigate possible shielding technology that could be used against the invaders,” she said.

“I see, well that would be motive enough then.”

“You think this was their work?”

“There are signs of extraterrestrial involvement, but we’ll know a lot more once our forensic people have finished. Were all your records kept in the building?”

“We have off-site backups of our important documents, of course, but, um, the loss of equipment and personal notes will be a huge blow for us.”

“I’ll need you to give me a full list of the staff members, and anyone else who knew about your work here.”

“Of course. When do you think we’ll be able to, you know, have a look at what’s left?”

“It may be some days yet before the building’s secured and our forensic people have finished their work.”

Jenny nodded.

“Well I think that’s all for the moment. If you could drop that staff list into the station later today, and I’ll be in touch with you, I’m sure.”

“Thank you, Inspector,” Jenny said, trying her hardest to keep a civil tone to her voice. “Now who’s going to tell the defence minister about this?”

Jason stared down at his feet.

“I’ll take care of that,” Peter said. “You two have enough on your plate as it is.”

“Perhaps it’s time for a family conference,” Julia said. “Why don’t you all come back to our place?”

“Good idea, Mum,” Jason said, giving her a hug. “This is getting all too much for me.”

“And me,” Jenny added.

“Jason thinks Mark and the others might still be alive,” Jenny said, starting the ball rolling once they’d all settled into Billy and Julia’s living room. Jason, as always, was stretched out on the floor, while the others occupied the lounge suite and armchairs.

“Chris and Damon, perhaps,” Jason said, “but not Mark, not now.” He rolled over and pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his shorts, using the time it took to blow his nose to both gather his thoughts and stop himself from crying. “In my dream last night, someone, oh God, someone cut his head off.” He covered his face with his hands as the thumping sound echoed again in his mind.

“It was just a dream, sweetheart,” Julia said. “Like the ones you used to have when you were little and woke up screaming in the night.”

“She’s right,” Jenny said. “You’re overwrought and your mind’s playing out your worst fears.”

“But it seemed so real. It was like I’d been there before, going into the city and climbing to the top of that awful golden tower.”

“How did you get past the Guardian in the river?” Billy asked.

“There’s a bridge. Before, when I projected myself into the portal in Brisbane, it was barricaded off, but not last night. I ran across and then into a narrow laneway that led me to the tower. There was a fountain, too, but it was broken and covered in graffiti.”

“I’ve been there too,” Peter said, and everyone turned to look at him. “It was a dream I had a few weeks ago. I was playing cricket with Jim Hamilton in that very laneway, would you believe, but the fountain wasn’t broken then, it was spraying water high into the air. After the game we went and stood under it to cool off. I remember seeing the golden tower, too, but it was a place I was really afraid of. That’s when I woke up.”

“I have to go in there,” Jason said. “If I don’t I’ll go mad, I’m sure.”

“I know, honey,” Jenny said with a sigh, “and I’m coming with you.”

* * *

“I don’t like this place,” Jason said as he pulled open the warehouse door.

“Why not?” Billy asked.

“It’s the smell; it conjures up too many bad memories.”

“It looks really melancholy,” Julia said, “almost spooky.”

“That’s what I love about you guys,” Jenny said. “You’re always so cheerful and positive.”

“Mind your feet, Mum,” Jason said as he led them in. “There’s broken glass and stuff scattered about in here.”

“Maybe Billy and I should give it a good cleanup while you’re away,” Julia said.

“What, and spoil its charming appeal?” Billy said.

Something scurried across the rafters high above them. “What was that?” Julia asked, taking a step backwards.

“Just a possum or an owl,” Jason said hopefully.

“Or perhaps a vampire or werewolf,” Billy added.

“The door’s over in the far corner,” Jason said, ignoring him.

“Do you want us to leave it open after you’ve gone through?” Julia asked.

“That’s a good question,” Jason said. “Frank always kept it locked, but whether it was to stop vagrants stumbling into Sheol or to keep Sheol’s inhabitants from coming out, I’m not sure.”

“But hang on,” Jenny said, “didn’t Anton have the key when he came through that first time?”

“Yes, he did. Maybe you can lock it from the inside too.”

He inserted and turned the key, pulling open the heavy steel door. On the back was another large keyhole, and he slapped himself on the forehead.

“Take care, both of you,” Julia said, giving them each a big hug, “and bring the boys back safely.”

“We’ll try our best,” Jenny said.

“Good luck,” Billy said, “and we’ll be thinking of you, every moment.”

Jason turned to Jenny. “Are you ready?”

“No, but let’s go before I lose my nerve entirely.”

“I love you, always,” Jason said to his parents as he took Jenny’s hand and led her through the shimmering light. As Billy and Julia watched on, the door swung closed again and they heard the key turning in the lock.

Part Four

The Path to the Truth

A Hope in Hades

“My grandson, yes, the boy who killed me,” Morgoth said. “We meet again, young Mark.”

“No!” Elko cried as Morgoth whipped out his golden sword, but before anyone could stop him, he swung it across a wide arc and sliced through Mark’s neck.

Pip watched in horror as Mark’s head dropped to the floor, bouncing three times before coming to rest at his feet. Rocked by what he could only describe as a blast of psychic energy, he stumbled backwards, falling into darkness as his legs cramped up in a stab of excruciating pain.

“My subjects, behold!” Mark’s seven-year-old voice echoed in Pip’s mind from the recording he’d watched more times than he could remember. *“My grandfather, Morgoth the Enlightened, has departed this realm and I, Mark the Bewildered, now stand in his place as his rightful heir and successor.”*

In the celebrations following Morgoth’s defeat, Pip had been conceived, and his life had begun in that first false dawn of peace. *“I recall now the words of my mentor Peter Thorpe,”* Mark had said ten years later after defeating of Brett Farley’s insurgents. *“Peace cannot be enforced from without but only embraced from within, and the events of the last two days have driven that point home to me. I hope this can also be a lesson for you as well, as you begin again your struggle to embrace peace.”*

The peace Mark had brought had been only illusionary, Pip now realised, and the people he’d twice tried to save had in the end turned against him. Now the tables had turned full circle, and Morgoth, the cruel dictator he’d deposed, had exacted his revenge.

“Mark is not the Fisherman,” Val had said last night, but if not Mark, then whom? *“The fisherman is a prophecy that’s perhaps best*

left unfulfilled,” she’d said as they were leaving, but he thought that unlikely. The Fisherman was coming, he had no doubt, and Mark was to have played a part in it, but whether as an ally or a threat would now remain a mystery.

Through the darkness came a cry of anguish. Pip thought it sounded like Chris, Mark’s friend and self-proclaimed guardian, the one he and Damon had come to Earth to help after he’d been possessed by the spirit of Gregory the Dolphin Slayer. It was all connected, he was sure, and Dolphins, black and grey, were at the heart of the mystery.

For the last four years Pip had been a Delphinidae student, going with Damon to Bluehaven to study. He’d been taught to revere the Dolphins as almost gods, and yet Mark had told Lorina they could no longer be trusted. Had the Dolphins been corrupted, and if so, by whom?

As if in answer to that thought, his legs cramped again and he doubled over in agony. Light began to sparkle around him, dazzling at first after the darkness but resolving itself into the chandeliers of Morgoth’s hall. He drew in a deep breath but sneezed as the smell of stale dust assaulted his nose. Rubbing his thighs as the cramp dissolved away, he gingerly stood and glanced around.

The hall looked older. Cobwebs hung from the corners, while layers of dust covered the furnishings and floor. To his left stood Elko, Damon and Chris, but beyond them and crouching down in fear was Morgoth. In his hand he still held the hilt of his golden sword, but the blade had shattered and pieces lay scattered on the floor around him. Gone too was his youthful appearance, replaced instead by the shrivelled old Morgoth that Pip remembered from his studies.

Before him stood a tall radiant being, an angel perhaps, glowing with life and vitality in this dingy hall. “Your hatred has only strengthened me,” the figure said, “for I now reclaim my birthright. Be gone from this realm too!”

A darkness surrounded Morgoth, binding and crushing him, and with a wailing that would haunt Pip for the rest of his days, he collapsed in upon himself like crushed cellophane and disappeared.

“It is done, then,” the figure said, turning now to face Pip and the others. The halo around him dimmed, and Pip rubbed his eyes as he realised it was Mark.

“Are you okay?” Chris asked, dashing forward to embrace him.

“Yes, I’m fine, but we must leave this tower quickly for I fear it may soon collapse.” The floor trembled slightly as Mark spoke, stirring up puffs of dust.

“Follow me,” Elko said, leading them through a side door and down a long flight of stairs.

“But how?” Chris asked as they emerged onto the plaza. Behind them, the tower was already starting to crumble. “I mean, I saw Morgoth cut Mark’s head off.”

“Everything here is an illusion,” Elko said. “Even us. We’re really just spirits in here, and in the clash between Mark and Morgoth, Mark’s spirit prevailed.”

“What’s happened to everything?” Mark asked as he looked around.

Under a dull overcast sky, the city seemed more like a ghost town. The fountain in the centre of the plaza lay broken and covered in graffiti, while the other towers, although not appearing to be in imminent danger of collapse, looked ill-kept and dirty, as if their occupants had long since deserted them.

“The clash of spirits has weakened the very fabric of this place,” Elko said. “Come, we must find the others and get you ready to leave as soon as possible.”

Pip looked around once more. Scraps of litter blew out of a deserted side street as a cold wind came up from the river, while behind him Morgoth’s golden tower was now just a pile of rubble. Someone had scrawled ‘*Dolphins suck!*’ across a nearby wall, looking like it had been written in blood. He wrapped his arms around himself and shivered.

* * *

“This way,” Clem said to Frank as he led him off to the right.

“How can you tell?”

“I don’t know, it’s just a feeling I have I suppose.”

The only times Frank had been inside Sheol had been with a Dolphin escort or with Anton. Like Clem, Anton was able to feel his way around in the darkness, locating the many exits with uncanny accuracy. It was an ability Frank himself didn’t share.

“You’re glowing slightly,” he said as he glanced across at Clem.

“Am I really?”

“It means you’re a strong telepath.”

Clem remained silent, quickening the pace a little.

“I know it can be hard for people with special abilities,” Frank eventually said. “Damon, Mark, Chris and even Pip are all special in their own ways.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Damon, obviously, as he carries Damien’s heritage, Mark I believe still has many of his Barefooter powers, while Chris’s combination of Elvish and Earthling traits gives him great compassion and insight.”

“What about Pip?”

“Pip is perhaps the most gifted of the four, although I’m sure he’s unaware of it.”

“He carries the Black Dolphin’s curse.”

“Does he really?”

A distant howling interrupted their conversation. Clem stopped walking, causing Frank to almost bump into him, as flickering lights appeared all around them.

“What are they?” Frank asked.

“Some call them ogres,” Clem said. “Be quiet and follow my lead.”

“Who dares enter our realm?” asked a rasping voice from out of the darkness.

“I am Clem, son of Edwin and bearer of the Black Amulet.”

“What is it you seek, Clem son of Edwin?”

“I seek the truth.”

“Is your companion also a truth-seeker?”

“Not by birth, but certainly by intent.”

“Do you vouch for him?”

“I do.”

“In the dimming of the stars shall the truth be found.”

“And the exiled shall be redeemed.”

“Will you honour your pledge?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Follow us then.”

The flickering lights drew together and began moving off into the darkness, with Clem and Frank following close behind.

“The path to the truth lies just ahead, Clem son of Edwin, but we can take you no further.”

“Thank you for your aid, and may your days of suffering soon end.”

“By your grace, truth-seeker.”

As the lights flickered out, Clem took Frank by the hand, leading him forward and down. Within a few paces the air began to glow with a greyish light, and as the mist parted they found themselves once more on the slope overlooking the River Styx.

“What’s happened to this place?” Frank asked as he took in the dead grass underfoot and the grey skies above.

“I don’t know, but I fear time is short.”

When Frank saw the bridge his heart sank. Its supporting beams had cracked and buckled, causing the span to list dangerously to the left, and to make matters worse, in places whole sections of the decking had disappeared.

“Is there no other way across?” he asked.

“Only the ferry, but I don’t think he’d take us, not after our previous encounter.”

Frank nodded, remembering how Clem had saved Pip’s soul from the ferryman. “The bridge it is, then.”

“What was all that stuff you were saying to the ogres?” Frank asked as they dragged aside the rusted remains of the barricade blocking the entrance to the bridge.

“They were once inhabitants of Huntress, but were exiled into Sheol at the time of the death of our sun. We’ve pledged that, should

the truth be found and the Fisherman come, we'll return them to their homes."

"Is that possible?"

"It's our pledge, and we'll honour it, by whatever means."

They'd reached the first section where the decking had broken away, leaving a gaping hole about two metres across.

"Take hold of the railing and step down onto the beam," Frank said.

"Easy," Clem said, and within moments was across. Frank followed cautiously behind him.

"I'm glad I've been going barefoot for the past few weeks," Frank said. "I'm sure it'd be a lot harder doing this with shoes on."

"I agree. I've been barefoot since Mark turned up and showed me the light."

Frank chuckled. "I don't think Mark's ever put anything on his feet in his life."

"Do you think he's still really a Barefooter then?"

"I think about all he lost in his encounter with Morgoth was his autothermia, and even then there may well be some other warming mechanism he's retained. His parents told me they could rarely get him to put a shirt on, even on the coldest winter days."

Clem remained silent for a few moments. "Some say the Fisherman is supposed to be the male child of a Barefooter and a Delphinidae."

"Yes, and Lorina's carrying Mark's child. If it's a boy, well, I think it's a pretty fair bet he'll be the one."

They'd reached the centre of the span. Ahead were two more missing sections of decking, one short but the second one much longer. A gust of wind sprang up, causing the bridge to sway alarmingly.

"Come on," Frank said. "The sooner we get off this thing the better."

The first gap caused them no difficulty, but the second was a different story. A section of the handrail had broken away as well, leaving them with nothing to hold onto, and to make it worse, the supporting beams were at their most twisted at that point. One of the

beams had actually cracked, leaving a jagged edge that was bobbing up and down as the bridge swayed.

“Careful now,” Frank said as Clem stepped down onto the remaining beam, arms outstretched as he tried to balance himself.

He took a few steps forward, wrapping his toes around the edge of the beam to gain extra purchase. In front of him now and crossing his path was the end of the broken beam, and he paused, waiting for the swaying to subside a little.

“I think I can climb over the broken bit easily enough, but do you have a cloth or anything I can put over the sharp edges?”

Frank rummaged through his pockets, finding nothing of any use, then pulled off his shirt and stepped down onto the beam, catching his balance before reaching out to pass it to Clem.

Just as Clem took hold of it, the wind gusted again. Frank teetered, pulling Clem off balance, and without thinking he reached back with his other hand and grabbed hold of the broken beam. He felt it cut into his palm, but there was no time to worry about that now. Shifting his foot slightly and wrapping his toes around the lip of the main beam, he steadied himself, allowing Frank to regain his balance. The wind eased again.

“Are you okay?” Clem asked.

“Yeah, but I’m getting too old for this sort of thing.” Frank looked up-river, trying to see any approaching wind gusts. “Take the shirt and I’ll ease myself back to the decking.”

“Shit,” Clem said as he lifted his hand from the broken beam and inspected the damage. “I’ve cut myself pretty badly.”

“Tear off a piece of my shirt to wrap it with. I can buy a new one once we’re off this accursed bridge.”

Clem steadied himself, then used the jagged edge of the beam to cut through the shirt before wrapping one piece around his hand and the other around the beam. Satisfied, and after waiting again for the bridge to settle, he lifted his left leg over the broken beam and reached down, just managing to grasp the main beam with his toes. He took a deep breath before pulling his other leg over.

“Come across to here now,” he said to Frank.

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Frank said as he stepped out onto the main beam again. Clem balanced himself against the

broken beam, reaching out as far as he could, while Frank cautiously stretched forward and finally managed to grab hold of his hand.

“We’re almost there,” Clem said as Frank took hold of the covered end of the beam, but at that moment the wind gusted stronger than ever. Clem grabbed hold of his arm as they braced themselves on either side of the broken beam, but with a groan of twisting metal, the whole bridge began to tilt.

The main beam dropped out from under their feet, leaving them hanging high in the air, wrapped around the end of the broken beam. As the bridge continued to buckle, the beam swung out and over the water, its vibration almost shaking them loose. With a final shudder, everything stopped moving again as the wind died down once more.

“Not good,” Frank said, and Clem almost laughed in spite of their predicament.

* * *

At the entrance to the laneway, Jim Hamilton came running towards Pip and the others. “Come quickly, down to the bridge!” he cried.

“What’s happened?” Elko asked as they ran after him.

“The boy and another man were crossing over, but it started collapsing under them. Pedro and Bobby are trying to help, but I don’t know if they can reach them.”

“You mean Clem?”

“Yes, him and an old man.”

“And I thought this was going to be the easy part,” Elko muttered as they emerged from the alley and sprinted across what remained of the parkland.

Pip couldn’t believe his eyes. It had only been a couple of hours since Pedro had led them across the silver bridge, and then it had looked to be in pristine condition. Now the structure before him was a twisted wreck, barely standing by the look of it. He gasped in horror as he saw Frank and Clem hanging from the end of a bent and broken beam.

“Jim, go back to the basement and grab some ropes and anything else you can find that might come in handy,” Elko said. “Take Chris with you too.”

“What do you have in mind?” Mark asked him.

“I’m not sure, but whatever it is we do to get them down, we’ll probably need rope. I just hope the decay of the buildings and environment here hasn’t weakened our rope as well.”

“I can’t believe Morgoth trying to cut my head off did this much damage.”

“There’s a lot more to you than meets the eye, young Mark.”

Mark shook his head and groaned.

“I reckon I can climb out to them,” Pedro said.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Elko said. “Here, tie this rope around your waist.”

Pedro did, then scampered out along the twisted beam like a monkey.

“That boy has no fear,” Jim said, shaking his head.

“Is there anything we can do?” Damon asked.

“No, I don’t want the living going anywhere near it. We dead folk are already dead, so it doesn’t really matter if we fall.”

“What happens if you do?”

“I don’t know, but I suppose the worst that can happen is we move on to the true afterlife.”

“There’s more beyond this then?”

“Yes, although once we leave Sheol there’s no coming back, or at least no-one ever has. Most spirits move straight on and don’t linger here.”

“Why did you stay, then?”

“Unfinished business, I suppose.”

Pedro by now had reached Clem and Frank, and was securing additional ropes around each of them. With Bobby acting as a belay, Clem climbed back along the rope and then, with Pedro’s assistance, Frank finally made it down onto solid ground.

“Trust you to be making such a dramatic entrance,” Damon said to him as he tried to stop his knees from knocking.

A strong gust of wind hit, raising the dust of what used to be lush parkland, while from behind them came the sound of twisting metal as the bridge finally succumbed and toppled into the river.

"I guess there's no going back now," Frank said.

"Not by that route, anyway," Elko said. "Welcome to Hades, old friend."

* * *

"Thank you all for coming," Elko said to those gathered around him in his basement headquarters.

"We didn't really have much choice," Mark said.

"Mind your manners," Damon said.

"No, Mark's right," Elko said. "Some of you were brought here under duress, and for that I apologise. Nonetheless, it was essential that you come, and given the limited resources and time at my disposal, I had no other choice."

"So far all I've heard is riddles and stories about black dolphins," Mark said. "What exactly is this all about?"

"I'd hoped Morgoth would've been here to explain it, as he had far greater first-hand knowledge than I, but alas that's no longer possible."

"It wasn't my fault he tried to cut my head off," Mark said.

"And no-one's blaming you either. Morgoth was a fool, but a useful fool nonetheless, and even though he was undoubtedly as mad as a hatter, I did manage to piece together much of his story.

"He was born into a powerful family of the ruling Barefooters, and although given mandatory military training by his father, was by nature a keen historian. In a falling-out with his parents, he left home and travelled to Bluehaven where he buried himself in the Delphinidae's libraries and archives. He was fascinated by the story of Damien and Lorna's gifts from the Dolphins, and, as Damien was teaching there at the time, he sought him out and became one of his most enthusiastic students.

"Everything changed, though, when he stumbled upon an old book written by the founder of a creed called the Black Delphinidae. In it, the writer spoke of an ancient people, predating even the first tribes

on Meridian, and of a calamity that befell their world. He claimed the Dolphins had become a vessel to carry the soul of their king into immortality, and that Damien and Lorna were supposed to have mated to produce a baby boy who would bring him back to life and restore their civilisation to its former glory.

“Morgoth decided that such an event, should it come to pass, would pose a threat to the sovereignty of the Barefooters and their birthright to rule the galaxy. He showed the book to Damien, expecting his friend and mentor to share his concern, but instead Damien accused him of blasphemy and expelled him from the college. Morgoth was forced to burn the book and cast its ashes into the sea, but from that day forward he was determined to ensure that the Dolphins could never fulfil their goal. He returned home, trying to convince his parents of the threat they faced, but they scoffed at him and cast him out. Enraged, and with the aid of other disgruntled young Barefooters, he overthrew the government and so began his million years of absolute rule. While he no doubt had a lust for power and relished in his domination of the galaxy, he had one overriding purpose in mind, that being to ensure the gifts of Damien and Lorna could never be united in a male child.

“Very early in his rule, though, he was almost undone when his eldest son Martyn, in a scene reminiscent of his own falling out with his parents, fled to Bluehaven and married the daughter of the High Priestess. She bore him a baby girl, much to Morgoth’s relief, but he executed them both for fear they might later on have a son.

“Determined to eliminate any further risk, Morgoth declared war on his fellow Barefooters and ultimately exterminated them, or so he thought. As we now know, his younger son Gallad fled with his followers to the Milky Way galaxy where his line was preserved, ultimately returning in the form of Mark. Others fled through Sheol in a self-imposed exile, passing through this very city on the way to their secret destination.”

“My quest has been to find them,” Frank said, “for I’m a descendant of one of their number.”

“Indeed,” Elko said, “and your goal is close at hand. Now with the Barefooters gone, Morgoth established his government on Bluehaven, keeping a close watch on the Delphinidae and the Dolphins

themselves. All was well, comparatively speaking, until a governor of Bluehaven, Gregory Harrington, stumbled across Morgoth's diaries while he was away on a crusade. Deciding to take matters into his own hands, Gregory set about slaughtering every dolphin he could find. Morgoth returned in a rage, for he knew such an act would destabilise the status quo he'd worked so hard to achieve over the millennia, and executed Gregory on the spot. His spirit landed here, and although hopelessly insane, he's also been an occasional source of information.

"For Morgoth, though, things started coming unstuck when, fifty years ago, he touched the mind of an Elf girl named Mary Anderson and saw in her the instrument of his demise and the fulfilment of the Dolphins' goal. That realisation drove him to the brink of madness, and his death and arrival here ultimately tipped him over the edge. He spent his days mostly prancing about naked in that youthful body of his and living out his fantasy of being lord of the universe, but occasionally I could get some sense out of him and little by little pieced together this story."

Damon stood. "You've dragged us all the way here on the basis of the ravings of a madman?"

"Sit down, Damon," Frank said.

"I first thought as you do," Elko said. "It sounded like pure fiction, but then I made contact with the boy Clem, who in his dreams would sometimes wander deep into Sheol. From what he told me of his world and people, I was able to put some of the pieces together and give credence to what Morgoth had told me.

"When Mark was arrested and convicted of the murder of that baby Dolphin, I knew the endgame was upon us and I had to act. There are some in positions of high standing who remain loyal to Morgoth's ideal and would stop at nothing to prevent the birth of Mark and Lorina's son, the boy destined to fulfil the Dolphins' ancient charge."

"What if my son doesn't want to be this reincarnated king?" Mark asked.

"I suspect in that he will have no choice," Elko said, "just as you had no choice in becoming what you are. You and Lorina were both groomed for your role, through a selective breeding process borne of

what seemed happy coincidences. But you've been manipulated, in part by me I must confess, although I didn't realise it at the time, and also by my friend Frank here amongst others. We thought we were freeing a galaxy from the clutches of a ruthless dictator, but instead we were playing into the hands of the Dolphins."

Pip suddenly laughed and everyone looked at him, surprised perhaps that he was even there. "Sorry, it's just that, well, dolphins don't have hands."

Damon glared at him but Frank and Elko both chuckled, while Mark turned to Chris and rolled his eyes.

"You've been very quiet, Pip," Frank said. "What's your take on all this?"

"I, um, I'm still having trouble deciding whose side we're supposed to be on. I mean, this reincarnated king doesn't sound like the kind of guy I'd want to be bringing back to life, but weren't we trying to *save* Mark and Lorina?"

"Would you rather I told you to kill them?" Frank asked.

"No, of course not. I don't want to kill anyone."

"Nor do I," Elko said, "but sometimes there are hard choices and people will die no matter what we do." He glanced at Bobby and Hilda. "You must follow your heart, Pip, and do what you think is right, for in that only you can decide."

"So what would you have us do?" Mark asked.

"Follow Frank and find his lost Barefooters. They're still alive, I believe, and so can aid you in ways we cannot."

* * *

"I had great difficulty finding this place," Elko said as he led them deeper into the city. "I eventually found it, more by good fortune than good management, although it took me some time to realise its significance."

All around them, fallen masonry littered the streets as the buildings continued to crumble. Since Mark's encounter with Morgoth, they'd seen no-one else about, but Pip had an uneasy feeling, as if he was being watched by unseen eyes.

They crossed the road and entered a tavern called *The Barefooters' Retreat*.

"I'd have thought the name of this place would've given it away," Mark said.

"In hindsight, yes, but at the time I didn't know what I was looking for, only that there was an exit from the city leading somewhere other than back into Sheol."

The tavern, like the rest of the city, was deserted, although it seemed to have escaped damage. The tables were covered in dust, but there were half-drained glasses on many of them, as if those drinking here had left in a hurry.

To the right of the bar were three doors, the first two featuring silhouettes of a man and a woman and thus of fairly obvious purpose. The sign on the third, though, showed two bare footprints.

"I asked the bartender what the third door was for," Elko said. "He told me it had always been locked and no-one knew where the key was. He said it might have been a storeroom or something, but he had no idea. I came here often and sat staring at that door, trying to figure out what might lie behind it, but it wasn't until a few months ago, when Bobby won the divot championship for the fourth time in succession, that I discovered the truth."

"Morgoth presented me with what he called the key to the city," Bobby said, pulling a blue velvet box from his pocket. "When I showed it to Elko he dragged me down here and tried it in the lock. It fitted."

Bobby removed the key from the box and unlocked the door, revealing a flight of stairs going down into the basement.

"You can imagine my disappointment when I came down here and found only dusty kegs and wine racks," Elko said as they reached the bottom. He picked up a bottle of wine, revealing the same footprint insignia on the label. "I thought all I'd found was the premises of some ancient wine club, until I saw that."

He pointed across at the far wall, where a black frame surrounded a vertical metal plate about two metres high and half a metre across.

"What is it?" Chris asked.

"I think it's another portal," Clem said, walking up to it and studying it in detail.

“That’s what I thought too, but I could find no way of activating it,” Elko said. “That was, until I found this.”

He pulled aside the mat from in front of it, revealing a small round hole in the floor.

“I know what that is!” Clem said, removing his black dolphin amulet from around his neck. Elko smiled as Clem pressed its head into the hole, causing a dull shimmering light to appear across the panel.

“That’s why we needed Clem here,” Elko said.

“Well done!” Frank said. “I take it this is the path to the lost Barefooters.”

“The path to the truth,” Clem said.

“None of you are under any obligation to follow me through,” Frank said.

“I can’t speak for the others,” Damon said, “but you couldn’t keep me out if you tried.”

“Nor I,” Mark said, grinning for the first time since his clash with Morgoth.

“I guess Pip and I will have to follow to keep you two out of trouble,” Chris said.

“Indeed,” Elko said, casting a glance at Frank who nodded. “I don’t know how much of this place will be left by the time you return, or even if we’ll still be here, but thank you again for coming, and I wish you safe travelling and a satisfactory outcome to your quests.”

“Thank you for all your help,” Frank said, shaking Elko’s hand. “And thank you too, Pedro, for rescuing Clem and me from that accursed bridge.”

“Any time,” Pedro said, hitching up his shorts which were sliding off him again.

“Good luck,” Jim said, “and say hello to Peter for me when you get home.”

“I will,” Mark said.

Chris turned to face Bobby. For a moment they looked at each other, before both stepping forward and embracing.

“You go with my blessing, Chris,” Bobby said. “Take good care of yourself, and of Mark, and, and do me one last favour, would you?”

“Of course, Granddad.”

“Please, don’t say anything about meeting me to your grandmother.”

Chris looked puzzled for a moment, but then nodded.

“I love you, Chris,” Bobby said before stepping back to Hilda’s side.

“I love you too, always.”

Frank looked around at his five companions. “If everyone’s ready, follow me.”

With Clem at the tail to pull his amulet through after him, they each passed into the light and disappeared. Moments later it became just a dull metal plate once more.

The Lost Barefooters

Pip blinked from the glare of bright sunshine as he stepped out into the forest. Clem followed closely behind, putting his amulet back around his neck, while the portal, which for a moment had been visible as a shimmering rectangle of light, disappeared with a plop.

From the richness of the colours surrounding him, and from the smells, Pip knew he was back in the real world. A bird chirped overhead, answered by another further down the valley, and he smiled to himself in the pure joy of living once more.

“Is everyone okay?” Frank asked.

Clem flexed his hand, then removed the piece of Frank’s shirt that was still binding it. “Hey, the cut on my palm’s gone!”

“Excellent! It’s good to know any injuries we sustain in Sheol don’t affect our real bodies.”

“That may be true of physical injuries,” Damon said, “but our spirits can still be hurt or destroyed in there.”

“I know,” Frank said. “I expect I’ll never get over my fear of bridges.”

Underfoot, the dusty track felt delightful on Pip’s soles. It was seldom used by the look of it, with two irregular wheel ruts separated by a hump of straggly grass. Dotted here and there on either side were pink and yellow flowers, waving on stalks above patches of dark green foliage. He took a deep breath and smiled again.

Yet in spite of all the beauty and serenity surrounding him, he felt an undercurrent of melancholy that reminded him of the old people’s home where his mother had once worked. Brightly coloured rooms, jolly staff and outwardly happy residents; yet behind all that a feeling of hopelessness, a knowledge that this was the last stop before the Great Unknown. He’d just had a taste of that Unknown, and supposed

he should be glad there was definitely an afterlife, but from what he'd seen of Sheol and the City of Towers, he wasn't entirely sure it was a good thing.

He looked up and saw the others were well ahead of him. *'No matter,'* he thought, *'we'll all end up at the same place eventually.'* As he watched, though, Chris slowed and dropped back, until a minute or two later he'd drawn level with him. They glanced at each other, exchanging a wordless understanding.

"I, um, I'm sorry about your grandfather," Pip said. "It must've been hard for you to have seen him, only to then have to say goodbye to him again."

"Yes, but I'm glad, too. He died suddenly in a car accident while we were attending my great-grandfather's funeral, and, well, I never had the chance to say goodbye then. At least seeing him again gave me that opportunity."

"I never knew my grandparents," Pip said. "They were killed in the bombing of Horwith before I was born. My parents would've been killed, too, except Dad had volunteered to help with the maintenance of the Barefooters' spacecraft in Azarath, and both he and Mum were there when the neutron bombs fell. It was pretty ironic, I suppose, that I was here to see Morgoth finally destroyed."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Empty, just empty. There's been too much death already, and I fear there's only more to come."

"Yeah." Chris paused, slowing his pace a little. "I liked what you said back there, when Frank asked for your impressions. You put into words a lot of what I was feeling."

"Thanks, Chris. I don't know what to believe any more, and I just want all this fighting and lying to stop."

"I killed a man once," Chris said. "Everyone said I was the hero, because he was one of Morgoth's men and had been responsible for the Meridian massacre, but I sure didn't feel like one. That was eight years ago, but I still have nightmares about it. I don't, I don't think you ever get over something like that."

Pip stopped walking, and when Chris turned to face him, he placed his hand on his shoulder. "What Elko said is true; people die no

matter what we do, and the best we can hope is to do what we think is right at the time.”

“I, I guess so,” Chris said, now with tears running down his face. “Thanks, Pip. You know, you’re the first one I’ve ever been able to talk about it with. I’m sure, I’m sure everyone else would call me a sook.”

“You’d be surprised, I think. Come on, we’d better catch up with the others.” He wrapped his arm around Chris’s shoulder, pulling him forward.

Pip and Chris rejoined the others at a vantage point overlooking the valley below. A short way ahead, the watercourse their track had been following joined a broader stream, and nestled on its bank about a kilometre further on stood a village. Houses of stone and thatched roofing lay clustered in a semi-orderly fashion around a central square, with curls of smoke rising from chimneys here and there. In the square itself, marquees flapped gently in the breeze, and Pip could just make out a few people wandering in and out of what he thought must be market stalls.

Fenced-off fields extended further up the valley, with animals that could be either horses or cattle enclosed within. Elsewhere he could see grain crops, along with other planted areas that may have been vegetables and fruit trees. Animal sounds and indistinct voices occasionally drifted on the breeze as it blew in gently from a distant sea.

“The lost Barefooters, do you think?” Damon asked Frank, but before he could answer, an extremely old man stepped out of the trees in front of them. He was tall, close on two metres Pip reckoned, with tanned skin and a few tufts of pure white hair. The only clothing he wore was a simple loin cloth tied around his waist.

“You may come no further,” he said in a voice that was strong and full of authority. “Visitors are not welcome here.”

“You’re, no you couldn’t be,” Frank said. “Herbert Douglass?”

“That’s my name, yes.”

“I’m Frank Halliday, one of your descendants.”

“Come forward,” the old man said, before placing a hand on Frank’s shoulder and closing his eyes for a few moments. “You speak

the truth, although your heritage is much diminished. Who are your companions?"

"This is Mark Collins," Frank said, waving him forward. "He's genetically the son of Gallad and Marinda."

"Impossible," Herbert said, reaching out and placing his hand on Mark's shoulder. "But nonetheless true. What trickery is this?"

"It's no trickery, I assure you," Frank said. "Gallad and his people escaped on the Intrepid and came to a galaxy called the Milky Way, where they established a colony on an uninhabited planet. General Torg found them, though, and in the ensuing battle Gallad fell and his remains were consumed by an underwater vine. Others, including Marinda, fled to a planet named Earth when a nearby star erupted and flooded their world with deadly radiation. She died soon after from its effects, but her heritage was passed down through the people of that planet and ultimately to Mark's mother, Jennifer Simpson.

"Mark's father, Jason Collins, who'd also inherited Barefooter traits from those early settlers, journeyed to the planet where Gallad had died, and slipped into the pool where the vine injected Gallad's DNA into him. Some years later, Jason and Jennifer met, married and conceived Mark, who at seven years of age, returned to Meridian and overthrew Morgoth in the manner prophesied by the Dolphins."

"Is this true?" Herbert asked Mark.

"Yes. Frank reckons my parents and I were specifically bred by the Dolphins to carry out that task."

"Do you now rule in Morgoth's place?"

"No, I immediately stood aside and an elected government was formed."

"My uncle is now Supreme Councillor," Chris piped in.

"And who might you be?"

"Chris Smith. I'm Maleena's son."

"Was her heritage passed down to you in a similar manner? I wouldn't have thought that possible for an Elf."

"No, my mother's still alive. She was frozen in time along with the rest of Meridian, until Mark came along."

"Remarkable. So who are the other Elves you have with you?"

“Damon Enderling and Pip Ingle,” Frank said, waving them forward. “Damon was conceived just prior to the war on Meridian and carries Damien’s essence.”

Herbert stared at him, scratching his head. “Now that is indeed remarkable. Was Sophie Enderling your mother?”

“Yes, she was. Did you know her?”

“We all knew her well. Remarkable, simply remarkable.” Herbert turned his attention to Pip. “So who do you claim to be, was it Peep?”

“It’s Pip, sir, but I’m no-one, really.”

Frank glanced at him, as if to say something, but then turned and looked at Herbert, who nodded.

“Well we can’t all be famous now, can we Pip?”

“I, um, being famous is the last thing I’d want, sir.”

“In that case you’ll be in good company here. Now, who’s the young lad with you?”

“I’m Clem, son of Edwin, and I’m a seeker of truth.”

“Well I don’t think you’ll find many truths here,” Herbert laughed. “Come, all of you, and forgive my earlier rudeness.”

* * *

“I thought it was supposed to be completely dark in here,” Jenny said.

“It is,” Jason said.

“Then how come I can see you?”

“Um, Damon reckons I glow because of my telepathic powers.” He turned to look at her. “You’re glowing too.”

“Am I?” Jenny held her hand up in front of her face. “You’re right! I’m not as bright as you, though.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that!” Jason laughed.

Jenny gave him a puzzled look before realising what she’d said.

“You’ll keep, mister smarty-pants. Now which way do we go?”

Jason clapped his hands and listened to the reverberation. “This way, I think.”

* * *

We lead a very simple life here,” Herbert said as they sat under a marquee, sipping tea with a dozen or so other Barefooters. “About the only technology we have is our plough, and even that relies on animal power.”

“It looks pretty idyllic to me,” Frank said.

“How long have you been here?” Chris asked.

“We came a million years ago, when Morgoth gave us no choice but to go into exile. Do you know about the War of the Barefooters?”

“I’ve studied some of it. But why are you still here? Morgoth’s been dead for nearly twenty years.”

“It’s not Morgoth we fear, but ourselves.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The explanation is simple enough if you study our history. For five thousand years, a council of Barefooters ruled the galaxy, led by a man named Thornton who grew more and more corrupted by power with each passing century. Morgoth and his friends overthrew him, only to fall victim to that same lust for power. We’re the offspring of genetically engineered soldiers, Chris, and it’s in our nature. I was really quite surprised that Mark turned down the chance to take Morgoth’s place.”

“I have Chris and his father to thank for that,” Mark said. “But for them, I’d probably be there now, sitting on that awful throne.”

“Do you ever wish you were?”

“To be honest, no. I’m probably too sensitive and naïve to be involved in any sort of politics.”

“And yet you’re a full-blooded Barefooter, aren’t you?”

“I was, but the subspace pulse that killed Morgoth also destroyed my own Barefooter DNA.”

Herbert looked puzzled. “When I touched you, I felt your essence very strongly.”

“The fractal elements in Mark’s genes were destroyed,” Frank said, “but I think there’s a lot more to being a Barefooter than just those.”

“You’re right,” another of the Barefooters said. “I was a microbiologist on Cornipus before we came here, and we reached that conclusion long ago.”

“So, um, does this mean I’m going to live for a million years?” Mark asked.

“No, you’re lucky in that respect. It’s definitely one of the fractal elements that turns off the aging process in us.”

“What do you mean he’s lucky?” Pip asked.

“Only the mortal crave immortality, young Elf,” Herbert said. “When you’re as old as we are, you crave death more than anything.”

“Can’t you, um, just top yourselves?”

“It isn’t that easy, believe me!” another Barefooter said. “Many have tried, and a few have succeeded, but our self-preservation instinct is awfully strong.”

“Old age is finally upon us, though,” Herbert said. “Already more than half those who accompanied us have passed on, and the rest won’t have too many more centuries to endure.”

“Are there no young Barefooters here?” Chris asked.

All the Barefooters turned to look at him with deep scowls on their faces.

“We’ve brought only misery and despair to the universe,” Herbert said. “When we came here we made a pact not to produce any children, and that has been upheld, rigorously.”

“Any babies accidentally conceived were drowned at birth,” another said.

“Gosh,” Pip said, then blushed and covered his face.

“For the same reason, none must leave here,” Herbert said. “The portal we came through was one-way.”

Frank turned pale. “We came here through your portal.”

“I was wondering how you got here,” the Cornipean microbiologist said. “Unless the laws of physics have changed dramatically in the last million years, this galaxy is way outside the range of any star ship. Well, um, I hope you like our food.”

“Speaking of food,” Herbert said, “you’re welcome to join us for our meal, and then perhaps there’s someone you might be interested in meeting.”

“Who?” Frank asked.

“All in good time.”

* * *

“We’re going downhill,” Jenny said.

“Yes, that means we’re on the right track,” Jason said. “The walls start to narrow down, and I think there might be things behind them, nasty things, so don’t touch them, okay?”

“Aye, aye, captain.”

“I’m being serious, honey.”

“I know, but in a place like this, it’s either make jokes or go crazy.”

“You’re right, and I’m glad you came with me.”

Jenny jumped as a slurping sound came from behind them, squeezing Jason’s hand even tighter. “What was that?”

“One of the critters behind the walls, I think. That means we’re almost there.”

Soon the air around them began glowing with a greyish light. Jason pulled her forward, sprinting out onto the slope overlooking the river, but as soon as the mist cleared, he pulled up short and gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Jenny asked.

“This place, it looks like a bomb’s hit it.”

The once lush green grass of the slope was now blackened and burnt, while on the other side of the river, many of the towers were listing dangerously or had toppled over altogether. A grinding, tearing sound drifted across to them as another of the towers collapsed in a cloud of dust.

Jenny glanced further down along the river. “It looks like your bridge is out too.”

Jason moaned as he took in the submerged pieces of twisted metal that had once been the silver bridge. “We’ll need to find another way across, then,” he said, leading her down to the bank.

“What’s that?” Jenny asked.

“It looks like an old sign,” Jason said as he picked up the rusty piece of metal from amongst the burnt grass.

Jenny squinted at it. “It’s in that Elvish script, I think. Can you read it?”

“Um, *River Styx Crossing Closed for Repair.*”

“Truly?”

“Yeah.”

“Hah, that’s a laugh.”

“Wait, there’s more. *Ring bell to summon ferryman.*”

Jenny hunted round on the bank and picked up a large bronze bell.

“Is this it?”

“Must be, I suppose.”

“Shall I?”

“Why not? I can’t see any other way of getting across.”

The bell had an ominous funereal sound to it that seemed to reverberate all around them. Out of the gloom, for it really was quite gloomy now, Jason realised, a boat appeared, looking for all the world like a sinister version of the toy tugboat he’d had in his bathtub as a kid.

“Welcome aboard,” the figure in a black hooded cassock said as he moored the boat against the bank and pushed a gangplank across.

Jason glanced at Jenny, who nodded grimly and stepped forward.

“Hey, wait a minute! You two are still alive, aren’t you?”

“Um, yes, and we’d like to stay that way if at all possible.”

“I can’t take the living across. It’s against regulations.”

“But we have to get into the city,” Jason said, “and the bridge is out.”

The ferryman glanced across at the twisted metal poking up out of the middle of the stream. “Never was much good. Bad for business too, you know.”

His laughter caused Jason’s skin to crawl.

“If you give me something valuable I can make an exception.”

Jason fumbled in his pockets. “All I have is this, the key to the portal we came through.”

“That’ll do nicely,” the ferryman said, snatching it from him.

“Well don’t just stand there, hurry aboard!”

* * *

“I didn’t think much of their food,” Chris said.

“No, it wasn’t very filling,” Mark said.

They'd been given a room in which to freshen up after their meal, which had consisted of little more than a few leaves of lettuce and a slice of stale bread.

"There has to be some way for us to leave," Pip said.

"Not without another portal into Sheol," Frank said, shaking his head. "I was a fool to just rush in here."

"You're not wrong," Mark said.

"Quit it, Mark," Damon said. "I'm getting really tired of your constant whinging."

"Well it wasn't you who got arrested, thrown in prison, then dragged through Sheol to some goddamned city only to have your head cut off the moment you got there!"

"Gentlemen, please," Frank said. "We're supposed to be on the same side, remember."

"Sorry," Mark said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry too," Damon said, offering Mark his hand. "Friends again?"

"Sure."

Chris glanced across at Clem, who looked like he was about to burst into tears. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, it's just that I came here expecting to find the truth about my world and its people, but all that's here is a bunch of self-pitying old men and women who don't know anything."

"Perhaps you just need to ask the right questions," Frank said.

"But what good will it do if we're going to be stuck here for the rest of our lives?"

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll think of something."

At that moment, Herbert knocked on the door and entered. "Are you ready?"

"How far do we have to go?" Pip asked. "My legs aren't very strong."

"It's a fair hike, but mostly downhill. I can carry you if need be."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, but if we could take it slowly, that'll make it easier for me."

"Of course."

“Um, I was wondering,” Chris said, “well, apart from Damon, none of us are autothermic and, um, we probably need a bit more nourishment than you do.”

Herbert slapped his forehead. “I’m so sorry, I just didn’t think. Look, when we get back I’ll prepare you a proper meal.”

“That’d be great! Thank you!”

“Yes, thank you indeed,” Frank said. “Right, shall we go?”

* * *

“Which way now?” Jenny asked as they stood on the far bank. All around them, the former riverside parkland had grown infested with weeds, with a smell of rot and decay filling the air.

“Up through here,” Jason said, guiding her carefully along the broken paving stones towards the laneway looming like a haunted chasm in front of them.

“We have to go in *there*?” Jenny asked.

“Afraid so.”

Above them, the tall buildings seemed to lean inwards, blocking off almost all the gloomy light. Something that sounded like a rat scurried off into the darkness as their bare feet padded across the cobblestones.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, Jason could see two figures ahead of him; street urchins by the look of them, playing cricket with a broken fence paling and an old crate. The bowler, a boy with greasy dark hair and an air of malice that was almost tangible, stopped partway through his run-up and turned to face them. At first he snarled, while Jason raised his hands and began backing away, but his snarl quickly turned into a broad grin.

“I know you! You’re Jason, Billy’s son!”

“I, um, yes, but I’m not sure...”

“I’m Pedro. We met in Sheol a few years ago. Do you remember Jim?”

“Jim Hamilton,” the batsman said, coming forward and shaking his hand. “We met briefly, just before my death. You’re a friend of Norrie, aren’t you?”

Jason was too bewildered to speak.

“We’re looking for some people,” Jenny said. “Our son and his friends.”

“I’m afraid you just missed them,” Pedro said, “but I can show you where they went if you like. Follow me!”

Pedro and Jim led them up the laneway and across a plaza. Jason glanced at the remains of the fountain he’d seen in his dream, then looked at the pile of rubble that was once Morgoth’s golden tower.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“You can thank your son for this,” Pedro said. “From what I’ve heard, Morgoth tried to cut his head off, but it backfired on him and then the whole place just started falling to pieces.”

“Is Mark okay?” Jenny asked.

“He’s fine, stronger than ever I reckon.”

Jason breathed a sigh of relief. “What happened to Morgoth, then?”

“He’s gone to dine with the devils.”

“You mean those things behind the walls on the way in here?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah, but you don’t want to know about them.”

“You’re right,” Jason said, feeling squeamish just from the thought of the slurping sound he’d heard. “I don’t.”

“You’re in luck, the tavern’s still standing,” Pedro said as he led them across the road and into the *Barefooters’ Retreat*. “There’s a portal in the basement they went through, but I don’t know how you’ll activate it. The kid who was with them had a special key or something, but he took it with him.”

Jason stood in front of the metal plate, studying it. He placed his hands on either side and closed his eyes, grimacing in concentration. For a moment nothing happened, but then a dull shimmering light began to appear across its surface.

“That’s some husband you’ve got there,” Pedro whispered to Jenny.

“I wouldn’t trade him for the world.”

Jason opened his eyes and turned his head around. “I think it’s open. Come on, let’s go!” Grabbing hold of Jenny’s hand, he pulled her through and disappeared.

“But...” Jim said, but it was too late.

* * *

“The person I’m taking you to is something of a recluse,” Herbert said as he led them out of the village and further downstream. “He’s also the oldest amongst us, by a long shot. You might say he’s our father figure.”

“He’s not going to be upset by visitors, is he?” Damon asked.

“On the contrary, I’m sure he’ll be delighted to meet you, and you in particular, Damon.”

“Why me?”

“Ah, best if I let him explain, I think.”

They continued on in silence for a while. Underfoot, the track became sandier, while the strengthening breeze took on a distinctly salty smell.

“Are we getting close to the sea?” Pip asked.

“It’s still a few kilometres away,” Herbert said. “How are your legs holding up?”

“Not too bad, so far.”

“That’s good. His house is just over the next rise.”

House was probably too strong a description, Pip thought, for it looked more like a tumble-down fisherman’s shanty. Made from roughly sawn timbers and driftwood, from the outside it appeared to consist of only one room. Smoke rose from a mud-brick chimney in the corner, while on the other side, chickens pecked at the ground inside a pen made of prickly bushes.

An elderly man stepped out to greet them, though Pip thought he didn’t look anywhere near as old as the rest of the Barefooters. While tall and deeply tanned like the others, his hair was full and mostly grey, with just a trace of white growing through it. His bright eyes and inquisitive grin gave him an almost boyish look.

“I’d like you to meet Frank, Mark, Chris, Damon, Pip and Clem,” Herbert said as he introduced each of his guests. “Gentlemen, this is Damien.”

Chris gasped, causing Damien to grin even more. “You can’t be, surely. Isn’t, um, isn’t Damon now you?”

Damien turned to face Damon, his grin faltering into a look of sadness and loss. “Was Sophie Enderling your mother?”

“Yes, but...”

Damien raised his hands, gently silencing him. “I don’t know quite how to say this, but I’m, well, I’m your father.”

Fishing for Answers

“What a lovely place,” Jenny said as they walked down the track towards the village. “It reminds me of that farm your grandfather had out near Narrabri.”

“Yeah, it does,” Jason said, but his thoughts had turned inward, back to those hazy summer days when he and his mates would go running all over the farm, inevitably ending up in the creek that ran along the back. Those were simpler days, for sure, and he wondered just where his life had run off the rails.

“Kind of melancholy, though,” she said, perhaps reading his thoughts, “as if time left it behind long ago.”

“Speaking of Granddad’s farm, I wonder if Kevin’s marauders have got their grubby little hands on it yet.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. The way things are going, there won’t be much left for us by the time we get back.”

“Once we find Mark we should try to get to Bluehaven and talk to Lorina and Owen.”

“Hmm, how do you think those two will react when Mark turns up alive and well?”

“Let’s not count our chickens before they’ve hatched. Until I actually have my arms around Mark, I’m not taking anything for granted.”

As if on cue, an elderly man stepped out of the trees in front of them. “What is this, a bloody invasion?”

“We must be on the right track, then,” Jenny said. “We’re Mark Collins’ parents.”

“Yes, I met your son earlier. Now if you don’t mind, I need to place my hand on each of your shoulders. It’s just a formality, but we have certain rules about who we let into the village.”

“By all means,” Jason said.

The old man stepped forward and did his thing, his expression impassive and unreadable. Jason sensed something brushing against his mind, but nothing too alarming, and a moment later it was gone.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the man said, “but your presence has put me in a somewhat awkward position. You’re both half-blooded Barefooters, are you not?”

“Well, yes,” Jason said.

“In that case I must place you under arrest and bring you before our disciplinary committee.”

“You’re joking, surely,” Jenny said.

“I’m sorry, but no. Allowing either of you to walk free would violate our Barefooter non-proliferation laws.”

Jason groaned, shaking his head in disbelief and wondering yet again just where his life had run off the rails.

* * *

“Your mother and I worked together in a refugee camp on Meridian in the months leading up to the war,” Damien said, as he led Damon and his companions down to the beach. “We became good friends, but there was never any romantic intent from either of us. Sophie was happily married with a young daughter, while I had, um, based my life on a doctrine of celibacy.

“As I said, we were good friends and often went out bushwalking during our time off. Roderick occasionally came with us too, so there was nothing underhanded or secretive about our friendship.

“All was well until one day a packed refugee ship made a rough landing, injuring many on board. Sophie and I, along with the rest of our team, worked non-stop for three days, treating their injuries and trying to make them comfortable. When the relief crew finally arrived, we all went to a nearby inn for a few drinks and then, being too tired to go home, bunked down for the night in their rooms. Sophie and I shared a bed, more out of necessity than choice, and, well, we were exhausted and drunk and, um, things just happened that really shouldn’t have.

“The next morning we promised not to tell anyone, and a few days later Sophie and Roderick were transferred to another town. I only

ever saw her again once, and that was only days before the time freeze. She was quite obviously pregnant, and we had little doubt the baby was mine, but Roderick had been quite happy to claim the credit and again we vowed to keep it our secret.”

Damon stopped walking, and as soon as Damien noticed he turned back and faced him. “I’m sorry, but when I saw you just now I really couldn’t keep the secret bottled up inside me any longer.”

“No, it’s okay, really,” Damon struggled to say, fighting back the tears that were forming in his eyes. He wavered for a moment, before reaching out and wrapping his arms around his father, tears flowing freely on both sides.

“Thanks Damien, I mean Dad,” Damon finally managed to say as they separated again. “I mean it; it explains so much about me I’ve never understood. I just wish, no, I, um, I really don’t wish for anything now.”

“There’s one more thing,” Damien said, wiping away his tears. “Soon after I fled into Sheol, Meridian was placed in the time freeze and the spirits of its population came roaming through that realm, lost in their never-ending dreams. I sought out your mother, and you, the unborn baby in her womb. I, I just couldn’t resist, I had to touch you and pass a little of my essence into you, in the hope I suppose that you’d know something of who I was and why I’d done what I did.”

“Yes, of course, it all makes sense now,” Damon said. They embraced again, while the others stepped away and let them be.

At last they reached the ocean. Pip thought his legs were about to drop off, and was one of the first to flop onto the sand. Along the beach stood an array of fishing poles, and Damien began checking each one, retrieving his catch for the day.

“It looks like you came at the right time; I have just enough fish for each of you.”

“I guess that lets me off the hook, then,” Herbert said. “I promised our guests I’d cook them a proper meal when we got back.”

“Your chance will come soon enough, no doubt.”

“Have you always been a fisherman, Dad?” Damon asked.

“Yes, pretty much all my life. Back when I was a kid on Bluehaven, Lorna and I practically spent our entire time in the water, catching fish for the settlers.”

“Just about every school kid knows that. I meant afterwards.”

“I didn’t really have much time for fishing during my working life, and it’s really only since we came here that I’ve taken it up again. There’s some good eating fish in these waters, too. Just wait till tonight!”

“Old Damien’s a pretty good cook,” Herbert piped in. “Puts the rest of us to shame.”

Pip thought Mark was about to make some facetious comment, but he didn’t.

“So just what else do you do here?” Damon asked.

“Not much, really. A lot of thinking, I suppose. I think a lot about you and your mother, of course, wondering what had become of you and whether the time freeze on Meridian would ever end. Of course the Dolphins had their prophecy about some grubby kid from a distant world coming and bumping off Morgoth – no offence, Mark.”

“None taken.”

“Anyway, they had their prophecy, but there’ve been plenty of prophecies over the eons and most fail to eventuate, so I really didn’t know what would ultimately become of you. Of course here we’re totally cut off and have no way of knowing what’s going on in the outside world.”

Clem was becoming increasingly fidgety, and when Damien paused for a moment he shot his hand up. Pip wondered if he was going to ask for permission to go to the bathroom, but he didn’t.

“Um, excuse me, but you were talking about prophecies and I was wondering if you know anything about the people of Huntress and the legend of the Fisherman.”

“Funny you should mention that. I spent quite some time amongst the fringe-dwellers of Huntress in my early days, and heard several variations on the Fisherman legend. There was talk of an ancient people whose king was the spirit behind the collective mind of the Dolphins, and some said the Fisherman would be that king reborn, while others claimed the Fisherman would be merely paving the way

for the return of the king. I'm not sure how much credence I'd place in any of it."

Clem looked crestfallen, but Damien continued. "That world does have an unusual history, though. They reckon its sun was once just an ordinary main-sequence star, but one day it suddenly dimmed, and then the planet stopped spinning and dropped into a lower orbit."

"I have a theory about that," Frank said.

"Please tell."

"I happened to be on the opposite side of the fold to Huntress a few months ago and observed a bright star exactly opposite to where that world's sun would be, only it had zero mass."

"You're joking," Damon said.

"No, its mass was zero right down to the last decimal place. Then in my most recent visit to Huntress, as we were coming out of orbit, the sun was eclipsed by the ship's wingtip and I observed a black region surrounding it out to about four or five solar diameters, with a bright corona beyond that."

"So what's your theory?" Damien asked.

"I reckon there's a subspace shell around that star, diverting much of its energy to the other side of the fold."

Damien nodded. "I've seen such things before. They're called star-dimmers, and were used as a form of climate control. Some of the stars back home have them fitted, I believe, but I don't think they've ever been used."

"The dimming of the stars," Pip whispered.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing, just something I heard somewhere."

"So do you think one of those star-dimmers might have gone out of control on Huntress?" Frank asked.

"It all makes sense," Damien said. "I suppose the sudden drop in radiation pressure would cause the outer corona to collapse and then rebound out, filling the inner orbits with gas and dust for a while until it settled down again."

"Enough to put the brakes on the planet's spinning and orbital motion?"

"Quite possibly, especially if it happened over a period of many years."

“Is there any way of undoing it?” Clem asked.

“It’d be difficult,” Damien said, “but I suppose you could spin the planet back up using subspace boosters around the equator. It might take a few years, five or even ten perhaps, but once you have its orbit and spin back where you want it, you turn off the star-dimmer and you’re back in business. I wouldn’t mind giving it a try if I could ever leave here.”

Clem was bursting with excitement, but before he could ask any more questions, another Barefooter came running towards them. “Damien,” he puffed, “you’re wanted back in the village. Two half-blooded Barefooters have turned up, and they’ve been charged under the non-proliferation laws.”

“Half-bloods?” Mark asked. “They’re not my parents, are they?”

“Yes, I believe they are.”

“What are they doing here?”

“Looking for you, I expect,” Frank said.

“Well I’d best go and see what can be done with them,” Damien said.

Pip turned back towards the beach. A line of fishing poles spread along the shore, and Damien was a fisherman. Could he be *the* Fisherman? His mind racing, he turned back to the others to say something, but they were already well ahead of him and out of earshot. Sighing to himself, he began trudging back up through the sand.

* * *

“I understand your concern for the welfare of your son,” the Barefooter calling himself the Proctor said, “but you must understand we have strict laws here prohibiting the creation of any new Barefooters. Your mere presence violates that law, and I’m afraid the penalty is death.”

“But we need your help!” Jenny cried. “The Supreme Councillor from Meridian is attacking our world, and we need to get to Bluehaven to speak with the High Priestess.”

“Is this Supreme Councillor a Barefooter?”

“No, he was consort to the High Priestess, before Lorina became High Priestess and Mark stepped into that role. He’s just gone mad with power and wants to take over our galaxy as well.”

“May I address the court?” Frank asked, standing and walking forward.

“This is most irregular,” the Proctor said, “but yes, go ahead.”

“For my entire working life I’ve studied the history of the Barefooters, and I’ve viewed the recordings made of your final meetings with Gallad on Meridian. I know about your predisposition to becoming psychopaths, but I also believe that trait was passed into the Delphinidae through Martyn and Loria’s daughter. If what Jason and Jenny have told us is true, I think Kevin is acting out your own worst fears of another psychopathic dictator.”

The assembly of Barefooters began murmuring amongst themselves.

“Frank’s right,” Jason said. “Kevin, or those behind him, had Mark falsely accused of murdering a baby Dolphin, and tried to have him killed because he was seen as a threat to their plans. It’s Morgoth all over again, only with a Delphinidae instead of a Barefooter at the helm.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” the Proctor said. “The portal into this world is one way.”

“Can’t we create another portal,” Frank asked, “a portal directly into Sheol?”

“We don’t have any of that technology here.”

“There are other ways of creating portals,” Damien said.

“Chris once opened a portal into Sheol just by thought power,” Mark said.

“And who invited you to speak?” the Proctor said, scowling at him.

“Sorry, but you can’t just kill my parents in cold blood and turn your collective backs on what’s happening out there!”

“Enough!” the Proctor yelled. “I will confer in private with Damien and Herbert. In the meantime, I want the prisoners and our visitors locked up and secured.”

“Can you really create a portal just by thinking about it?” Pip asked Chris as they sat on the floor of the locked room, their legs bound with heavy ropes.

“I did once, a long time ago, but I don’t remember how.”

“Perhaps, if the time comes to go down that path, I could probe your mind,” Damon said.

“Whatever,” Chris said, a sullen expression on his face.

“What’s wrong, Chris?” Mark asked.

“Nothing you’d understand.” He glanced for a moment at Pip.

“I think he would, Chris,” Pip said. “I think we all would.”

“All right.” Chris squirmed around, trying to make himself more comfortable on the hard floor. “I created that portal the time we went to confront Farley, and I, and I killed him in cold blood. I’m a murderer, and I don’t know how much longer I can live with myself over that.”

“Oh Chris,” Jenny said, trying to stretch over and hug him but not quite reaching him. “You were trying to save Mark and Lorina, and if you hadn’t pushed him through into that other time line, who knows what would have happened?”

“That’s what’s so wrong about it!” Chris cried. “Anything, anything at all, might have happened. Jason might have overpowered him, and then he would’ve been arrested and tried in the proper manner. I didn’t have to kill him, and I think it’s because I killed him that all this stuff’s been happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we took off from the collapsed palace, there was a man on the ground, a soldier, standing with his hands raised in surrender, and I’m sure he saw me looking at him out the window. I’ve seen him again, just recently, in the recordings I was watching of Kevin’s political speeches. I think he’s one of his aides or something.”

“I think I know who you mean,” Jason said. “There’s a man named Hoskins who suggested to Owen that the dead dolphin may have been flipped onto your bed from Eden.”

“Hoskins is Kevin’s personal assistant,” Frank said. “He’s a bit of a snake if you ask me, and I’m sure he listens at doors.”

“Lorina and Owen were going to look into his background,” Jason said, “but I haven’t heard back from them since.”

“They might be in grave danger then,” Jenny said.

“All the more reason to get to Bluehaven, and with as many of these clapped-out Barefooters as we can muster.”

The door opened and eight Barefooters entered the room, followed by the Proctor.

“Unbind them and bring them out,” he said.

Their ropes removed, the eight prisoners were escorted from their cell and back into the community hall now doubling as a courthouse.

“As Mr Halliday so kindly pointed out,” the Proctor began, “we Barefooters have within us a genetic predisposition to psychopathic behaviour, and given the right circumstances, we will ultimately succumb to the lust for power. As much as we might protest, it’s in our biological makeup and there’s nothing we can do about it. The only exception here is Damien, who received his powers directly from the Dolphins rather than through the genetically modified virus that created the rest of us.

“There are two amongst the six visitors who arrived this morning that can claim Barefooter heritage. Frank Halliday is a descendant of the esteemed Herbert Douglass, however his heritage has been diluted over many generations of cross-breeding with the general population of Cornipus, and he poses no threat.

“Mark Collins was by birth a full-blooded Barefooter, but in his confrontation with Morgoth, the fractal molecules making up part of his Barefooter heritage were utterly destroyed. The psychopathic trait is attached to one such molecule, and so he also poses no threat.

“Our two latest arrivals, Jason and Jennifer Collins, though, are half-blooded Barefooters. Some traits they have in common, such as autothermia, while others, including the anti-aging component, they both lack. In between are traits carried by one or the other, but not both, and the psychopathic element is amongst that latter group. Jennifer, you do not carry that trait, and so are acquitted.

“That leaves us with Jason. In probing your mind this afternoon, a memory was touched relating to an incident with a woman named Rebecca Gosling. Would you please tell the court what transpired.”

“That was a long time ago,” Jason said, “and in a time line other than this. A group of people, agents of Morgoth as it later turned out,

had attempted to alter the course of history and in doing so, infiltrated every government on Earth. Overseeing the operation was Rebecca Gosling, formerly the Science minister in the Australian government and then the self-proclaimed Empress. My associates and I, with the aid of a descendant of Gallad's Barefooters, crossed over into that time line with the aim of killing her and thus bringing it to an end. Our objective was achieved, however in doing so I became consumed by a lust for power and tried to take her place as Emperor of Earth. Fortunately for everyone, one of my associates destroyed the orb that was maintaining the time line, and it ended before I could do any damage."

"Thank you for your honesty," the Proctor said. "There can be no doubt that you carry our psychopathic legacy, and the only question now is what to do with you. By our law, which prohibits the proliferation of our race, your very existence on this world demands the death penalty, and I have no choice but to so find."

Jenny sat heavily, covering her face with her hands, while Mark was instantly at her side with his arms around her.

"You can't do this!" Clem cried. "Mark's father is a good man who wouldn't hurt anyone!"

"Silence! But for your age, I'd have you charged with contempt of court. If the decision were up to me, I'd have no hesitation in upholding the law, for our book of laws is the ultimate fabric that holds our community together. However, as much as my genes may want me to be, I'm not a psychopathic dictator here, and my co-adjudicators, Damien and Herbert, for whom I have the utmost respect, argued strongly for clemency in this case.

"Therefore it is my judgement that your sentence be suspended, subject to the condition that you be rendered sexually impotent by surgical means. Doctor Ellis, our resident surgeon, has indicated his willingness to perform the procedure. Do you accept this judgement and its condition?"

Jason glanced at Jenny for a moment before turning back to the Proctor. "I do, and thank you for your clemency."

"So be it," the Proctor said. "I declare this matter closed."

* * *

“It didn’t hurt a bit,” Jason said as he stepped back outside to join the others, although Jenny thought his dark complexion was a little paler than usual.

“I guess there’ll be no brothers or sisters for me now,” Mark said.

“There were never likely to be anyway,” Jenny said. “One junior Barefooter in the house was headache enough for us.”

She wrapped her husband in a hug, smothering him with kisses. “You’re still my man, no matter what they’ve done to you.”

At that moment, Jason just wished everyone would stop staring at him.

“So you reckon Chris can create a portal into Sheol,” Damien said, sensing his discomfort and changing the subject.

“He did it once,” Mark said, “so I don’t see why he shouldn’t be able to do it again.”

Jason furrowed his brow. “There might be a small problem.”

“Yes?”

“A portal into Sheol must open onto both sides of the subspace fold. It’s a theorem proved by my mentor, Peter Thorpe. If there’s nothing on the other side of the fold but empty space, that could prove to be a tad uncomfortable.”

“I dare say you’re right,” Damien said, “but those who chose this planet must’ve had such things in mind. There’s a twin planet on the opposite side of the fold to this one.”

“Is there really?”

“It’s not too habitable, and the fishing’s lousy, but it’s good enough for the second or two of exposure we’re likely to get.”

“That reminds me,” Pip said. “When you were talking yesterday about maybe fixing up Huntress, I was wondering if you might actually be the Fisherman from their legend.”

Damien stared into space for a few moments while Clem could barely contain his excitement. “Yeah, it’s possible I suppose, I could be, if that’s how things turn out, but I don’t put much faith in prophecies, as I think I said yesterday.”

“Woo-hoo!” Clem yelled.

“Settle down,” Frank said, ruffling the boy’s hair. “We have a long way to go yet before any of that’s likely to happen.”

“I expect we’re going to meet a fair bit of opposition once we arrive on Bluehaven,” Jason said. “How many of the Barefooters have volunteered to come?”

“Well, none actually,” Damien said.

“What? Why not?”

“Oh, the usual excuses. *‘It’s too far’*, *‘it’s not our war’*, *‘we mustn’t interfere’*, *‘we’re too old’*, or the best one yet, *‘I’ll miss the Thursday night bingo’*.”

“This is ridiculous,” Mark said, turning towards the Barefooters who were sitting under one of the marquees sipping tea.

“Just what is it with you lot?” he said, raising his voice. “You’ve just neutered my father, on pain of death, because his mere existence posed such a grave threat to your *status quo*, while on the other side of the universe we have some pumped-up madman raining death and destruction on my home world because a million years ago one of your number decided to have a fling with the High Priestess’s daughter and infected the whole of the Delphinidae with your goddamned psychopathic gene!

“I’ve been falsely accused of murder, had my marriage dissolved, and been thrown into your prison colony on Huntress where I was bashed senseless and left for dead. Do you think I’m just going to stand back and let that madman take over my home? No, of course not, I’m going to fight back in whatever way I can.

“But I can’t do it alone. I lost my Barefooter powers when I was seven years old, getting rid of the monster you walked away from a million years ago, but even if I hadn’t, fighting a war single-handed is no mean feat. I need allies, powerful allies, people who are prepared to stand up for what’s right and do their bit, or die trying.

“Young Clem, who came here seeking the truth about his home world and its people, described you as a bunch of self-pitying old men and women, and he’s so right. Look at you! You sit around here drinking tea, eating lettuce leaves and babbling on about how wonderfully idyllic your lifestyle is. The dead guys in that City of Towers we came through are a thousand times more alive than you lot!

“I’m glad much of my Barefooter heritage was destroyed by that subspace pulse, and I wish the rest had been too. Do you know why?

Because, if you lot are what it means to be a Barefooter, I'd be ashamed to ever show my feet in public."

The Proctor stood and clapped three times. "Well said, young Mark. You certainly have fire in your belly, I'll grant you that, but think for a moment about what you're doing. Even if you were to pull off a most unlikely victory against your opponent, who I'm sure has an enormous well-oiled military force at his disposal, before the ink's even dry in the history books, someone else will come along, calling themselves Supreme Councillor or Supreme Ruler or whatever, and you'll be right back where you started again. We know, we've seen it happen so many times before, and it'll keep on happening until someone finally figures out a way of wiping humanity from the face of the universe. Our galaxy, and I dare say yours as well, never learns from its mistakes, it just goes right on repeating them generation after generation, and you can huff and puff as loud as you want, but at the end of the day you're not going to make one iota of difference.

"Go home, Mark, and find some quiet little spot away from the fighting and let those who think they have to keep killing each other, do so until there's nothing left but blood and dust for the next lot of zealots to trample into the ground. You cannot win this war, Mark, and never will."

Mark stood firm, hands on hips, shaking his head and silently fuming.

"Come on, Mark," Chris said. "It's no use; they're just a bunch of clapped-out nobodies gone way past their use-by dates."

Mark turned and walked away.

"Wait," a voice called, and he turned to see Herbert Douglass stepping out from under the marquee. "The Proctor is right, for you have little chance of victory against the might of the galaxy's forces; they were formidable enough a million years ago, and I'm sure Morgoth would not have let them wane. He's also right when he says that even if you were to prevail, sooner or later another ruler drunk with power would arise. This is a war that ultimately you will never win.

"However, I hold a slightly more optimistic view than my learned colleague here. I think I'd be right in saying that, for all his faults,

most of the galaxy's population consider the present ruler to be more desirable than Morgoth. Likewise, when Morgoth overthrew Thornton, there were celebrations in the street, and, at least up until my departure, I never heard anyone calling for the return of their former ruler. Going further back, Thornton himself brought law and order following the centuries of chaos in which the tribal warlords were trying to out-murder each other.

"What I'm saying is, each new dictator, however bad they may seem in hindsight, is considered an improvement on his predecessor, and I see no reason why that trend shouldn't continue. If you win your battle, you'll bring peace for a while, for many generations perhaps, and that in itself is an honourable quest.

"You have accused us of cowardice, self-pity, and of bringing disgrace to the honourable reputation of the Barefooters. When Gallad was preparing to fight his father, it was I who argued against going to war. I believed that lives would be spared if we just walked away into exile, as my colleagues from Cornipus had done. Perhaps that's true, lives may well have been saved.

"But had we done that, Gallad would never have travelled to your galaxy and so you would never have returned to ultimately fulfil his goal. I was wrong to argue for exile, I realise that now, and if it's any consolation, I for one will join with you and fight by your side."

He stepped forward and knelt before Mark. "Had I a sword I would offer it to you, my liege, but for now I offer you only my word."

Mark was dumbfounded. "I, um, of course, please do, thanks."

As Herbert stood, one by one, other Barefooters stepped forward, each kneeling before Mark and offering their service.

"Fools!" the Proctor snarled, before storming out of the marquee with his supporters scurrying along behind him.

"Good speech, Mark," Chris said.

For Death or Glory

“Everybody hold hands,” Chris said. “I’m pretty sure we need to maintain physical contact for this to work.”

He closed his eyes and grimaced in concentration, trying to remember just what he’d done when he’d opened the portal eight years earlier. *‘The day before I became a murderer,’* he thought, then tried to push it out of his mind.

He’d been at Tom Collins’ farm with his parents, celebrating Billy and Peter’s joint birthday. Peter had actually been born the day after Billy, but they’d always had a party that began late on Billy’s birthday and ended in the early hours of Peter’s.

They’d been playing cricket, after having been for a swim in the creek, and it was just after lunch while Peter was batting that he’d suffered a heart attack. Chris had felt something stirring inside him, and had taken hold of Mark’s hand just as a shimmering bubble had formed around them. He concentrated on the memory of that bubble, trying to visualise it and force it into being.

“Nothing’s happening,” Clem whispered.

“Shush,” Frank whispered back, but it was too late, Chris’s concentration had already been broken.

“Do you want me to try to help you?” Damon asked.

“Um, yeah, okay. There was a shimmering bubble that formed around us last time, and I was trying to concentrate on that.”

“Perhaps, but that’s probably more the effect than the cause. I think you need to go deeper, a lot deeper. Here, let me put my hand on your forehead.”

Chris closed his eyes again, feeling Damon’s gentle probing of his mind. Memories flashed into his consciousness, things he’d completely forgotten, like the food he’d eaten that day and the cloud cover that had been getting thicker and more stifling as the afternoon wore on.

Norrie tosses the ball to Tim for the start of the third over. Peter's side, the Dodos, had already scored twenty-six runs off the first two overs, so the game would probably be finished well before afternoon tea.

Peter takes strike as Norrie runs in to bowl, and glides it out towards Mark who cuts it off just before the boundary. Peter and Aaron complete two runs, but Peter's puffing pretty heavily and walks the last few metres back to the crease.

Tim strolls back to his mark, but as he turns to begin his run-up, Peter steps away from the wicket. "I think this heat is starting to get to me," he says, but he doesn't look at all well. "I think I'd better go and..."

"This is what you must do," the voice of the Dolphins echoed in Chris's mind. A pinpoint of pain exploded in the centre of his head, radiating outwards through his scalp and into Damon, who was still touching his forehead, and also through his hands and into Mark and Pip who were standing on either side of him. He felt it go through them and into Jenny and Clem, then to Jason and Frank, and so on until everyone clustered around him was sharing his pain.

The grass beneath his feet disappeared, replaced by a smooth surface that felt like nothing at all. The light coming through his closed eyelids faded, as if a dark cloud had covered the sun, while a rushing noise filled his ears.

Something smelt of bogs and rotting eggs, but then it was gone. Gone too was the light, and when he opened his eyes he at first saw nothing. Gradually, though, as his virtual eyes adjusted to the dark, he began to see the faintly glowing forms of Damon, Jason, Clem and the host of Barefooters.

It was cold, icy cold, like someone had just locked him in the cold-room at the supermarket. He shivered, and would've wrapped his arms around his chest only Mark and Pip were still holding tightly to his hands. Gradually the cold became heat, but without going through cool, lukewarm and warm along the way. It seemed to sneak around the outside, if that was possible.

Just when he thought he'd melt into a puddle and flow down the great cosmic drain in Sheol's floor, the heat faded away into a feeling of nothingness.

"You did it!" Clem shouted, breaking free of Pip and Frank as he leapt in the air.

"Don't let go," Frank said, grabbing hold of him again. "It's too easy to get separated in here."

"Which way do we go?" Mark asked.

Nobody answered.

"Any ideas, Dad?" Damon asked.

"No," Damien said. "This is way beyond any of the parts of Sheol I explored."

"We all went through that City of Towers," Herbert said, "but I'm guessing that's a short cut."

"Maybe we should've gone back that way," Mark said.

"I'm not sure that's possible. The portal we used only worked one way."

"So how did you know where it went?"

"We didn't. The barman in the tavern told us to go through, and we did."

"That was taking a big risk, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so, but we'd been living in that city of the dead for so long, anything was better than just hanging round."

"You didn't go straight through, then?"

"No, we stayed in the city for what must have been thousands of years, although time's very strange in there. Sometimes it stretches, while at other times it compresses right down."

"That's all very interesting," Frank said, "but it's not really getting us any closer to Bluehaven. Thoughts, anyone?"

Silence filled the chamber as the echo of Frank's voice died away, but not for long. A chuckling, throaty and evil, drifted in from what seemed all directions at once.

"Ogres," Mark muttered.

"They sure get around," Pip said, as flickering lights, like burning torches, surrounded them.

“Should we try the pink hair and flatulence thing again?” Chris asked, but before anyone could answer, a husky voice spoke out of the darkness.

“What brings a host of Barefooters into our realm?”

“I do,” Clem said. “I am Clem, son of Edwin and bearer of the black amulet, and we go to honour our pledge.”

“Do you indeed? *In the dimming of the stars shall the truth be found.*”

“And the exiled shall be redeemed.”

“You speak true, Clem son of Edwin. We guide you.”

“Careful, Clem,” Mark said. “It might be a trick.”

“I think it’s okay,” Frank said. “Clem seems to hold some sort of sway over them.”

“Tell them we need to go to Bluehaven first to meet with Owen and Lorina,” Jenny said to Clem.

“Lorina and Owen are now on Huntress with the fringe-dwellers,” the ogre said.

“I told Anton to take them somewhere safe,” Frank said. “What the hell’s he playing at?”

“They’re safe with my people,” Clem said. “Very safe.”

“The boy speaks the truth,” the ogre said. “We take you there now.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Clem,” Frank said as they began following the flaming lights.

The ogres stopped walking.

“This is Huntress portal, but it is closed.”

“Don’t worry,” Clem said, pulling his amulet off again. “I have the key.”

In the light from the ogres’ torches, he could see what appeared to be a metal plate set into the grey wall of Sheol. He inserted his amulet into the matching receptacle at its base, causing the surface of the plate to turn black.

“Shouldn’t it be shimmering?” he asked.

“No, the portals look black from in here,” Damien said. “That’s what makes them so hard to find.”

“We go out now,” the ogre said.

“No, not yet,” Clem said. “Our world was badly damaged and has barely enough food and water to sustain our village. You must give the Fisherman and his people time to start it spinning again and fix the sun.”

“Is this true, Fisherman?”

“Yes, what Clem said is true,” Damien said, “and even if everything goes to plan, it’ll take some years before your world is ready for you to return to.”

“Why should we trust you?”

“You have my word,” Clem said, “and Damien’s.”

“Is not enough. We want hostage to keep here until we can go home.”

“That’s out of the question,” Frank said, but before anyone could react, a hand reached out from behind one of the torches and pulled the amulet from its socket.

“No-one goes through until we have hostage. We take young Elf, one who says he doesn’t fear us, and makes fun of us.”

“I think he means you, Pip,” Chris whispered.

“Yes, one you call Pip. We take him, keep him here until you come back.”

“You must promise not to harm him,” Clem said.

“Now wait just a minute!” Frank said.

“Unless you have a better idea,” Damien said, “I don’t think we have much choice but to go along with them.”

“But they’ll kill him for sure!” Damon said.

“Not if they want to return to their homes.”

“We keep word,” the ogre said. “Not eat Pip.”

“I can’t allow it,” Damon said. “They’re cannibals, why should we trust them?”

“They’ve helped us so far,” Herbert said, “and Damien’s right, we have no other choice.”

“It’s too high a price,” Frank said. “We can find another portal somewhere, can’t we?”

“That’s too dangerous,” Damien said.

“Very dangerous,” the ogre said. “Give us Pip, you be safe.”

“What sort of bargain is that?” Damon asked.

“Pip carries the Black Dolphin’s curse,” Clem said. “He must suffer for us to succeed.”

“Now I’ve heard everything,” Damon shouted. “This is ridiculous!”

“Would you all stop arguing over me like I was a piece of meat?” Pip cried. He took a deep breath as the glowing faces of Damon, Damien, Jason and the Barefooters turned as one towards his voice. “I’ll do as they ask, I’ll be their hostage.”

“Don’t be stupid, Pip,” Damon said, breaking the stunned silence that followed.

“I’m not. This is something, something I have to do. Don’t ask me why, because I don’t know, but it’s just, well, if I don’t do this all will be lost.”

“He’s right,” Clem said. “It’s the Black Dolphin’s curse.”

“Will you quit it with your black dolphins?” Damon shouted.

“Hush, son,” Damien said. “The boy’s right, for I’ve heard the Black Dolphin’s curse is the gift of foresight.”

“Can you really see the future, Pip?” Chris asked.

“No, nothing like that, it’s just a feeling I sometimes have, that things I do will have certain consequences, good or bad.”

“I bet it works the other way too,” Frank said. “Do you sometimes see things in the past, things that happened long ago?”

“You’re right. My parents said I had a photographic memory, but I can sometimes visualise what might have happened eons ago.”

“Is that how you found the portal in the ruined village?”

“Yes.”

“Huh! I knew it!”

“What’s he on about, does anyone know?” Damon asked.

“Probably that Pip is the most vital member of our team,” Damien said, “so if he thinks he should stay here with the ogres, then stay he must.”

“Is settled, then?” the ogre asked.

“Yes, it’s settled,” Pip said. “I’ll stay with you.”

“Good.” A hand appeared out of the darkness, pushing the amulet back into the socket and opening the portal again.

“After you,” Damien said, ushering Damon and Frank ahead of him. Pip watched as the rest followed, wondering now if he hadn’t just made the most monumental blunder of his life.

“You did the right thing,” Clem said as he followed Jenny and Jason into the portal. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled his amulet from the socket as he passed through, and the portal became just a dull metal plate once more.

* * *

“Careful, Mum,” Mark said as he helped Jenny out onto the floor of the ruined building. “This portal has a right-angle bend in it.”

“I hope we don’t have to go through too many of those,” Jason said, emerging behind her. “They had something like that at an amusement park back home, but that one was only an illusion.”

Clem half crawled out of the portal behind Jason, but twisted himself around while keeping his arm extended down into it. With a quick flick, he pulled his amulet out of the socket on the other side, drawing it through moments before the portal closed.

“What is this place?” Jason asked as he looked around.

“I was wondering the same thing,” Jenny said.

“The Old People lived here before the death of our sun,” Clem said. “There were many towns like this, but most are gone completely now.”

“These Old People,” Mark asked. “Were they the ogres?”

“Yes, some of them.”

“Why do they hate Elves?”

“No-one knows.”

“But I think Morgoth knew,” Frank said as he walked back over to them, “and his friend Gregory the Dolphin Slayer too, I suspect.”

“Do you know?” Mark asked.

“Not for certain, but I think I have a fair idea of what it’s all about.”

“Are you going to tell us?”

“Not until I’m sure, but the evidence is pretty plain and you should be able to figure it out for yourself if you put your mind to it.”

“Sometimes I wonder whose side you’re really on, Frank.”

“It’s good that you do, because sometimes I’m not sure myself.”

“Which way do we go?” Damien asked as he and Herbert joined them. The other Barefooters had spread out through the ruined city, peering at each broken wall and cracked foundation as if it held some great archaeological secret.

“Down that way towards the watercourse,” Clem said. “There’s an old bridge a little way along where we have to cross, but I don’t know if it’ll take this many people.”

“No more falling bridges, please,” Frank said, turning pale.

“Sorry,” Clem said, “but this will be the last one, I promise.”

“Where’d all the water go?” Mark asked as he stepped cautiously out onto the bridge. “I mean a couple of days ago when we left, it was a raging torrent, but now it’s bone dry.”

“It’s been at least two months since you left,” Frank said.

“It can’t be!”

“My trial was a month after I was arrested, and I was a prisoner in the Colony for three weeks before Owen and I escaped.”

“But that’s not possible.”

“Time does strange things inside Sheol,” Damien said, “particularly in that City of Towers.”

“When Morgoth cut your head off,” Chris said, “it went dark for a while. It only seemed like a few moments, but who knows?”

Jason froze in his step. “Did you say Morgoth cut Mark’s head off?”

“He tried, but it backfired on him.”

“I saw it in a dream,” Jason said, “and that’s why Jenny and I came looking for you.”

“What happened, honey?” Jenny asked Mark, lifting his hair to inspect the back of his neck.

“It was pretty terrifying, Mum. Morgoth, only as a young man, not the old geezer I saw on Meridian, said something about me being the boy who’d killed him, then whipped out his sword and sliced through my neck. Everything went dark, and I thought I was dead, but then it was like I was wrestling with him and trying to push him off me. He almost had me, too, but then I thought of Lorina and my unborn child,

and of all I'd been through and all the horrors I'd seen in that prison, and my anguish and frustration just burst out and it was like I had this great power inside me, this power for goodness and justice and for the right of ordinary people to just carry on their lives without monsters like him mowing down everyone in their path, and then, well, and then it was light again and I was towering over him, only he was all shrivelled up and old like before."

"You said something about reclaiming your birthright," Chris said.

"Did I? I don't really remember. I just wanted to be rid of that monster for good, and then he was gone."

Jason gave him a troubled look, but whatever he was thinking, he kept to himself. "Come on, we'd best get off this bridge before it drops out from under us."

* * *

Lorina sat down beside Owen, reading the e-mail he'd just received from his policeman friend, Scott Davies.

'Hi Owen,

I'm glad to hear you've turned up safe and well. I really didn't know what to make of your sudden disappearance. Anyway, I have news that may be of interest to you.

We have a suspect in the Harry Tibbits murder enquiry, a prison guard on Huntress named Smithers. Do you know him? We received an anonymous tip-off which I suspect came from the former governor of the Colony, and sure enough we found evidence linking him to the crime. It's fairly circumstantial and I'm not sure if we have enough to make the charges stick, but we have an officer on his way there now to interview him.

If it was him, I suppose there's every chance he was also involved in the Dolphin-slaying business, although the description the Dolphins gave of the kidnapper would point towards a younger man. Perhaps he had an accomplice, but that's merely speculation (or wishful thinking) on my part.

I'll keep you informed of developments, one way or the other.

Regards Scott.'

“Did you meet this Smithers person during your time inside?” Lorina asked.

“Meet him? He was the one who nearly bashed Mark to death, and would’ve done the same to me if Frank hadn’t seen it coming and planned evasive action.”

“Sounds like a nasty piece of work. I hope Scott’s right and they lock him up for a long time.”

“He may well be the brawn behind all this, but I doubt he’s the brains. I wonder if there’s any connection between Smithers and Hoskins.”

“Could be. Maybe you should suggest that to Scott.”

“I will.”

Before he could begin composing a reply, though, the front door opened and closed as Edwin escorted Gordon and a nervous young man into the house. Owen recognised him as one of his fellow escapees, although he didn’t know his name.

“My lady,” Gordon said, bowing to Lorina, and the younger man copied the gesture. “This is Russell, and he has something to tell you both.”

Russell stepped forward, bowing again before pushing his long black hair away from his face and rubbing his nose. “I, um, my lady, I’m really sorry, I should’ve spoken up sooner, but I couldn’t, he would’ve killed me if I had, for sure.”

“Take it easy,” Lorina said, “and start from the beginning.”

“Sit down,” Owen said, pointing him towards the lounge chair, while Edwin fetched him a glass of water.

“Thank you so much,” Russell said, still squirming about on the chair. “That guard Smithers had it in for me from the day I arrived, but I’ve been told he picks on us smaller skinny guys, like you, Owen, and, um, and poor Mark. So I copped my fair share of bullying from him, even though I tried my best not to antagonise him.

“Then one day, probably six months ago now, although keeping track of the time ain’t easy here, one day he says, ‘Bunyip-face,’ ’cause that’s what he called me, he says, ‘Can you swim?’ I says yes, ’cause back home on Cornipus I did lots of swimming, and he says that’s good ’cause he’s got a job for me, off world. Well I couldn’t say no, you never said no to him, not if you wanted to stay this side of

the River Styx, so he comes and fetches me from my cell during the off-shift and we board this spaceship thing he's got out the back.

“‘We’re going to Bluehaven,’ he says once we’ve taken off, and I think that’s nice. I ain’t ever been to Bluehaven before, never, so I think maybe we’re going to see the Dolphins. We were, too, in a manner of speaking.

“‘We lands at the spaceport there, then he drives us up the coast a bit along a rough track to a little beach. There he makes me change into some yellow swimming shorts, before we get on a boat and go out into the ocean.

“‘We stop out in the middle of the water and he starts throwing little fish over the side. I ask him what he’s doing, but he just tells me to shut my gob, and I do. You never say no to him, not ever. Anyway he keeps throwing those fishes over the side, and soon there’s Dolphins swimming all around us. There’s whole families of them, with little young’uns, so cute they was.

“‘He tells me to jump in the water and grab one of them young’uns, the littlest one I could find, and I didn’t want to, no way, but I was so scared so I did, and grabbed this tiny little Dolphin and heaved it up onto the boat. Them’s mighty heavy, you know, even the little ones, once you get them out of the water. Anyway he pulls me back onto the boat and starts the motor, and we head back to shore with that poor little fellow flopping around on the bottom and squealing like it doesn’t know what’s happening.

“‘We load the Dolphin into the van, then he pours some liquid all over the boat before setting fire to it and pushing it out to sea. Pretty quick it’s gone, then we drive back to the spaceport where three men are waiting for us. Two are in those military camouflage clothes, but the third, the one who seemed to be in charge, he was in just plain clothes, but I’m sure Smithers called him Commander once. He puts the Dolphin in a glass tank, and the two soldiers then carry it on board another ship, a big one, military looking, it was.

“‘So anyway, when that’s all done Smithers and I get back on our ship and return here. He tells me if I breathe a word about this to anyone he’ll kill me, and I know he would, so that’s why I said nothing, even when Mark was accused of killing that poor Dolphin. It wasn’t me what killed it, though, I swear it was alive when that other

man put it in the tank, 'cause it was twisting around trying to get out, and squealing all the time. Poor little thing, I still have nightmares about it, I do.”

Russell covered his face with his hands as he started crying, while Owen and Lorina stared at each other, dumbfounded.

“Russell,” Owen said, walking over and crouching down before him, “I know you didn’t mean any harm, and I know what Smithers was like, even though I was only in there for a short time. I wonder, do you think you’d recognise those men if you saw them again?”

“I, um, I think so, yeah I’m pretty sure I would.”

“Lorina, is there a photo of Paul Hoskins anywhere in the archives?”

Lorina began searching on the ultranet terminal. “Yes, here’s one; it’s not very clear but it’s probably good enough.”

“That’s him all right,” Russell said, “the one in charge.”

“Thank you, Russell,” Owen said, “thank you so much. Now I have one more question for you, and you don’t have to answer right away. Would you be prepared to repeat what you’ve just told us in front of a court of law?”

Russell looked him in the eye before turning to Lorina. “Mark was a good man, my lady, a truly good man, and I know he died because of what I did. I’m terrified of what Smithers or that other man might do to me if I testify, but, but if it will in some way make up for the terrible thing I did, then yes, I will.”

“Thank you!” Lorina said, dashing forward and wrapping her arms around him. “Thank you so much for doing this, and I’m sure if Mark were here now he’d be thanking you too.”

At that moment someone knocked on the door and Edwin went to answer it.

“Clem, you’re back!” Lorina heard him say. “Come on in, all of you.” She stepped away from Russell and returned to Owen’s side, taking hold of his hand.

Clem entered the room, closely followed by Frank and an elderly grey-haired man she didn’t recognise. She gasped with delight when from behind them came Damon and Chris, dishevelled and dusty but otherwise unharmed. “Look at you both, you’re alive!”

She was about to dash over to them when another young man entered, tall and thin with long black hair like Russell's. She'd so convinced herself of Mark's death that for several long moments her mind refused to recognise him, but when she did, her legs gave way beneath her and she collapsed into Owen's arms.

* * *

Kevin was in a flap. He was due to fly to Meridian to make what might well be the most important speech of his political career, but Paul Hoskins was nowhere to be found.

"I'm afraid no-one's seen him anywhere," Loretta said. "He's an old man, though, perhaps he's fallen ill."

"I'll check his room," Kevin said, fumbling through his pockets for his master key while dashing down the corridor.

He cautiously opened the door to Paul's room, knocking as he did, while suddenly realising that in all the time Hoskins had been in his employ, he'd never before set foot in his quarters. "Paul, are you in here?"

A quick check of the room and en-suite confirmed that he wasn't, and Kevin was about to leave when the telephone rang. Glancing at the caller ID, his curiosity was aroused when he saw it was an encrypted call from Huntress, and he picked up the handset.

"Commander, everything's gone pear-shaped here! Smithers has been arrested and taken to Meridian! What should I do?"

"Hello, who is this?" Kevin asked, but the only response was a clunk and a broken connection. He turned, replacing the handset, and jumped as he found himself face to face with Hoskins.

"Ah, there you are, Paul. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"I'm sorry, sir, I was preparing your shuttle. Who was on the phone?"

"A wrong number, I think. I couldn't make head or tail of anything they said."

"Yes, I've been getting a lot of those of late. Are you ready to go?"

"I'll just grab my briefcase and then we can be off."

* * *

Mark stood behind Chris, his mouth open and his mind totally blank, as he watched his wife – *no, his former wife, he reminded himself* – collapse into the arms of Owen Lachlan.

Owen glanced momentarily at him before gently easing her onto the lounge suite and cradling her in his lap, while Val dashed off to the kitchen to bring her a nip of brandy.

“Here, sip this,” Owen said, taking the glass from Val. Lorina slowly sat up again.

“Mark? Is it? Are you? Can you be?”

Before Mark could remember how to speak, the door opened and closed behind him and Anton dashed into the room.

“Ah, you’re back, excellent,” he said to Frank, ignoring everyone else, “and just in time, by the look of it. Who are all the old geezers down in the square? Are they...?”

“Yes, the Lost Barefooters.”

“Better yet. Simmons is about to make a speech on Meridian proclaiming the annexation of Earth and the enslaving of its people, and, um, I thought perhaps we should try to stop him.”

“That’s what we came here for,” Mark said.

“We’ll need a ship big enough to take all the Barefooters,” Frank said.

“No problem,” Anton said. “Give me thirty minutes. Oh, and great to see you again, Mark. You’re looking pretty good for a dead guy.” He dashed from the room, leaving Mark gaping after him.

* * *

Kevin strode out onto the steps of Government House, flanked by eight armed bodyguards. Before him stood the usual crowd of media personnel as well as a sizeable number of curious onlookers.

“Citizens of the galaxy, today is a day for celebration and rejoicing as we put our recent troubles behind us and move forward to renewed prosperity. I bring you long-awaited news on several fronts that will give us all great hope for the future.

“Firstly, thanks to the heroic efforts of our military personnel and police forces on Amber and Sontar, the recent unrest has been quelled and an amicable agreement reached between the landholders association and the farm workers union. Therefore I’m pleased to announce today that the state of emergency is now lifted, and normal relations with Amber and Sontar will be resumed. As a precaution, though, and at the request of President Wisemonger, I’ll be leaving a small military force in position and ready for immediate action, should there be any future trouble. The safety of the people of those worlds is, and always will be, paramount.”

There was some cheering and applause, but not quite as much as Kevin had been expecting. Nonetheless, he put on his best politician’s smile before continuing.

“My second announcement concerns the unprecedented success of my trade mission to the Milky Way galaxy. In return for the shipment of fractal ore to their worlds, we have secured a food source that will put an end to the shortages and high prices we’ve had to endure in recent months. Representatives of the planet Earth have signed an annexation agreement giving us full control over that world’s resources, including its abundant food production capacity, and already shipments of fresh and processed foodstuffs have begun to arrive. I’ve installed General Gallagher as interim Commander in Chief of that world until such time as, um, such time as a civilian governing council can be framed, I mean formed.”

Kevin stopped, staring into space as the word *Commander* stuck in his mind. *‘Commander, everything’s gone pear-shaped here! They’ve arrested Smithers!’*

“General Smithers, I mean General Gallagher, will be working closely with the existing public administrations on that world, to ensure a smooth transition of pears, no, sorry, power.”

He shuffled through his notes, trying to regain his composure.

“Our, um, our businesses and workforce on Ignus will also receive enormous benefit from this deal, as a result of an unfortunate mishap on one of the Milky Way’s mining worlds.”

‘Sir,’ Hoskins had said just hours before his first meeting with the council on Eridani. ‘A most fortuitous accident has occurred. This

galaxy's primary source of fractal ore, a small planet called Burrumbulla, has imploded.'

"They were using matter imploders," Kevin mumbled, more to himself than his audience. From his right, Paul Hoskins loudly cleared his throat, causing Kevin to turn and stare at him. *'Burrumbulla has imploded.'*

Movement at the front of the audience caught his attention, and he gasped, almost taking a step backwards, as he saw Lorina and Owen push forward, flanked by Damon and Christopher.

'Oh Dad, we think Damon, Chris and Pip might be dead,' Lorina had cried when she and Owen had burst into his office shortly before his trip to the Milky Way.

'Did I hear her say that Damon's dead?' Hoskins had asked after he'd been blatantly listening at the door.

'Sometimes I wish I could just take one of Morgoth's old planet imploders and do away with that accursed world,' Kevin had said in reply.

Planet imploders.

'Burrumbulla has imploded.'

'It's just an idea, sir,' Hoskins had said, 'and you should bounce it off General Gallagher on Nimber before saying anything, but it could be the answer to our problem with the food wholesalers.'

General Gallagher.

Commander-in-chief Gallagher.

'Commander, everything's gone pear-shaped!'

Commander Hoskins?

Lieutenant-Commander Hoskins!

Kevin suddenly found himself transported back eighteen years to the night he and his family had been dining at the palace. Morgoth had tried to rape Lorina, but when Kevin intervened he'd been arrested and taken into an office, where a middle-aged military officer sat filling out forms.

'Lieutenant-Commander,' the chief guard had said, 'His Highness requests this prisoner be prepared for execution.'

‘With pleasure,’ the officer had said as he stood, and for a moment Kevin had caught a glimpse of the man’s name embroidered on his shirt. HOSKINS.

In the ensuing events that saw him almost burnt to death in Morgoth’s execution stadium, he’d completely forgotten that man’s name, until now.

“This is all wrong,” Kevin said, shaking his head and trying to clear it. “All wrong.”

He pointed towards his aide. “Guards, arrest that man! Arrest Paul Hoskins!”

The bodyguards, taken momentarily by surprise, drew their weapons, but instead of pointing them at Hoskins, they aimed directly at Kevin.

“What the…” Kevin started to say, but Hoskins interrupted him.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m countermanding that order and placing *you* under arrest.” He strode over to the microphone as the guards drew Kevin aside. “On behalf of General Gallagher, supreme commander of our forces, it is my duty to advise of a grave peril facing this galaxy, and to place it under military rule until such time as the danger can be dealt with. The unborn child carried by High Priestess Lorina poses a threat far greater than anything seen in our long and turbulent history, and she and her companions are now also under arrest.”

Eight armed soldiers emerged from the crowd, surrounding Lorina, Owen, Damon and Chris.

“No!” another voice said, as a thin dark-haired man pushed his way forward and up the steps. Kevin gasped as he recognised him as his former son-in-law.

“Not you!” Hoskins said. “You, you’re supposed to be dead!”

“In the name of my late grandfather,” Mark said, “and whose title I now reclaim, I command you to stand aside!”

“You don’t fool me!” Hoskins yelled. “I know you lost your Barefooter heritage when you killed Morgoth, you murdering little bastard!”

“That’s true,” Mark said, “but my friends haven’t lost theirs.”

The crowd parted as the host of Barefooters, led by Damien and Herbert, pushed through and mounted the steps.

“Shoot them!” Hoskins yelled. “Shoot them all!”

Gunfire erupted, and for a moment the Barefooters slowed, but as each bullet entered their bodies, it was thrust back out as the wound immediately healed. Relentlessly they mounted the steps, pushing aside all opposition. Hoskins backed away, then turned and ran, while the guards, realising their weapons were useless, lowered them and surrendered.

Mark, emerging from the shell of Barefooters that had encircled and protected him during the gunfire, stepped up to the microphone, while Lorina, Owen and Damon came forward to join him. Kevin circled cautiously around to stand beside Lorina, not taking his eyes off Mark for a moment.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered. “I’ve been an absolute fool, haven’t I?”

“Yes you have, Daddy,” she said, wrapping her arms around him.

“People of the galaxy,” Mark said, and the crowd before him hushed. “I’m sure you’re as bewildered by all this as I am.”

“*Praise the Bewildered One!*” someone shouted from below, and the chant was quickly picked up by many others in the crowd, before Mark raised his hands to silence them.

“Fear is a terrible thing, especially when used as a justification for horrific crimes. Lieutenant-Commander Hoskins, formerly second in command to Brett Farley, the man who brought you the Meridian massacre, spoke of a grave threat facing this galaxy, and claimed my unborn child, the baby in the womb of High Priestess Lorina, was the source of that threat. But how could that be?”

“Long ago, long before the first tribes roamed the grasslands of Meridian, a race of people lived on the planet you now know as Huntress. Back then its sun was bright and full, making their world a rich and fertile one, but calamity struck when a star dimming machine, intended perhaps for climate control, ran amok and cut off most of their sunlight. Many lives were lost, I’m sure, but some of the survivors fled into Sheol, where they reside to this very day.

“According to one legend, the Dolphins’ collective consciousness carries the spirit of their ancient king, to be brought back to life by the male child of a Barefooter and a Delphinidae. Hoskins and his people believed my son, if the child Lorina’s carrying turns out to be a boy, would be the fulfilment of that prophecy, and that this ancient king would claim sovereignty over all your worlds.

“To stop that from happening, six months ago they plucked a baby Dolphin from the seas of Bluehaven and slaughtered it, while planting evidence to falsely implicate me in that crime. My marriage to Lorina was dissolved, and I was banished to your prison colony on Huntress where I was bashed and left to die, all to stop Lorina and me from conceiving a child.

“As it turned out, they were a few days too late, for Lorina had already fallen pregnant, so I’m guessing their *Plan B* was to discredit Lorina’s father, Supreme Councillor Simmons, and so pave the way for a military coup in which Lorina could be safely isolated and her child, our child, terminated. All, as I said, because of fear.

“Is it possible this prophesy could be realised? Yes, it’s possible. My child might be a boy, even though history would suggest it’s much more likely to be a girl, your next High Priestess in the Delphinidae matriarchy. But yes, it’s possible it could be a boy. Could that boy become the reincarnated king of Huntress? I know little of the Dolphins’ collective consciousness or how that might be passed into a human, but let’s assume for now it could happen. But even if it did, and even if my son were to become that ancient king, in the end he would rule by his own actions and make his own choices. The future is not written in stone; we all have choices, choices we must make based on our judgment at the time of what’s for the best, and if those choices turn out to be wrong, well, we have a saying on Earth for that. *‘Shit happens.’*

“Fear of what the future might or mightn’t bring is no excuse to go murdering innocent Dolphins or destroying peoples’ lives. That’s cowardice, plain and simple, and there can be no excuse, none.

“But enough of my babbling. I’m sure Supreme Councillor Simmons has more to say, for this is after all his podium. Supreme Councillor?”

The crowd shouted, "*Praise the Bewildered One!*" as Kevin made his way back to the microphone. Mark tried to walk away, but he pulled him back.

"What can I say?" Kevin said. "I've been a fool, a conceited fool drunk on power and blind to everything that was happening around me. Hoskins used me as a willing puppet, and but for the actions of Mark and his friends, friends who stood by him in spite of the terrible crime he was alleged to have committed, Hoskins and General Gallagher would now be ruling our galaxy.

"To the people of Earth, and to those in the Milky Way whose lives were shattered by the destruction of Burrumbulla, I offer my greatest apology and sincerest of sympathies. I promise to make up for those terrible deeds in whatever way I can, but not as Supreme Councillor. From that post I now stand aside, and invite young Mark here, whose bravery and honour puts me to shame, to offer himself forward as my replacement."

Mark tried to escape, but Kevin, with Lorina's help, pushed him back in front of the microphone.

"*Mark the Bewildered! Mark the Bewildered!*" chanted the crowd in acclamation, before Mark once again raised his hands to silence them.

"I spoke before of choices," he said. "Eighteen years ago, I was given a choice. I could stand beside Morgoth, my genetic grandfather, and become his heir and successor, or I could activate a subspace pulse that would destroy both his and my Barefooter powers. It was a difficult choice, particularly for a seven-year-old boy, for I thought if I became your Supreme Ruler or whatever I could put an end to war and suffering and bring happiness and joy to everyone. I know Morgoth felt the same when he overthrew Thornton, and I'm sure Thornton felt the same when he overthrew the tribal warlords. But in the end, and with the help of my friends, I chose to activate the pulse and remove the superhuman element once and for all. I had no idea my action would actually kill Morgoth, instead I'd been told it would just reduce us both to mere mortals, and that's why until now I've been reluctant to ever accept a position of power. But in my recent journey through Sheol, I encountered Morgoth's spirit and saw its true nature, and that score is now settled.

“So I offer you my service, for what it’s worth, and hope that, with the aid of my friends and supporters, I’ll have the foresight and wisdom to make the right choices, the courage to acknowledge my wrong ones, and the grace to honour the legacy my real parents, Jenny and Jason, have given me.”

Taking Lorina’s hand in his right and Kevin’s in his left, he bowed before his adoring public as the chants of “*Mark the Bewildered!*” rose again.

Reparations

“We’ve won the first battle, but not the war,” Mark said to his hastily convened council of advisers. “General Gallagher’s still on Earth, creating God-knows what mayhem. Who’s the highest ranking military officer here we can still trust, anybody?”

“How about Colonel Piper?” Anton asked.

“Piper’s good in my books,” Scott Davies said.

“How quickly can we get him here?” Mark asked.

“I have all the emergency contact numbers,” Kevin said, dashing from the room. “Leave it to me.”

“What are you thinking of doing, Mark?” Jason asked.

“Gallagher will know what’s happened here by now, so I don’t think we have any choice but to take as much firepower as we can muster and meet him head-on.”

“There’s no chance he might just surrender without a fight?” Jenny asked.

“From what I know of Gallagher, it’s unlikely,” Anton said. “I fear it’ll be a fight to the death.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“We’ll stand by you in battle, my liege,” Herbert said.

“Thank you,” Mark said, “but I fear we’re going to need more than just an army of Barefooters this time.”

Kevin dashed back into the room. “We’re in luck. Colonel Piper’s actually on Meridian and will be here shortly.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Mark asked.

“Not a whole lot,” Kevin said. “I only met him once, during the swearing of allegiance ceremony just after I took office. He joined the military soon after the fall of Morgoth, part of the new broom I gather, and opposed the Brett Farley uprising.”

“He’s a bit of an individual thinker,” Anton said, “which is why he’s never advanced beyond Colonel. The generals see him as a loose cannon who won’t blindly obey their orders, but he’s highly regarded by the lower ranks.”

“So if it came to a show-down between Piper and Gallagher,” Mark asked, “which way would the masses swing?”

“It’s hard to say. Gallagher would pull rank, of course, but I think in their hearts they’d support Piper.”

“Any chance of getting Piper promoted?” Jenny asked.

“No,” Kevin said. “Promotions are handled by an internal military board that’s tightly controlled by the generals.”

“It sounds like a pretty cosy little club they have running there.”

“It is, yes. That’s why it’s been so difficult for the various civilian governments since the fall of Morgoth to bring the military under control.”

“Wouldn’t Mark’s heritage from Morgoth give him some sway?” Chris asked.

“In theory, perhaps,” Anton said, “but until he’s proven himself on the battlefield, he can huff and puff all he wants about being Morgoth’s grandson and the generals will just laugh at him behind his back.”

“Like they did to me, I suppose,” Kevin said. “I just can’t believe how big an idiot I was.”

“Hoskins saw your weaknesses and played them for all they were worth,” Frank said.

“Speaking of Hoskins,” Jenny asked. “What happened to him?”

“I’m afraid he got away,” Herbert said. “We went after him once the guards surrendered, but he disappeared down an alleyway, and had gone by the time we got there.”

“The police are out looking for him,” Scott said, “but I doubt we’ll find him.”

“Why not?”

“The military have probably smuggled him back to Nimber by now.”

“Oh, I see.” Jenny shook her head in despair.

“I can see that if I’m going to make a lasting impression on this galaxy, I’ll have to do something with the military,” Mark said.

“If I can offer you any advice,” Kevin said, “don’t believe anything they tell you, unless it’s bad news.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

The sound of heavy boots pounding on the floor heralded the arrival of Colonel Piper.

“I hope I’m not too late,” he said, sounding out of breath.

“No, not at all,” Mark said. “Please come in and join us.”

The Colonel stepped towards him, removing his sword from its scabbard as he approached. For a moment Mark thought he was about to be decapitated again, but instead Piper knelt before him and placed it at his feet.

“I offer you my service, my lord Mark, meagre as it is.”

“And I accept with pleasure and gratitude,” Mark said, picking up the sword and handing it back to him.

“So what can I do for you?” Piper asked, smiling.

“I, um, I need to remove General Gallagher from Earth and restore that world’s independence.”

“I see. That’s not going to be easy, given he has most of our intergalactic fleet with him.”

“How many ships do we have left?”

“To be precise, one, the battle cruiser your predecessor, Mr Simmons, returned on.”

“Oh. That’s not good, is it?”

“It’s better than not having any at all. It can carry a dozen fighter craft in its hold, so we should be able to at least put on a bit of a show before we’re blown away.”

“If we can reach the surface,” Herbert said, “our army of Barefooters would give his ground forces a run for their money.”

Piper ran his fingers through his beard. “Yes, perhaps, and I could certainly provide support for you. The cruiser can carry up to a thousand troops at a pinch.”

“Will that be enough, though?” Jenny asked. “The last thing we want is a long drawn-out guerrilla war.”

“You need to give Gallagher a way out, a way for him to withdraw and still save face.”

“Ah, the bee-sting and the honey pot,” Frank said.

“We call it the carrot and the stick,” Mark said, “but the same deal, I guess.”

“We don’t have much of a sting,” Piper said, “so we need a very big honey pot. Suggestions, anyone?”

“What’s the one thing Gallagher craves above all else?” Jason asked.

“Power,” Kevin said.

“That and a case of Gold Label Meridian whiskey,” Piper said.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “So here’s what we do.”

* * *

Owen knocked on the door to Mark’s cabin as they cruised silently through intergalactic subspace on board the *Excalibur*.

“Come in,” Mark said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Owen sat, nervously rubbing his hands together as if they were cold. “I, um, I thought you’d like to know that, with all that’s happened, it’ll just be a formality now for, you know, for the courts to overturn your conviction and reinstate your marriage, if that’s what you want.”

Mark watched him, his impassive expression perfectly masking any emotions he was feeling.

“My marriage to Lorina was just a ruse to divert everyone’s attention away from you,” Owen continued, “and to appease her father too. I must admit, though, that I’ve become, um, somewhat fond of her, I guess.”

“I see.”

“I think, well I’m pretty sure, that, well, that she has similar feelings for me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re not making this easy for me, Mark.”

“Would you rather I hit you on the nose?”

“No, well, yes; no, I guess not. Look, what I’m trying to say is, um, is if you two want to get back together, I’ll gladly step aside, well perhaps not gladly, but, oh God, I’m making a right mess of this, aren’t I?”

“You could say that.”

“Look, if you want her, she’s yours, okay? No hard feelings, none at all. Regrets, yes, I’ll admit that, but I told her when we were on Shimmel that you were my hero, and if you were to return, I’d gladly step aside for you. I suppose it was easy for me to say that when we all thought you were dead, but I’m a man of my word, so, yeah, it was an experience of a lifetime, and something I’ll always look back on and cherish, but she’s your wife, really, and carrying your child, and now you’re the Supreme Ruler and I’m just a nobody –”

“That’s enough, Owen,” Mark said softly. “You’re certainly not a nobody, and I don’t see how my being supreme ruler or whatever makes any difference. Ultimately it’s Lorina who must decide, but I don’t want to force that decision on her, not now while we’re in the midst of a war.”

“Of course not, and I’m an idiot.”

“In that case we’re both idiots. Come on, Owen, let’s go and see what the bartender on this fine ship has to offer.”

* * *

Mark’s head still hurt as they emerged from subspace at what Colonel Piper reckoned was a safe distance from Earth. He couldn’t remember now what he and Owen had been drinking, a sure sign he’d drunk too much of whatever it was.

“Gallagher’s fleet is still in blockade formation around the planet,” the helmsman said. “Sir, we’re being hailed.”

“On speakers,” Piper said.

“Excalibur, this is the Invincible. Who is your commanding officer and what is the purpose of your visit?”

“It’s Colonel Piper here, from the Pulper seventeenth squadron, and I have with me the new Supreme Councillor who wishes to speak with General Gallagher.”

“Do I?” Mark whispered.

“One moment please and I’ll see if he’s available.”

Mark took a deep breath while running his hands through his hair.

“Piper, is it?” came the voice of General Gallagher. *“I thought it might be you, or perhaps Wilson. No matter, it’s Mark the Bewildered I want to talk to. Are you there, your lordship?”*

“Um, yes,” Mark said.

“Good. That was a nice speech you made when you seized power, showed a bit of the old fire in the belly, not like your wimpy predecessor, Simmons or whatever his name was. Now you I can relate to. I served under your grandfather, did you know that? I was only a corporal then, and didn’t know him personally, but he was a great man, mad as a bunyip on Frizian honey of course, but still great.”

Mark closed his eyes as the clamp around his head seemed to tighten a notch or two.

“I’d like you to come down to the surface and meet with me. I’ve set up my command headquarters in a place you’re no doubt familiar with, a former Delphinidae College I believe. And just in case you might decide to do something foolish, I have several other guests with me; a couple named Billy and Julia who claim to be your grandparents, and four Elves who were so conveniently interned by the former administration here. Shall I expect you in, say, an hour from now?”

Piper nodded.

“Yes, I’ll be there,” Mark said.

“Good, and bring young Christopher Smith with you if he’s amongst your entourage.”

Chris nodded.

“Yes, he’ll be with me.”

“Splendid. I look forward to meeting you both shortly. And don’t worry, Piper, I have no intention of harming either of your charges.”

“So what do we do?” Mark asked once the connection had been broken.

“We do as he asked,” Piper said, “and play it by ear.”

“In that case, um, does anyone know a good cure for a hangover?”

* * *

A guard stepped forward as Mark and his entourage approached what was once his Delphinidae College. “I’m sorry, but only Mark the Bewildered and Christopher Smith may enter at this time.”

“Be careful, both of you,” Jenny said as Mark and Chris stepped forward, carrying a large box between them.

“What’s in that?” the guard asked.

“A gift for the general,” Mark said, opening it for inspection.

“Ah, Gold Label I see,” the guard said. “A wise choice, if I may say so. Follow me.”

“What have they done to this place?” Chris whispered as the guard led them across the courtyard. All the carefully selected native shade trees had been chopped down, their remains piled up in one corner along with what was left of the outdoor furniture, and Mark almost wept as he took in the wanton destruction of the place he and Lorina had put so much effort into building.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but someone’s going to pay, for sure.”

They entered the administrative section and were led upstairs to what used to be Mark’s office.

“Mark! Chris!” Julia cried as she leapt up and embraced them both. “It’s great to see you looking so well.”

“You had us all worried for a while there,” Billy said as he embraced his grandson.

From behind them came Maleena and Aaron, wrapping themselves around Chris, before Mary and Ron joined them as well.

“Ah, the happy families are reunited at last,” said a voice from behind them as a tall man in a highly decorated uniform stepped out.

“General Gallagher I presume?” Mark asked.

“At your service, your lordship.”

“We bring you a gift, General,” Mark said, picking up the case of whiskey.

“A fine gift indeed,” Gallagher said as he inspected one of the bottles. “Perhaps we should share one after our negotiations have been concluded.”

Mark felt his stomach trying to revolt against the thought of more alcohol, but took a deep breath and forced a smile.

“This must be Christopher Smith,” Gallagher said, turning away from Mark and relieving him of his discomfort. “I understand you were the one responsible for the death of Commander Farley and most of his forces.”

Chris looked as if he'd been punched in the stomach. "I, I didn't mean to, and I was just a kid then, and I was only trying to save Mark, Lorina and Uncle Jase. And I didn't know the whole palace was going to fall down, honest."

"Nonsense, Christopher," Gallagher said. "You rid the galaxy of a very evil man and a lot of evil men who supported him. I know it can be hard coming to terms with killing someone, sad to say I've had to do it often enough over the course of my career, but sometimes tough choices have to be made on the spot, and usually if we do what we think's right at the time, it probably was."

Mark watched on helplessly as Chris's lip began to tremble, never realising until now the depth of his friend's torment over Farley's death. He'd known he'd become increasingly uncomfortable discussing their time on Bluehaven, but had not understood why, even though it should've been as plain as the nose on his face. Chris had been made a hero for deliberately pushing a man to his death, and Mark's heart broke for him as he understood now just how difficult it must have been for him growing into adulthood and realising more and more what a terrible thing he'd done. Gallagher had sensed it straight away, of course, and was now driving the knife in as hard as he could.

"Enough of the pleasantries, General," Mark said, his mind racing to take control of the situation. "For better or worse I'm now the Supreme Councillor, at least until fresh elections are held, and I have some matters of policy I need to discuss with you. Firstly, though, I believe there's a ritual that needs to be performed. Your sword, please, General."

"I'm so sorry, your lordship," Gallagher said, now looking a little flustered. "I've been most remiss, of course." He knelt, unsheathing his sword and placing it at Mark's feet. "I offer you my service, Mark the Bewildered, and swear to you my oath of allegiance."

"And I gratefully accept," Mark said, picking up the sword and handing it back to him. "I will reward your allegiance, have no doubt, but in return I will hold you to your oath. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

“Right. Now first off, I’m revoking the annexation of Earth, and I’d like you and your forces to return as quickly as possible to Nimmer. I’ll have another job for you all very soon.”

“And what would that be, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“I need to evacuate everyone from Huntress, so my Barefooter friends can begin work on restoring that world. I don’t expect to have any problems with the fringe-dwellers, but I want the Colony closed and each of its inmates reviewed by an independent legal commission. I’m making you responsible for the logistics of that operation.”

“You intend allowing the prophecy to be fulfilled, then?”

“I have no interest in prophecies, but there are people, survivors of the calamity that befell Huntress long ago, trapped in Sheol. My colleagues believe it’s possible to undo at least some of the damage by restoring Huntress’s sun and orbit, and it’s my intention to allow those survivors to return home once that work is completed.”

“Lieutenant-Commander Hoskins believed those people would rise up against us, led by your future son.”

“Let me make one thing clear,” Mark said, straightening himself up to the point where he seemed to tower over Gallagher. “Until I learn otherwise, my child, my *daughter*, will be the next Delphinidae High Priestess, no more and no less. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good. Now as far as Hoskins is concerned, I want him to face trial for the murder of the baby Dolphin, and if I find he’s been given sanctuary by the military, your head will roll, and I don’t mean that figuratively.”

Gallagher nodded, gulping.

“That’ll be all for now, General.”

Gallagher turned to walk away, but Mark called him back.

“Ahem, General, haven’t you forgotten something?”

“I’m sorry, my lord, but I don’t –”

“Your whiskey, General.”

“Of course, and thank you, my lord.” Gallagher picked up the case before scurrying from the room.

Chris turned towards Mark, his face beaming. “What can I say? Wow!”

“I think perhaps I was a little hasty, letting him take the whole case,” Mark said. “I could really do with a stiff drink right now.”

* * *

Mark pulled Chris aside as they made their way back out. He’d only have one shot at this, he knew, and prayed he’d find the right words to say.

“Gallagher was wrong, Chris. Killing can never be justified, not when you strip away all the fancy excuses and embellishments. You’ll have to come to terms with what you did on Bluehaven, and only you can do that, but you acted to save others, not to serve yourself, so that must surely stand in your favour, don’t you think? Had you held back, things would have turned out differently, for sure. Dad might have overpowered Farley, but it’s more likely Farley would’ve triumphed, and the universe would be in a far bigger mess than it is now. But all that misses the point, I know; killing is still killing, and it’s still fundamentally wrong.

“We all have regrets, Chris, things we wish we’d done differently, but we can’t turn the clock back and change them, and even if we could, I suspect we’d only make an even bigger mess the second time around. I strongly believe there’s an overriding purpose in life, and that everything we do, no matter how terrible it might seem, serves that purpose. The past is done, it’s set in stone for good now, but it’s our responsibility to build on that past and try to turn all its facets towards a better and brighter future.

“You can’t bring Farley or his men back to life, but you can learn what drove them to do what they did, and what drove you to do what you did, and perhaps some day that knowledge might even save others from a similar fate. But even if it doesn’t, simply understanding the past, and learning from our experiences, places us in better stead to grasp the opportunities of the future.”

“But Gregory said I was a born killer,” Chris said, “and that’s why he chose me to continue his jihad against the Dolphins.”

“He was lying. He saw what was troubling you and played it for his own ends, that’s all. Look, I know it’s not going to be easy for

you, after all you've been through, but I also know you wouldn't be going through this anguish at all if your soul wasn't innately good."

Mark placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "There's a path to a brighter future, Chris, even though you can't see it right now, and while only you can find that path, I promise I'll always be there to help in any way I can."

Chris stood perfectly still, staring into his eyes for what seemed an eternity before nodding ever so slightly. "I, I think, I think maybe I can find that path, Mark."

"I'm sure you can, Chris, I'm sure you can."

As Mark and Chris emerged onto the front steps of the College, a dozen microphones and cameras suddenly appeared in front of them.

"Mark, are you really the new Supreme Councillor?"

"Is it true you've revoked Earth's annexation?"

"Do you know who really killed that dolphin?"

"Yes, yes and yes," Mark said. "Earth is now a free and sovereign world once more, although I'd like to negotiate a fair and equitable trading arrangement in order to continue some of the food shipments, at least in the short term. General Gallagher and his forces are returning to their base on Nimber, and I'm placing Colonel Piper and his men at your disposal to help make good the damage to your infrastructure.

"I know there's been much suffering here, and words of apology can sound hollow at such times, but for what it's worth, my government extends its heartfelt apologies to you all, and I'll be doing everything in my power to ensure that such an atrocity can never happen again."

Lorina dashed up the steps, taking her place at Mark's side. "As the Delphinidae High Priestess, I stand by what Mark" – she glanced back down at Owen, who nodded – "what my *husband* has said, and also offer the services of the Temple to aid your world in whatever way we can."

She took hold of Mark's hand as another young woman dashed up the steps.

"Sandra!" Chris cried, leaping forward to meet her half way.

"My hero's returned," she said as she smothered him in kisses.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Chris said, wrapping his arms around her and holding her tightly.

* * *

“It was all too easy,” Mark said as they were sipping hot chocolate at his grandparents’ home.

“Gallagher’s biding his time,” Colonel Piper said. “He’ll feign loyalty while probing your weaknesses and waiting for you to make a mistake. Be very wary of him, Mark.”

“I will, don’t you worry.”

“So what’s next?” Jenny asked.

“I need to speak with the Milky Way Council on Eridani and see what we can do about making reparations for the destruction of Burrumbulla,” Mark said.

“How are you going to pay for all these reparations?” Julia asked.

“The Temple has substantial reserves we can use,” Lorina said, “and Damon tells me there’ve already been many offers of help from the people of Meridian.”

“I’d like to make greater use of the military,” Mark said, “but I just can’t trust the generals.”

“That’s going to be the real challenge for us,” Lorina said. “As long as they’re constantly trying to undermine him, we’ll be limited in what we can achieve in the long run.”

“Speaking of the long run,” Damien said, “I’ll have my people start work on Huntress as soon as we get back, but we’re going to need a few thousand subspace boosters to install around the equator.”

“Perhaps Jason and I can help there,” Jenny said. “One of this galaxy’s biggest freight companies is doing a refit of its fleet, and we’ve been working on the design of the new drives for them. They were going to just scrap their old ones, but I’m sure we can divert them in your direction.”

“I wish all our problems could be solved that easily,” Mark said, yawning.

“You might just be surprised,” Julia said.

“I think I’d better get my husband home before he falls asleep on the floor,” Lorina said.

“Yes, if the people of your galaxy could see him now, they might have second thoughts about making him their supreme ruler.”

“Or *whatever*, Gran,” Mark said, forcing his eyes open again. “You left off the most important part of my title.”

“Spoken like a true Collins,” Billy said.

New Beginnings

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Owen said as he finished the last of his pummel fruit pie. “Scott reckoned the Fisherman was going to be the male child of a Barefooter and a Delphinidae, possibly Mark and Lorina’s son, and yet you’re now telling me Damien is the Fisherman.”

“Dad reckons there might have originally been two prophecies that merged into each other,” Damon said. “One said a fisherman would bring Huntress back to life, while the other spoke of the resurrection of an ancient king whose spirit became the Dolphins’ collective consciousness. The second one, of course, is complete nonsense.”

“You need to keep an open mind,” Frank said.

“I know, but I just can’t accept that the collective wisdom of the Dolphins is really some long-dead tyrannical ogre.”

“Perhaps he wasn’t a tyrant,” Clem said. “He might have been a well-loved benevolent ruler, like Mark is.”

Frank stared at him as the pieces of the puzzle flew around inside his head, forming yet another possible outcome in this great mystery.

‘You’re not the Fisherman, I know that now,’ Clem had said to Mark as they’d been leaving his home after the storm, and Frank wondered yet again who Clem really was. And who for that matter was Mark? And why had the people of this galaxy so utterly embraced him?

‘Sometimes I wonder whose side you’re really on, Frank,’ Mark had said after they’d returned from Sheol.

‘It’s good that you do, because sometimes I’m not sure myself,’ he’d said in reply, and even now, he was still unsure.

‘You’ve been very quiet, Pip,’ Frank had said during their council with Elko. *‘What’s your take on all this?’*

'I, um, I'm still having trouble deciding whose side we're supposed to be on. I mean, this reincarnated king doesn't sound like the kind of guy I'd want to be bringing back to life, but weren't we trying to save Mark and Lorina?'

'Would you rather I told you to kill them?'

'No, of course not. I don't want to kill anyone.'

Pip had hit the nail on the head, Frank realised now, and he feared, perhaps more than anything else, that he may yet be forced to kill Mark, or at the very least his son.

"Frank?" Damon asked. "What are you thinking?"

"Huh? Me? I was just wondering ... no, it's nothing, really."

"You're incorrigible," Damon sighed.

"I think we have everything," Edwin said as he entered the living room, carrying two large suitcases.

"How much of this place will be left when we return?" Val asked.

"The first few revolutions of the planet will be very slow," Frank said, trying to clear away the cobwebs of his dark ponderings, "months, then weeks, of daylight, so it'll get very hot here for a while, even with the star-dimmer still operating. The Barefooters will be erecting a reflective shield over your village, to protect it as much as possible, but even so, we can't promise anything."

"What about the pummel forest?" Clem asked.

"The forest will burn, unfortunately, but we've taken as many saplings as we could find so we should be able to re-establish it once the planet's been stabilised."

"As long as the people are safe, that's the main thing," Val said. "Houses, forests and farms can be replaced easily enough."

"That's right," Edwin said.

Clem looked around at the deserted village as Frank led them towards the evacuation ship, still scarcely able to believe that the ultimate goal of his people was about to be fulfilled, and that he'd been the instrument of that.

For all his life, he'd been fascinated by the tales his grandfather had told him of the ancient times, and of the prophecies that would some day come to pass. He remembered now his twelfth birthday,

when he'd been inducted into the Black Delphinidae, keepers of those truths, and had taken the oath and received the amulet as countless previous generations had done. But this time the Fisherman had really come, and soon their sun would return. The ancient ones were coming home, and with them perhaps would be the Black Dolphin and the final resolution of their great mystery.

But for now came the hardest part, the waiting in exile as the Fisherman and his Barefooters installed their subspace boosters and began the long slow process of spinning up the planet and restoring its orbit. Ten years, they'd said, and by then he'd be twenty-four, positively ancient in the eyes of a teenager. But wait he would, spending that time studying the ancient books, so that when the day came to return, he'd be ready.

"I don't know whether I should be happy or sad to be leaving here," his mother said. "It's been a harsh world, not an easy place to live, but it has its beauty too."

"That beauty will still be here, Mum," he said, "but we'll see it in a new light."

Daylight, day and night; something none of them had ever experienced. Their lives had been synchronised to the spin of Cornipus, simply because that world had been the source of their news and entertainment channels, and in that respect the refugee centre would be like a second home to them, but the actual alternating day and night would take some getting used to.

Still, he wondered how many of the villagers would actually return to Huntress, his parents included. Ten years was a long time, and by then many would have new jobs, new relationships and new lives. It would be the same dirt and the same rocks here, but practically everything else would be different. Day and night, seasons, regular rainfall; it all seemed so foreign to him, but perhaps after ten years on Cornipus it wouldn't be so strange after all. He looked around once more, taking in as much as he could, before mounting the steps to the ship.

Owen had been at a loose end since Lorina's decision to return to Mark, and had gladly accepted Frank's suggestion that he take on the role of legal representative for the fringe-dwellers. The refugee centre

on Cornipus had a good reputation and the best facilities in the galaxy for displaced people, but even so there'd be some who'd try to take advantage of their vulnerability, and good legal counsel was an essential part of the relocation process.

Now, as he boarded the ship bound for Cornipus, he thought back on those last nine months, since the morning his father had called him to tell him they were going to investigate a dolphin slaying on Earth. From there to his marriage to Lorina, his imprisonment and escape with Frank, and to Mark's return, claiming not only Lorina but stewardship of the entire galaxy, and now back to Huntress to witness the beginning of the restoration of that world.

He still didn't understand what it had all been about and, in spite of everyone's happiness and celebration, couldn't shake off the feeling that it wasn't all over yet, not by a long shot. There was still the birth of Mark and Lorina's child, due any time now, and the enormous ramifications that hung on the sex of that child. In a way he wished he could be there for the birth, but by the same token he was sure his emotions would run away with him if he was. He scratched his head again, lost in confusion.

For Damon, it had been a time of quiet introspection. Roderick Enderling, the man he'd known as his father for most of his life, had accepted Damien's revelation with good grace, and even admitted suspecting something of the truth when Damon's autothermia had become more and more apparent. After returning from Earth with Mark, Damien had spent two months as Roderick and Sophie's guest, while the other Barefooters had begun the preliminary work on Huntress. They'd chatted a lot about their time together before the war, and while Damon had been interested at first, he'd soon wandered off on his own, spending much time poring through the archives and libraries looking for anything relevant to the Black Delphinidae and their prophecies.

What he found only confused him more, so he'd returned to Bluehaven, seeking solace from the Dolphins. Their words, although soothing and reassuring, did little to ease his uncertainty, and so he'd busied himself with day-to-day work in the Temple until Frank had called on him to help with the evacuation of Huntress.

Frank knew a lot more about what was happening than he let on, Damon was sure, and just minutes ago he'd caught him staring into space after Clem had said something about the ogres' king being benevolent like Mark. Frank had often said he preferred not to speak his mind until sure of the facts, a trait Damon found very frustrating at times, but it was in the nature of the man and he was grateful to have had such a knowledgeable and competent teacher. He feared, though, that Frank's ponderings might bode ill for the Delphinidae, and perhaps that's why he preferred not to discuss them.

The hatch closed, and as Damon strapped himself in, his thoughts turned once more to Pip. It was three months now since his friend had been taken hostage by the ogres, three months of captivity in the darkness of Sheol, and he had to fight back the tears of frustration and anger at the thought of him having to endure another ten years of it. He'd been tempted more than once to venture alone into Sheol to rescue him, but the unknown consequences of such an act, and the risk of being captured himself, had stayed his hand.

As the ship rose, he stared out the window at the planet below, trying to spot the ruined city where the portal into Sheol lay hidden, but they were rising too rapidly and the only landmark he could identify was the crater surrounding the Colony. In despair he turned away, knowing that when he'd next see that world, if his father's plan succeeded, it would be a very changed world indeed.

* * *

"Gentlemen, please come in," Mark said as President Wisemonger of the Amber and Sontar Alliance, and his aide, Peter Pennyquick, entered his office. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Wisemonger glanced around the room before letting his eyes fall back onto Mark. This smiling young man, with his dishevelled black hair and yellow surfing shorts, looked totally out of place amongst the formal opulence of the Supreme Councillor's office, and yet there was a rightness about it too, an absurd appropriateness reminding him of the rainbows and duck ponds of his childhood.

"Please, take a seat," Mark said before perching himself on the corner of his desk.

“Thank you, your lordship,” Wisemonger said.

“Call me Mark; everyone else does.”

“You’re an amazing young man, truly amazing. To have achieved all this after what you’ve been through, it’s, well –”

“Amazing?” Pennyquick chimed in.

“My words exactly,” Wisemonger continued. “The productivity of the farm workers on Amber and Sontar has doubled since you took office, did you know that?”

“Yes, I’ve seen the figures and it’s good news indeed. We’ve been able to drop most of our imported foodstuffs from Earth now.”

“I’m pleased to see you giving so much support to your local producers. You know, when I speak to those workers and ask them why they’re putting in so much extra effort, they all say they’re doing it for you, Mark.”

Mark blushed. “What can I say? You embarrass me.”

“It’s true, though,” Pennyquick said, smiling. “I’ve never seen so many happy peasants, ever.”

“I hope that, with our initiatives in education and training, they won’t be peasants for much longer,” Mark said.

“I’ve always said the way to greater productivity is through education and training,” Wisemonger said. “The Landholders Association is most impressed, *most* impressed, and that brings me to the reason for my visit. At a special meeting convened at my request, the Association has voted unanimously to dissolve the Alliance and return our worlds to your governance.”

“I’m honoured indeed,” Mark said, “and of course welcome your decision.”

“If your schedule allows, we’d like to invite you to visit our worlds and meet first hand some of our workers.”

“I’d be delighted to, but it may have to be delayed a short while, for as I’m sure you know, my wife is due to give birth very soon now and I need to remain with her at this time.”

“Yes, of course, and we’d expect nothing else. Just have your people contact the Association at a convenient time and we’ll make all the arrangements.”

“Thank you, I will, most definitely.”

“Thank you so much for your time, Supreme – sorry, I mean Mark.”

“My door’s always open to you, gentlemen.”

* * *

“Mark, are you awake?” Lorina asked, shaking him by the shoulder.

“I am now.”

“I think the baby’s coming.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. Grab my dressing gown and let the hospice know we’re coming, would you?”

“Of course. Is there anything else you want?”

“Just a glass of water, sweetheart.”

“Are you okay to walk?”

“Yes, it’s not far.”

“Remember what I told you,” the nurse said. “Take a deep breath now, and push.”

Mark, starting to feel dizzy, remembered he had to breathe too, and did so, huffing loudly. The nurse gave him a reprimanding look.

“One more time, my lady, it’s almost there, almost there.”

The baby’s head emerged, and with one last spasm, Lorina pushed her child all the way out into the world. Moments later the ward filled with the joyous sound of an infant’s first cry.

“It’s a girl!” the doctor said. “Congratulations, both of you!”

“So much for the prophecies,” Mark muttered to himself. “To hell with them all, honestly.”

“Wait, I don’t think she’s quite done yet,” the nurse said as another spasm gripped Lorina. Moments later a second tiny head poked its way out. “Push again, my lady, you have twins by the look of it.”

Mark felt a darkness grip his heart, as all the joy of the occasion vanished into a cold nothingness. Another cry, sounding to him like the call of a carrion bird, filled the ward.

“This one’s a boy!” the doctor said. “A tiny little boy.”

When Mark saw his son's face, though, all his dark thoughts disappeared, replaced once more with happiness and joy. "I've been blessed, truly blessed," he whispered.

"Are you done now, my lady?" the nurse asked Lorina.

"Yes, that's it."

"I have no idea why the second infant didn't appear on any of the scans," the doctor said.

"Perhaps he was hiding," Lorina said, and for a moment another chill ran up Mark's spine.

"Have you chosen names for them yet?" the nurse asked.

"The girl we're calling Loraine," Lorina said. "It's an Earth name, but it follows the pattern of the High Priestesses so it seemed appropriate. As for the boy, well –"

"Drago," Mark said.

"What?"

"Huh? I, um, I mean David." Mark scratched his head, feeling like he'd just woken from a daydream. "Let's call him David."

"Yes, I like that," Lorina said. "David it is, then."

"Loraine has your hair and eyes, honey," Mark said, now cradling his daughter.

"Yes, the future High Priestess for sure. What about David?"

"His eyes are brown," the nurse said, "just like his father's, but his hair, well, if you ask me it looks red."

"At least he doesn't have your nose," Lorina said, managing a chuckle.

"Thank heavens for that," Mark laughed.

* * *

"I have wonderful news for you," the doctor said as Mark and Lorina entered his surgery with the twins. "Both your children are fit and well, and the DNA tests we did on your son showed no Barefooter traits, or anything else out of the ordinary for that matter."

"That's a relief," Mark said. He'd requested the tests, in spite of Lorina's protests, if for no other reason than to put his mind at ease. Had they been positive, though, he didn't know what he would've

done, he really didn't. *'No need to worry about that any more,'* he thought.

"I told you there was nothing to worry about," Lorina said, echoing his thoughts. "It's like Damien said, prophecies aren't worth the paper they're written on."

"Of course, honey, and I'm an idiot through and through."

"I know, but you're my idiot, and that's what counts."

They held each other and kissed, while Loraine and David looked on in puzzled amusement.

* * *

At first nothing much seemed to happen, but over the course of many weeks the red twilight of the Colony began to lighten, although none remained to see it. At last, the rays of that first new dawn touched the rim of the crater, creeping gradually down its side until finally the reddish sun climbed high enough to reach the fringe-dwellers' village.

To the east, dust stirred amongst the relics of the Old People's city as a hot wind blew in from the sunlit side of the planet. As the daylight touched the metal plate set into the floor of one of the ruined buildings, a dull shimmering appeared across its surface. Moments later, a lone figure emerged from the portal, stumbling at first before setting his back to the wind and making for the village.

Part Five

The Mind of the Dolphins

The Pasha

The burning torches all went out moments after the portal closed behind Clem, plunging Pip into darkness.

“Hello, are you still there?” he asked, fearing the ogres may have abandoned him.

“We’re still here. The fearless Elf is afraid of the dark, is he?”

“No, I’m not afraid; I just don’t like it, that’s all.”

“Best you get used to it, as you’ll be here for a long time.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t really expect your friends to come back for you, do you?”

“I, um, yes, I do.”

“Many times we’ve been promised a return to our homes by those who bear the black amulet, but we’re still waiting.”

“This time will be different. The Fisherman has returned.”

“There have been many claiming to be the Fisherman.”

“But, but Damien, Damon and Mark, they wouldn’t just leave me here, would they?”

As the ogres roared with laughter, Pip suddenly realised that, since the closing of the portal, they’d been speaking in their native tongue, and he was replying and even thinking in that language now. Although part of his Elvish heritage, the ease with which it had happened made him realise just how close he was to the origin of that trait.

“But Damien and his Barefooters will do it, I know,” he said. “Huntress *will* be restored.”

The ogres fell silent, perhaps sensing something in Pip’s voice they hadn’t expected.

“Were you the people who lived in the canyon?” he asked.

“Yes, that was once our home.”

“Gosh, have you been in here ever since your sun went out?”

He remembered now the daydream, or perhaps vision, he’d had in the ruined village, of a bright flash in the sky followed by a creeping darkness heralding the end of their world.

“It was night in our village when the sun flared,” one of the ogres said. “Some say we were the lucky ones, for everything on the sunlit side of our world was burnt to a crisp. Then came the darkness and the hot winds, and we knew our world was dead so we came in here.”

“Do you know what caused it? Damien and Frank thought it might have been a star-dimming machine.”

“Yes, the Tivinel made it to stop our world from overheating.”

“What are Tivinel?”

“They were the high people, tall and fair-skinned like you Elves, and were the cause of all our troubles.”

The other ogres hushed, while Pip could feel them drawing close around him, focusing their hatred and anger onto him.

“You fear us now, don’t you, little Elf? And so you should, so you should.”

Pip took a deep breath, trying to force himself to relax while every nerve in his body wanted him to just run into the darkness in blind panic. Instead he sat, leaning back against the metal plate of the portal.

“You are not Tivinel, though,” the ogre said, “even though you were created in their image.”

“I, um, but how?”

“You Elves know little of your own history, but no matter. As I said, the Tivinel were the high people, while we, the Barungi, were called the low people because we lived in the tropical lowlands near the sea.”

“Were you different races?”

“Different species actually, but we were closely related. Close enough for us to cross-breed, although such children mostly lacked our mind-speech and were called Gomerel, the simpletons. The Tivinel used them as workers, for what they lacked in psychic skills they made up for with dexterity and ingenuity.

“Occasionally though, but very rarely, a crossbred child would not be a Gomerl but a Pasha, a Great One. They were always male and infertile, so the Pashas could never become a race of their own, and mostly there was only ever one, for the ruling Pasha would kill any who might challenge him, but the Pasha possessed great psychic powers, able to bend the minds of other folk should he wish. The Pasha was our ruler, our king.”

“*King*,” Pip whispered, thinking now of the prophecy Elko and Damien had spoken of.

“The Pasha possessed great wisdom and foresight.”

“He could see the past and the future,” another ogre said.

“Left to his own devices,” the first continued, “the Pasha was for all intents and purposes immortal, for he never aged or suffered any illness, but it was rare for one to live more than a few thousand years before a new Pasha challenged and defeated him. The change of Pasha was a great time for the Barungi and Tivinel fortunate enough to be living then, for it was a time of great feasting and celebration, and there are stories of the great changeovers passed down as legends from generation to generation.”

“But if the Pasha was so wise,” Pip asked, “how’d he let the Tivinel set off their star-dimmer?”

Again the ogres fell silent, and he wondered if he’d just blasphemed their king.

“Drago was a fool,” one of them finally said. “The Tivinel knew it, too, and encouraged him in his stupidity.”

“Who was Drago?”

“He was our last Pasha, and was just ten years old when he murdered his predecessor.”

“The challenge of the Pasha was supposed to be a great ritual,” another said, “a test of skill, both physical and psychic, but Drago used his powers to hide himself, firing a poisoned dart at the old Pasha while he was addressing the New Year festival.”

“The Barungi blamed the Tivinel,” the first continued, “and a short war erupted, but Drago put an end to that, confining us to our lowland farms while giving the Tivinel free rein over the rest of the planet.”

“Gosh,” Pip said.

“With the aid of their Gomerall slaves, they built huge cities everywhere, burning coal and oil to power them. Eventually their fumes caused our world to heat up, even though by then they’d discovered subspace and could get all their power from that. So they built the star-dimmer to counter the effects of their global warming, but that only made things worse.”

“How’s that?” Pip asked.

“The tropics cooled, but the poles got hotter and the icecaps continued to melt, raising the sea levels and flooding our lands. So they dimmed our star even more, and that fixed the sea levels, but then our crops wouldn’t grow properly in the dim sunlight and food became scarce. The Gomerall were made to suffer the most, and eventually rose up against their masters, stealing their space ships and fleeing to the world you call Meridian.”

Pip suddenly saw the connection Frank had been hinting at all along, cursing himself for not realising it sooner. “Those Gomerall became the first tribes on Meridian, didn’t they, and all our people descended from them.”

“That’s right, little Elf. Perhaps you’re not as stupid as the rest of your race.”

“But you said before that the Elves were made in the image of the Tivinel. How could that be?” He thought he knew now what the answer would be, but he wanted to hear the ogres say it.

“That was Drago’s doing, or the thing that Drago became. While our world was falling apart around him, our great Pasha spent his days swimming in the sea. Marine creatures, aquatic mammals you call dolphins, swam with him, and he delighted in their company, calling them his children. But soon he grew jealous of them, for they could swim much faster and further than he could, so he used his physic powers to take over their minds, projecting his spirit into them.

“When the Tivinel’s star-dimmer finally broke, Drago’s residence was destroyed, killing his physical body, but his spirit took refuge in the dolphins, for the water protected them from the burning flash.”

“I see, but how did the dolphins get to Bluehaven?”

“Through the portals into Sheol. Those of us who survived the flash, Barungi and Tivinel alike, fled into here once we realised our

world was lost. The dolphins came a long time later, though, still carrying Drago's soul."

The vision of the flooded village opened once more in Pip's mind. *Dolphins meandered through the streets, drifting in and out of buildings as if looking for something, while above them and gazing down on them with great sadness, floated a lone black dolphin. "Watch and bear witness, Pip, for you are our only hope."*

He watched once more as the black dolphin entered the building where the portal was hidden, leading the others through and into Sheol.

"What was the black dolphin?" he asked.

"There are no black dolphins, only grey ones."

"But I saw a black dolphin in an aquarium on Meridian."

"There are no black dolphins," the ogre said again, but there was something in his voice this time, a hint of fear, Pip thought.

"The dolphins came into Sheol," the ogre continued, "carrying Drago's spirit with them, and found a portal into the seas on Bluehaven. Some of the Tivinel wanted us to follow them, but we knew if we did we'd be enslaved, so we stayed here instead."

"Did your people build the city of towers?" Pip asked, and again he could feel the ogres tensing up.

"The Tivinel built that and lived there for a while, but we didn't like it and stayed away. Then, after a while, the Tivinel vanished and it was taken over by the spirits of dead Gomerall."

"Do you know what became of the Tivinel?"

"No-one knows, little Elf, and perhaps it's for the best if we never find them again."

Pip sat in silence for a few moments, plucking up the courage to ask what seemed to be the ultimate question.

"Drago's trying to be reborn, isn't he, into the child of a Barefooter and an Elf?"

Before the ogres could answer, he felt a tingling against his back as the metal plate he was leaning on dissolved away, and he tumbled backwards into the portal.

* * *

“Sir, I’ve just detected a subspace energy pulse on the surface of the planet,” the First Officer on board the control ship orbiting Huntress said to Damien.

“Do you have a fix on it?”

“Yes, it came from a canyon just to the north of the Colony.”

“Show me.”

“Just here, sir.”

“The portal,” Damien whispered, staring at the topographic display on the screen in front of him while scratching his head. “I need to take a shuttle down there.”

“It’ll be getting pretty hot, sir, are you sure that’s wise?”

“I’m the father of all Barefooters, and extremes of temperature are no problem for me, but I think there might be someone down there who doesn’t share that trait.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Damien stepped from his shuttle, immediately buffeted by a gust of hot wind. Raised dust, disturbed as much by his landing as the wind, he supposed, swirled around the relics of the Old People’s town as he tried to remember in which particular ruin the portal lay hidden.

The dim reddish sun had risen just above the canyon wall, although it had been shining on the surrounding lands for some weeks now. Soon it would be uncomfortably hot, even for a Barefooter, and if his hunch was correct, he knew he’d have to hurry if he was to have any chance of finding Pip alive.

The portal was on the side of the town closest to the watercourse, he remembered now, and on what would have once been a corner block. Choosing the nearest likely candidate, he picked his way through the rubble towards it.

His first guess drew a blank, but he spotted another ruin a bit further down that looked more than just a little familiar. While sprinting towards it as fast as he could on the uneven ground, he pondered how much of even these relics would survive the extreme baking and freezing of the first very slow revolutions of the planet, wondering yet again whether there was really any hope of restoring Huntress as an hospitable and viable world. His misgivings vanished,

though, when he spotted the unmistakable shimmering of the portal at the back of the ruined building.

He stepped closer to it, wondering how Pip had managed to open it without the amulet, but as his shadow fell across it, the shimmering disappeared and the portal reverted back to being just a dull metal plate. As he moved to the side, allowing the sunlight to once again fall on it, the portal reopened. He stepped back and forth, watching in amazement as it opened and closed like a magic doorway.

'It wasn't Pip's doing at all then,' he thought, *'but best not to leave it open while the planet's in such an inhospitable state.'* Shading it to keep it closed, he bent down and covered it with rubble, making sure there was no chance of any light falling on the plate during the course of the long hot days ahead.

Satisfied now that it would stay closed, he wiped his brow and was about to walk back to his shuttle when he spotted a faint pair of bare footprints in the dust, headed away from the portal. Confirming they were too small to be his own, he studied the ground in front of them and found more prints, a single line heading unmistakably in the direction of the fringe-dwellers' village.

For a moment he thought they could be just left-over tracks from when they'd all emerged from the portal three months earlier, but as another hot gust buffeted him, he realised any such prints would have long since been obliterated.

Torn between his need for speed and desire not to lose the track, he hastened slowly, scanning the ground in front of him for the very faint footprints. In places they disappeared altogether, either eroded by the wind or simply not evident in the hard-packed dirt, but his luck held out as on each occasion he eventually spotted another print leading him further on.

Pip had made it past the Old People's bridge before being overwhelmed by the heat, showing a stamina and determination Damien thought quite remarkable for an Elf. He started sprinting as soon as he caught sight of the wisps of blonde hair fluttering on the side of the track, fearing as he approached that he was too late, and cursing himself for wasting so much time covering the portal.

He knelt beside Pip's body, certain now he was dead, but something touched his mind, a faint whisper perhaps of another living soul. Filled with an irrational sense of hope, he leant over him, checking his vital signs.

Pip was hot, way too hot, but still had a pulse, weak and irregular though it was. Sighing with relief that he was at least still alive, Damien gently picked him up, shocked at how little he weighed, and began carrying him back to the shuttle.

The hot wind strengthened, blowing against him as he staggered along the track, all the while projecting his healing powers into Pip, trying to stop his spirit from slipping away. Three times he thought he'd lost him, but each time he'd fought back, clinging to life by the flimsiest of threads, and aided, Damien was sure, by an alien yet benevolent presence. In brushing his mind, it spoke to him of sunshine, warm seas and love; of a simple life, lost long ago and yet perhaps even now still redeemable.

* * *

Pip opened his eyes to see an angelic face looking down on him. For a moment he thought he'd passed over, but the soreness as he drew in a deep breath quickly convinced him otherwise.

"How are you feeling?" Sandra asked.

"I guess I must still be alive."

"Of course you are," said another voice from behind her, "and you can thank Damien for that."

"Chris?"

"Sandra and I came as soon as we heard what had happened. You had us worried for a while, that's for sure."

"Thanks for coming. I, um, is Mark here?"

"No, he's on Bluehaven with Lorina and the babies."

"Babies?"

"Yeah, she gave birth to twins, Loraine and David."

"Did you say Drago?"

"No, David. Who's Drago?"

"Never mind. I have to see them." Pip tried to sit up, but his vision sparkled as a wave of dizziness forced him back down.

“Take it easy,” Sandra said. “You won’t be going anywhere for a while yet.”

“Ugh,” he said, but he was already drifting off to sleep.

Pip could hear hushed voices as he floated back up into consciousness.

“Have you contacted his parents yet?”

“No, I haven’t been able to find them.”

“His father’s the maintenance supervisor at Imperial Aerospace, while his mother used to work at the old folks’ home.”

“I’ll keep trying – ah, it looks like he’s waking up.”

“How are you feeling?” Damon asked as Pip forced his eyes open.

“A little better, I think.”

“That’s good, because I brought you some of your favourite chocolates.”

“In that case, yeah, I’ve just about fully recovered.”

“I guess I can hand you over then and claim the reward.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you know? The ogres have put a price on your head.”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“Pip Ingle, wanted dead or alive, preferably cooked.”

“And seasoned with fifteen secret herbs and spices.”

“Exactly. So how’d you manage to escape?”

“That’s something we’d all like to know,” Damien said as he entered the ward.

“I didn’t mean to,” Pip said, propping himself up on his bed. “After you all left, I sat down and leaned back against the plate of the portal while talking to the ogres, and suddenly it opened and I tumbled backwards through it.”

“You were sitting there talking to them for three months?” Damon asked.

“What? No, it would’ve only been about an hour at the most.”

“Time does strange things in Sheol,” Damien said, “but I’ve never known it to compress that much.”

“Perhaps it was the ogres’ doing,” Damon said.

Damien scratched his chin. “You may well be right. They’ve been in there for well over a million years, so that would be incentive enough for them to figure out how to compress time.”

“I think we experienced a little of that while they were escorting us from your world,” Damon said. “It didn’t seem to take very long to cover what should have been an enormous distance.”

“Maybe once the sun’s set, Pip should go back in there and wait a few days while the ten years it takes for us to finish our work slips by out here,” Damien said.

“Perhaps,” Pip said, “but first I have to find Mark and Lorina.”

“What for?” Damon asked.

“I need to tell them about something the ogres said to me.”

“What was it?”

“I, um, I really need to ask Mark about it first.”

“Honestly, I don’t know who’s worse, you or Frank,” Damon said, shaking his head.

“I’m sure Pip has his reasons for not wanting to discuss it with us,” Damien said.

“When do you think they’ll let me out of here?”

“It’ll be a few more days yet, I’m afraid.”

“Damn!” Pip thumped his pillow before rolling over and burying his face in it.

“I guess we should let you rest then,” Damon said.

“Yeah, sorry, and, um, thanks for coming to see me.”

“Just take it nice and easy, okay, and I’m sure they’ll have you up and about in no time.”

“Damn fool’s lucky to be alive at all,” Damien said once he and Damon were out of earshot of Pip.

“I know, but he can be pretty headstrong when he has a mind to be. I wonder what it is he’s not telling us.”

“I’m betting it’s something about David.”

“You mean he really is the king of the ogres? But I thought all the tests they did came back negative.”

“No-one thought you were autothermic until Chris took you to Earth.”

“Yeah, but no-one was expecting me to be.”

“You’re right, of course. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about.”
Damon didn’t think his father sounded too confident, though.

* * *

Pip stepped out of the customs hall, taking a deep breath as he slipped his identity card back into his wallet. Although born on Meridian, there was something about the smells of Bluehaven, something homely and welcoming, and he grinned as he took another deep breath.

“Brother Ingle?” the nervous young acolyte in front of him asked.

“That’s me, I guess, but everyone just calls me Pip.”

“I have a boat waiting to take you straight to the Temple, sir.”

“Thank you. I’m honoured, of course, but really there was no need.”

“The High Priestess herself insisted as soon as she heard you were coming. Is it, um, is it true you fought off a host of ogres single-handed to get here?”

Pip laughed. “I fell backwards out of Sheol when the portal I was leaning on suddenly opened.”

“Oh, I see,” the acolyte said, blushing. “Well I’m sure you were very heroic.”

A taxi pulled up in front of them, providing a welcome distraction.

“The wharves, thanks,” the acolyte said to the driver, and moments later they were rolling through rich farmland towards Settlers Bay. It was there, Pip remembered now from his studies, that Damien and Lorna had first encountered the Dolphins, beginning the long history of the Barefooters and Elves that was about to reach its climactic moment. He stared out the window, wondering yet again how Mark and Lorina would react to what he had to tell them.

“How have the Dolphins reacted to Lorina’s son?” he asked the acolyte.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Have they, um, done anything odd?”

“Not that I’ve heard. Both the babies received their blessings, of course, and there was quite a turnout for the ceremony, but apart from that, no, there’s been nothing unusual.”

“I see,” Pip said, unsure whether he should be relieved or more worried by this.

“Many are saying David will be our future king.”

“What?”

“Well, Mark’s really our king now, although he refuses to take on any title, and the media are already referring to the boy as Prince David.”

“What happened to our elected government?”

The acolyte rolled his eyes. “Where were you when Simmons was running the galaxy?”

“Fighting ogres.”

“Oh, of course. Well I shouldn’t really say bad things about him, what with him being the Reverend Mother’s husband and all, but honestly, it was just one disaster after another.”

“So what do you think of Mark as ruler?”

“He’s wonderful, everyone just adores him, and look at what he’s done to fix the food crisis with Amber and Sontar. He’s a marvel, that’s for sure, and so modest and unassuming too.”

Pip smiled, although he’d only known Mark personally for a short while; a few days, by his reckoning, but several months in the outside world. For all Pip’s life, Mark had been his hero figure, his idol almost, but Damon had gently scoffed at him. *‘Mark’s a nice guy,’* he’d once said, *‘and he and Lorina are doing a great job with the college on Earth, but he’s no superhero, believe me. It was Chris’s father, Aaron, who convinced Mark to kill Morgoth instead of becoming his heir, and then it was Chris himself who got rid of Farley. They’re the real heroes, not Mark.’*

He recalled now how Damon had been constantly niggling Mark during their time in Sheol and on the Barefooters’ planet. *‘Mind your manners’, ‘Quit it, Mark’, ‘I’m sick of your constant whinging’,* and so forth. At the time he’d thought it was just Damon’s frustration coming out, but now he wondered if perhaps there was more to it. Did Damon see Mark as a threat to the Delphinidae? Pip closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead in confusion.

“Is something the matter, sir?” the acolyte asked.

“No, just tired after my flight, I guess.”

* * *

A fishing boat pulled into the jetty as Pip eased himself out of the taxi, while a flock of hungry gulls circled above, searching for any scraps the fishermen might discard. He breathed deeply, smiling as he filled his lungs with the warm salty air of the world his parents still longingly called home.

“The boat’s just down here, sir,” the acolyte said, leading him towards the wharf furthest to his left. Alongside it sat a small cruiser, its white hull gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight. For a moment Pip shivered, remembering perhaps some long-forgotten nightmare about a ferry boat on a dark river. *‘Give me your passenger!’* a voice echoed in his mind, causing another shiver to run up his spine.

“Are you sure you’re all right, sir?”

“Yes, I’m fine, really.”

“Easy now,” the acolyte said, helping him onto the rocking boat. “We don’t want you falling overboard.”

At that moment, Pip wished the acolyte would fall overboard, and was almost tempted to give him a helpful shove.

“Thank you,” he said instead, steadying himself before making his way to the passenger seat.

“The seas are quite calm today so we should have a quick run up the coast.”

Pip said a silent prayer of thanks.

* * *

“Look at you, poor dear,” Lorina said as she helped him from the boat. “You’re so pale.”

“I’m fine, really,” Pip said again.

“Of course he is,” Mark said, shaking his hand. “He’s had both Damien and Damon looking after him.”

Pip studied the tall grinning man standing before him, taking in the lank black hair and trademark yellow board shorts of the galaxy’s new Supreme Councillor. In spite of his meteoric rise to power, he was still the same unassuming young man Pip had first met on

Huntress, making his heart ache all the more at the task that had brought him here.

“I guess I missed all the excitement,” he said to him.

“It was pretty terrifying at the time, I can assure you,” Mark said, “but it all worked out fine in the end. I’ve been hearing about your escape from the ogres. How did you manage it?”

“I don’t know what they’ve been telling you, but it was just an accident, really. I was leaning on the portal when it suddenly opened, and I just fell backwards out onto Huntress. Damien told me the sunlight caused it to open, but he didn’t know why.”

“You’re lucky they noticed it on the control ship.”

“I know. I would’ve been well and truly cooked by now if they hadn’t.”

“Damien said you had something to tell us.”

“Yes, but I, um, I think perhaps it should wait until after dinner.”

“You’re right of course. We have your room ready for you if you want to freshen up.”

“That’d be nice, thank you.”

Pip took another deep breath, but this time even the warm salty smell couldn’t ease the dark foreboding gripping his heart.

* * *

“That was delicious,” Pip said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. “I haven’t had food like that since, well, since I left home I guess.”

“Thank you, I’ll be sure to tell our chef,” Lorina said. “He’s from Earth, did you know? He used to work at the college before it was closed.”

“Do you think there’s any chance it might reopen?”

“Not really. Mark has his work here now, and I have my duties as High Priestess as well as two little ones to look after.”

Pip took a deep breath. “I, um, that’s what I need to talk to you both about.”

“Come on through to the lounge,” Mark said. “I’ll order some hot chocolate.”

“Sounds good,” Pip said, standing and rubbing the backs of his thighs which were starting to cramp up after so much sitting.

“Are your legs still bothering you?” Lorina asked.

“No worse than usual. I’m fine, really.”

He stretched before following his hosts through to the lounge, wishing people would stop fussing over him.

“The ogres told me all about what happened to Huntress,” Pip said, taking a sip of hot chocolate as he settled into the armchair. “They said there were two races, two species actually, the Barungi, who we call ogres, and the Tivinel. They both had psychic powers, much like we and the Barefooters do, but most cross-bred children lacked such powers and were called Gomerl. They were the ones who fled to Meridian and were the ancestors of all our people.”

Mark nodded. “From the hints Frank’s been dropping, I’ve suspected something like that.”

“Sometimes, though,” Pip continued, “a cross-bred boy would go the other way, receiving the powers of both his parents. They called them Pasha, and they were their kings. Only one Pasha ever ruled, though, fighting off any challengers until he was eventually defeated.”

“Were there ever any female Pashas?” Lorina asked.

“No, the Pashas were always male, and they said they were infertile too, so they could never breed.”

“So that’s where that crazy prophecy about the male child of a Barefooter and a Delphinidae came from,” Mark said.

“Yes, except I don’t think it was crazy.”

Mark and Lorina both stared at him, the silence of the room weighing down and crushing his soul as he tried to find the words to say what had to come next.

“Drago, their last Pasha, spent a lot of his time swimming with the dolphins on Huntress, projecting his spirit into them so he could travel far and wide. His body died when their world was destroyed, but his soul remained with the dolphins, becoming their collective consciousness.”

Lorina frowned, but he had to go on.

“Eventually those dolphins fled through Sheol to Bluehaven, taking Drago’s soul with them. There they remained, waiting generation after generation for thousands of years until Damien and

Lorna stumbled across them and were given their gifts. I, um, I think Drago wanted them to breed and create a male child, a vessel for him to take over and become Pasha once more.”

“You think David is that vessel, don’t you?” Mark said.

“He, um, he must be, I’m sure.”

“David’s just a normal little boy. Didn’t Damon tell you all the tests have proved negative?”

“Yes, but, but I think they’re wrong.”

“Come with me, Pip,” Lorina said, standing and guiding him out the door. “I’ll take you into the nursery so you can see for yourself, but you must be very quiet.”

“Quiet is my middle name,” he whispered, but he was sure she didn’t appreciate the joke.

Pip crept into the darkened room with Lorina and Mark close behind. Before him, sleeping in a large crib, were the two infants; Loraine, with her fair skin and wisps of blonde hair, and the darker-skinned David – a result of Mark’s Aboriginal heritage, he supposed – with his strangely thick red hair. *‘We think they’re fierce with long sharp teeth,’* he remembered saying not long ago, *‘but perhaps they’re not, perhaps they’re midgets with pink hair.’* David’s hair wasn’t exactly pink, not in the darkened room at any rate, but it was enough to cause the hairs on the back of Pip’s neck to rise.

David stirred a little, turning his head towards Pip before opening his eyes and staring straight at him. In the centre of each big brown eye was a darkness so black it drew him in, down and down into its freezing depths. Death, cold and absolute death, that’s what the darkness meant, and down Pip fell, down and down until suddenly both legs cramped and he collapsed to the floor, writhing in agony.

David started screaming, louder even than Pip’s cries of pain, and that woke Loraine who started screaming too. Mark picked up David while Lorina took hold of Loraine, taking them both from the room and leaving Pip to his torture.

* * *

“How are your legs?” Lorina asked as she and Mark joined Pip for breakfast.

“Still a bit sore, but I’ll be fine.”

“It sounded pretty bad,” Mark said.

“Yeah, it was one of the worst cramps I’ve ever had, I reckon.”

“What caused it, do you know?”

“Let me just finish eating,” Pip said while munching on a mouthful of cereal.

Lorina glared at him, but Mark took hold of her hand.

“Let him say what he has to,” he whispered, “and then we can decide what to do, okay?”

Pip made sure he’d eaten every last speck of cereal before carefully putting down his spoon and taking a long slow sip of juice. Lorina and Mark continued sitting opposite him, staring at him in silence, but he wasn’t going to be rushed. He put down his glass before clearing his throat.

“Last night I looked down into David’s soul and saw only darkness and death. Drago hasn’t taken him yet, so that’s something I guess, but I have no doubt he’s the vessel.”

Lorina shook her head. “What you’re saying is nonsense, complete nonsense, and I’ll have no more of it. David’s just a perfectly normal little boy, no more a vessel for this Drago person than you or I. I don’t know what the ogres did to you, Pip, or whether your heat stroke might have caused it, but you need help. What happened last night was the makings of your own mind, nothing more, do you understand?”

Pip stood. “But I’m not imagining it or making it up, I swear! Drago is altogether evil and you must stop him now while you still have the chance.”

“Sit down, Pip,” Lorina said. “I’ll not have raised voices in my Temple.”

“What is it you ask?” Mark said softly. “Would you have us kill our child?”

“You have no other choice,” Pip whispered.

“Tell me, Pip, if I put a knife in your hands, would you have the courage, the strength of will, the stomach even, to slaughter a little baby boy in cold blood?”

Pip closed his eyes, placing his hands over his face while visualising himself creeping into the darkened nursery, the knife in his hand glinting in the muted light, creeping towards the crib on tip-toes, not making a sound, looking down on baby David sleeping peacefully beside his sister, raising the knife ready to strike...

“No, I couldn’t,” he said, sighing. “In all honesty I just couldn’t.”

“And yet you expect us, the baby’s parents no less, to perform that task for you!” Mark said, now standing and raising his voice.

“But you must! Once Drago takes hold he’ll be unstoppable!”

“How dare you come in here and tell me to kill my own son! This is ridiculous!”

“Go, Pip,” Lorina said, “go now and never set foot in this Temple again. You are stripped of all standing within the Order and cast out into the wilderness, never to return.”

“But –”

“Silence! Now go, before I have you arrested and cast into the sea.”

Pip stood, turned and walked out.

Years of Sorrow

*Oh Elfstar with your silver beams,
Take us nightly in our dreams.
To Bluehaven, our long lost home,
Where ancient Dolphins vainly roam.
In search of what they cannot find,
With many souls but just one mind.*

Pip couldn't put the words of that song out of his mind as he trudged through the lonely streets of Azarath on the way to his parents' place. A light rain had begun to fall, adding to the misery of his aching legs, but there'd been no taxis in sight at the interchange and he'd been forced to walk.

A car sped past, splashing water from a puddle all over him. A young man poked his head out the window, yelling, "Crazy bloody Elf!" as it disappeared into the night. Pip sighed, turning at last into his parents' street.

"Wha-da-ya-want?" the man in the stained moth-eaten tee shirt that only half covered his beer belly said as he opened the door in response to Pip's knocking.

"I, um, I was looking for my parents, actually."

"The Ingles? Left here months ago. Now piss off." He slammed the door in Pip's face before he could even think to ask if they'd left a forwarding address.

"Pip, is that you?" someone called out from next door, and Pip hobbled over to the fence.

"Mrs Farrow, do you know where my parents went?"

"They never said anything to me, disappeared all of a sudden they did, but I've heard they went back to live on Bluehaven."

“Damn!” Pip said before blushing as he remembered who he was talking to. “Sorry, but I’ve just come from there.”

“Never mind. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I, um, no thanks, I’m fine,” he said, remembering from his childhood just how revolting her tea was.

“Have a talk to Mr Finch at the real estate agents tomorrow. He handled the sale of the house and might have their new address.”

“I will, thanks.”

He turned and waved, walking back in the direction of the market district where he hoped he might find a hotel room for the night.

Pip pushed open the door of the Lumberjack Hotel, glad to be out of the rain. Lured in by its bright neon lights on the otherwise dark and gloomy street, he looked forward to a hot meal and a place to rest his weary legs.

“Hey, you!” the bartender yelled. “Yes, you, the Elf, can’t you read?”

“What, huh?”

“Dress rules apply in here. You need a shirt and shoes. And dry yourself off while you’re at it. Now scam!”

“I, um, sorry,” Pip said, sighing as he stepped back out into the rain.

At the far end of the street a small flashing sign caught his eye.

SALESMAN’S ARMS
CHEPROMS

Thinking that a *chep rom* was better than no *rom* at all, he brushed as much water as he could from his hair before opening the door.

“Now if I didn’t know better, I’d guess you were looking for a meal and a room,” the ruddy-faced man behind the counter said.

“I, um, yes.”

“Well this is your lucky night, young sir, for we have a special deal on both.”

Pip pulled out his wallet and handed the man his credit card, not caring how much this special deal would cost him.

“Just sign here and I’ll take you to your room,” the man said after swiping the card, seeming surprised the transaction hadn’t been rejected by the bank’s computers. “The dining room’s open till ten.”

“You don’t, um, have any dress rules, do you?”

“No, of course not. We have Delphinidae scholars like yourself staying here all the time.”

“I, um, I’m not, no, never mind.”

Pip followed him up a dark and narrow flight of stairs and into a room overlooking the street.

“The bathroom’s at the end of the hall if you want to freshen up,” the man said before disappearing back down the stairs.

Pulling a clean and dry pair of shorts from his bag, Pip took no time at all deciding he’d do precisely that.

* * *

At first glance the dining room looked empty, and it wasn’t until he’d placed his order that he noticed the elderly man sitting in a dark corner squinting at his newspaper. The man caught Pip staring at him and stared back, although his eyes remained hidden in the darkness of the room. Pip turned away as a shiver ran up his spine.

The waiter had just left after delivering Pip’s meal when the man in the corner stood to leave, his newspaper folded under his arm, but as he passed Pip’s table, a slip of paper fell out onto the floor next to him.

“Um, excuse me, sir, you dropped this,” Pip said as he picked it up, but the man had already disappeared. While not really meaning to, he looked at what was written on it and his heart froze.

DAVID = DRAGO?

Finish your dinner and come to room 207

He stared at the slip of paper, half expecting the letters to rearrange themselves into something more mundane, a shopping list perhaps, but the message remained, plain and simple.

At length he folded the paper, pushing it deep into the pocket of his shorts before picking up his knife and fork and continuing his meal.

Room 207 was next to the bathroom at the end of the corridor, facing towards the back of the hotel. Pip was about to knock when the door swung open and the elderly man whisked him inside.

It was dark, the only illumination coming from the streetlights outside, and Pip could just barely make out the shadowy form of the man and the furniture in the room.

“Sit, young Pip, for I think we have a common purpose.”

“How, um, how do you know my name, and how do you know about Drago?”

“How I know is unimportant, what matters only is that I do. The people I represent have need of your services, as you no doubt have need of theirs.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do we agree that Drago must be stopped?”

“Yes, but —”

“Come with me then.”

The man grabbed him by the wrist, his hand cold and bony, pulling him out onto the balcony and down the fire stairs to the laneway at the back of the hotel.

“Hurry, we don’t want to be seen,” he said, holding open the door of a black car hiding in the shadows. Pip hesitated for just a moment before climbing in.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Best you not know, for now at least,” the man said as he pulled out onto the main street.

The man drove in silence, turning in and out of side streets until Pip was completely disoriented. At length he pulled into what Pip took to be a warehouse area enclosed by a high security fence, passing through a gate that swung open as they approached.

At the back of a nondescript metal-clad building he pulled up next to a large open doorway, helping Pip from the car before whisking him inside to a waiting black spacecraft.

As soon as he was strapped in, it rolled forward out of the hangar before rising silently into the night sky.

* * *

The spacecraft had no windows in the passenger compartment, and the bright floodlights of the marshalling yard dazzled Pip for a moment as he stepped from the hatch.

“Quickly, come this way,” the elderly man said as three other men in blue overalls dashed out to attend to the ship. “It’s close on midnight here, so I’ll take you to your quarters now and you can meet our commander in the morning.”

“What is this place?”

“No questions.”

Having no other choice, Pip followed him into the nearest building and down a long sterile corridor. The man pushed open a door marked ‘1746’, revealing a small room furnished with just a bunk and a hand-basin.

“The bathroom’s 1799, otherwise remain here until someone comes for you in the morning.”

“I, but,” Pip said, but the door slammed shut behind him, and by the time he opened it again and looked out, the corridor was empty.

“1746 and 1799,” he muttered to himself as he stretched out on the bunk, glad at last to be off his feet. Within minutes he was asleep.

* * *

The young man in full military dress knocked on the unmarked door before gently pushing it open. “He’s here, sir.”

For the first time in his life, Pip felt naked in just his Delphinidae shorts.

“I’m pleased to meet you at last,” the grey-haired man behind the desk said as he ushered him inside. “Please, take a seat.”

“Should I know you, sir?”

“Unlikely, I’d think, given your circumstances, but we’ll come to the formal introductions later. For now, suffice to say I’m the commander of this operation.”

“Operation?”

The commander stared Pip in the eyes until he was forced to look away. “You’ve heard the story of Drago and the dolphins, I understand.”

“Um, yes sir, at least what the ogres told me.”

“I dare say it’s probably close enough. Your confrontation with the High Priestess was ill-timed and ill-conceived, though. Most unfortunate.”

“I, um, I had to warn them.”

The commander slowly shook his head. “A parent will always defend its child, even someone as stupid as you should know that.”

“I, I guess so.”

“You guess so. Here we don’t guess, we act, and when we act things happen, the right things. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, perhaps there’s hope for you yet. Now firstly we’ll have to get you into uniform. How tall are you?”

“One hundred and seventy centimetres.”

“Waist?”

“Seventy-six centimetres.”

“Shoe size?”

“Shoe?”

The commander again shook his head. “How – long – are – your – feet?”

“I, um, I’m not sure.”

“Never mind, we’ll find something to fit you in stores, no doubt.”

“What’s happening?”

“You’re in the military now. We’re going to stop Drago, and stop him properly.”

“Gosh.”

* * *

“Private Ingle, you almost look the part, I think,” the commander said.

Pip wasn’t sure what was worse; the heavy clothing wrapped around his torso or the tight boots squeezing on his feet.

“Sergeant Croft will be your immediate superior and will show you around the base,” the commander continued. “He’ll also be overseeing your physical training.”

“But sir, my legs cramp up severely if I exert myself.”

The commander threw him a bottle of pills. “One of these each morning will stop the cramps.”

“But my doctor said nothing could be done.”

“Civilian doctors know nothing. Take one a day, and trust me, no more cramps.”

“Yes sir.”

“You’ll also be receiving specialist weapons training, for that’s where I see you fitting into our operation.”

“What is it I’m expected to do?”

“Follow orders, just follow orders.”

“I, um, yes sir.”

“That’ll be all for now, Private. Take good care of him, Croft, and don’t be deceived by appearances. Ingle’s not as soft as he looks.”

“Yes sir,” Croft said, saluting before pushing Pip out the door in front of him.

“You’re going to be sorry you ever enlisted, Ingle,” he whispered.

“But I didn’t.”

Croft clipped him across the ear. “But you didn’t, SIR!”

* * *

Pip lay stretched out on his bunk, his uniform and boots dumped unceremoniously on the floor beside him.

Just two days ago he’d been annoyed by firstly a Delphinidae acolyte and then Lorina fussing over him, wishing at the time they’d leave him alone. *‘Be careful what you wish for,’* his mother had often said, and she was so right, so right.

He thought back over the argument with Mark and Lorina that had seen him excommunicated from the Order, and the ordeal of his flight back home to Meridian only to find someone else living in his parents’ house.

Tears began forming as he wondered what had really become of them. Although often working long hours, his parents were

nonetheless reasonably sociable amongst the neighbourhood and he thought it unimaginable they'd have moved back to Bluehaven without at least telling the nosy Mrs Farrow. Had they been abducted, like he'd been, or perhaps even killed? Who would do such a thing? And why?

As he climbed off the bunk to wash his face, the bottle of pills sitting on the corner of the hand-basin caught his eye; pills the commander had said would stop his legs from cramping.

'Don't you even think about running again,' his own doctor had once warned after a short sprint had landed him in hospital. *'If you do, you'll risk permanent damage.'*

'Is there nothing I can do to stop the cramping?'

'No. What you have is congenital, and there's no treatment or cure.'

Could his doctor have been so ignorant as to be unaware of those pills? Or could the military doctors be so far advanced over their civilian counterparts?

'One a day will stop the cramps. Trust me.'

But could he really trust the commander? Who was the commander anyway? He'd said Pip wouldn't have known him, and yet he seemed familiar, someone he'd seen just recently, he thought. Bunyip-baiting came into his mind, but that had been that Cornipean politician, Sharp or Blunt or something.

Questions, too many questions. Shaking his head in confusion, he returned to the bunk and closed his eyes.

Pip tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep, and so was doubly surprised when woken by a raucous siren.

"Ingle, I want you dressed and in the marshalling yard in five minutes!" Sergeant Croft yelled from just outside his room.

Pip staggered outside, still buttoning his shirt as he squinted up at the dark sky through the glare of the floodlights.

"Look alive, Ingle," Croft shouted. "In a couple of hours the sun will be up and you'll be complaining about the heat."

"No I won't, sir," he yawned.

"For that you can run an extra ten kilometres. Did you take your pill?"

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Follow me.”

Croft led him across the yard to a narrow passageway between buildings, emerging on the edge of what Pip took to be a sports oval.

“Five laps around the running track for starters,” he said. “That should warm you up a bit.”

“But I can’t run, honest sir.”

“There’s no such thing as *can’t* here! Now get moving, or do I have to poke a bayonet up your backside?”

“Yes sir,” Pip said, taking a few cautious strides forward.

“You call that running? Move it, come on, move it!”

Pip’s legs began to ache, feeling like they were encased in lead, but to his surprise they didn’t cramp as he picked up the pace. He reached the end of the straight, extending his stride a little more as he rounded the wide arc at the far end of the field. *‘Half a lap down and only four and a half more to go,’* he thought, wondering if he’d still be alive by the time the sun rose.

“That was pathetic,” Croft said as Pip fell to the ground after staggering to the end of his fifth lap. “I don’t know what the commander sees in you, I honestly don’t. If it were up to me, I’d shoot you now and be done with it.”

“Please,” Pip wheezed, “be my guest, sir.”

His expression turned to shock as Croft pulled his pistol from his belt.

“There now, you don’t crave death as much as you thought. Another five laps, please.”

Pip pulled himself to his feet, shaking his head.

“Right,” Croft said, “go and have a shower then grab some lunch in the mess hall. Meet me back in the marshalling yard in thirty minutes and we’ll start on your weapons training.”

“Yes sir,” Pip gasped, thinking weaponry would have to be a piece of cake after what he’d just been through. His legs almost dropping off, he hobbled back towards the barracks.

“Have you ever fired a rifle?” Croft asked.

“No sir.”

“You’ve never been hunting?”

“No sir.”

“No fairground shooting galleries?”

“No sir.”

Pip expected another clip across the ear, but Croft just smiled.

“That’s good, Ingle, really. It means you’ve no bad habits we have to undo.”

“I see. Thank you, sir.”

“We’ll start you off on the simulator, as there’s less chance of you shooting yourself in the foot with that, or shooting me in the foot for that matter.”

Pip chanced a grin, but Croft just shook his head and sighed.

“Hold it against your shoulder with the pointy end aimed at the target,” Croft said as he handed Pip the electronic rifle. “Now take aim through the sights and see if you can hit it.”

Pip squinted, taking careful aim at the concentric rings glowing on the display screen on the far wall, before pulling the trigger and almost falling over backwards from the simulated recoil.

“Not bad, you actually hit the front wall. You see, I wasn’t joking about you shooting yourself in the foot.”

“No, you weren’t, sir.”

“Try again.”

“Good,” Croft said as Pip hit the centre of the target for the tenth time in succession. “You’re doing a lot better than I would have expected. Okay, let’s try something a little different.”

He pressed a button on the control console, replacing the target image with a picture of baby David. “Kill him!”

“What?”

“Kill him now. Do it!”

Pip raised the rifle, taking aim and steadying himself while remembering the darkness he’d seen in David’s eyes. ‘*Cold and absolute death,*’ he thought, ‘*the mark of Drago.*’ Taking a deep breath, he adjusted his aim a little and pulled the trigger.

A loud squishing noise echoed around the room as the image of David’s head exploded into a mangled pulp of blood and bone. As

pieces of simulated gore rained down on him, Pip doubled over, depositing his half-digested lunch across the floor.

“There’s a mop and bucket in the corner at the back,” Croft said. “Clean it up, then go and take a shower while I report to the commander.”

Pip retched again.

Pip sat alone in the mess hall, looking despondently at the uneaten dinner in front of him while his whole body ached as much as his legs. He picked up his knife and fork, tempted to take a small bite, but as soon as he did he saw the image of David’s head exploding and had to swallow hard to stop his gorge from rising again. He pushed the plate away, shaking his head in abject misery.

“Have you enjoyed your first day?” the commander asked, slapping him on the shoulder after sneaking up behind him. Pip jumped, causing a spasm of fresh pain to dart up and down his spine.

The commander sat beside him, pushing Pip’s dinner back in front of him. “Eat it, Ingle; it’ll make you feel better.”

Pip cut off a small piece of meat, pushing it into his mouth and going through the motions of chewing and swallowing. When it didn’t come straight back out, he tried another piece.

“Croft told me about what happened this afternoon,” the commander said. “You shouldn’t feel ashamed, it just means you’re reasonably human and civilised, but don’t worry, we can soon fix that.”

“Yes sir,” Pip said, trying to swallow.

“There’s only ever been one fresh recruit who didn’t react the way you did.”

“You, sir?”

“Oh no, not me,” the commander laughed. “That honour went to my former Commanding Officer, the late Brett Farley. You’ve heard of him, no doubt.”

“I have, yes sir.” Pip remembered again that terrible day in school when news of the Farley massacre had come through. *‘Some bad men have taken over the government building in the capital, and it looks like some of the council may have been killed,’* his music teacher had said to the class. Bad men, indeed.

“According to rumour, the image they put up for him to shoot was his father.”

Pip swallowed hard as his gorge tried to rise again.

“I think, by the time we’ve finished with you, you’ll be as great a soldier as he was, perhaps even greater.” The commander slapped him on the shoulder again as he stood and marched out of the hall, leaving Pip to scurry to the bathroom before emptying his stomach into the toilet.

Pip flopped onto his bunk, too tired to remove his uniform. His whole body ached, from the top of his head to the ends of his toes, and with that thought he pushed himself upright and at least managed to remove his boots. Sighing with a little relief, he half unbuttoned his shirt before pulling it over his head and throwing it on the floor. With the last of his energy, he struggled out of his trousers and flopped back down, instantly asleep.

In his dreaming, he found himself standing in the ruined village while rising waters flooded all around him. The black dolphin floated towards him, placing its snout on his shoulder.

“You are the chosen one, Pip. The fate of us all rests upon you.”

“What must I do?”

“Follow orders, just follow orders. Withdraw into yourself, hide your humanity and become the killing machine they want you to be. For now you must suffer, as through suffering comes clarity and strength, but a time of awakening will come, for you and the Other.”

“The Other?”

“You must pass beyond redemption when the stars grow dim. Remember that, Pip –”

“– in my years of sorrow ahead.”

The dream faded as his consciousness dissolved away into nothing.

Assassin

Mark sat on the edge of his desk, his legs dangling and his toes spread wide apart as the television crew made ready for his live broadcast.

“Ten seconds,” the producer said, prompting him to brush a few strands of hair from his face and rub his suddenly itchy nose. “Five, four, three, two, one...”

“Hello everyone, and I hope you’re well and enjoying life wherever you might be. Five years have passed since I became your Supreme Councillor, although I can scarcely believe they’ve gone so quickly, so perhaps now’s a good opportunity to reflect on what we’ve achieved and look forward to what might be in store for the future.

“I’ll begin by thanking you all for your overwhelming support and your wonderful effort in building our galaxy into the vibrant and prosperous civilisation it’s become. Everywhere I go, I’m constantly amazed, bewildered even, meeting with you all and learning something of your diverse lives and cultures, and I’m truly honoured to have been able to serve you over this time.

“It’s also five years since Damien and his team of Barefooters began work on the restoration of Huntress, and I’m pleased to report that the initial phase of spinning up the planet and moving it back into its correct orbit has almost been completed. Work will now focus on safely shutting down the star-dimming device that was the initial cause of that world’s calamity, and I’m sure you’ll all join me in wishing them every success in their endeavour.

“Coming up soon is also the fifth anniversary of the birth of my children, Loraine and David, and to mark the occasion we’ll be holding a birthday party on the beach outside the Temple on

Bluehaven. While Lorina and I would love to invite you all to attend, we simply don't have a big enough beach, and so instead we've decided to conduct a ballot. The lucky one thousand families drawn at random will receive free transport to and from Bluehaven as well as free accommodation as our guests for the day. To register, simply go on-line to the Temple's website or visit your nearest Post Office. Good luck, and Lorina and I look forward to meeting as many of you as we can.

"I thank you, one and all, for your hard work and dedication that's made my five years in office such a wonderful experience. We've achieved a lot together, but this is only the beginning of what I hope will be a long and sustained period of growth and prosperity for us all."

Loraine and David ran forward to embrace their father as soon as the red light on top of the camera went out.

"Daddy, are we really going to have a great big birthday party on the beach?" Loraine asked.

"Of course! It's going to be a wonderful day with lots of people and games and yummy food."

"Loraine and I will be King and Queen for the day!" David said.

"Of course you will," Mark said, giving them each a big hug.

"Can we wear crowns?" Loraine asked.

"I don't see why not."

"Daddy, why don't you wear a crown?" David asked, now looking very serious. "You're the King of the Universe, aren't you?"

"No I'm not," Mark laughed. "A king is someone who rules by his own volition, whereas I rule only because the people want me to. Do you understand the difference?"

"What's *vol-volition*?"

"It means making yourself king because you want to be."

"Like being selfish?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I don't want to be a selfish king."

"I'm sure you won't be."

"You'll *never* be king," Loraine said, "because *I'll* be queen and have you locked up in a tower for ever and ever."

David looked stricken for a moment until Loraine giggled.

“That’s enough, sweetheart,” Lorina said. “I’m sure our galaxy’s big enough for a king *and* a queen.”

“You’re right, Mummy, and I was just being silly. I’ll only lock David in the tower if he’s naughty.”

“Come on, Your Highnesses,” Mark said, ruffling their hair, “and let’s see if we can’t find some dinner fit for royalty.”

“Yum, yum, yum,” David said, running ahead of them.

“I’m a bit worried about Loraine,” Lorina said once the children were in bed.

“You mean about her teasing David?” Mark asked. “I’m sure that’s pretty normal for a five-year-old.”

“No, it’s not that. By now her psychic powers as the next High Priestess should be starting to develop, but I can sense nothing as yet.”

“Perhaps she’s just a late starter. She’s fifty percent Earthling, after all.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I guess I’m still a bit jittery after all that talk about prophecies, and then that awful Pip Ingle coming here and wanting us to kill David.”

“Yeah, that was so creepy. Damon said he disappeared without a trace soon after arriving back on Meridian. The poor kid was deranged, and probably died of a brain aneurism or something.”

Lorina nodded thoughtfully. “I was really impressed with what David said about not wanting to be a selfish king. It made me just so proud of him.”

“Yeah, hardly the makings of a tyrannical ogre, that’s for sure. Poor Pip, you know I really liked him when I first met him on Huntress. It just goes to show you can never tell, I suppose.”

“He was Damon’s childhood friend, wasn’t he?”

Mark nodded. “Damon was pretty cut up when I told him about what happened, and then Pip’s disappearance on top of that, but he got over it pretty quickly. The work they’re doing on Huntress has him too busy to get caught up over lost friends.”

“Frank’s been telling me about that. They’ve found huge cities buried under the ice on what used to be the dark side of the planet.”

“The archaeologists are having a field day, that’s for sure, and Damon and Frank are in the thick of it.”

“I just hope they don’t stir up any old ghosts.”

“That prophecy stuff really does have you spooked, doesn’t it?”

Lorina nodded sheepishly while Mark wrapped her in a hug and kissed her on the nose. “Everything’s sweet, I promise. It was just one big storm in a teacup, that’s all.”

* * *

“Is that it?” Damon asked, staring out at the small metal cube floating alongside their spacecraft.

“Yes, that’s the star-dimmer,” Damien said.

“But it’s so small! It couldn’t be any more than, what, a metre along each side?”

“A bit less actually, but that’s it all right. It’s locked precisely opposite the centre of gravity of Huntress’s sun, and it’s responsible for maintaining the subspace shell that’s diverting most of the star’s energy across to this side of the fold.”

“Incredible. How do we turn it off?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

Damien remembered saying, back when the restoration of Huntress was mere speculation, that, *‘once you have its orbit and spin back where you want it, you turn off the star-dimmer and you’re back in business.’* It sounded like the easy part back then, and he supposed he’d just imagined there’d be a big *OFF* button on the side, but real life was never that simple.

“Can’t you just nuke it?” Damon asked.

“We could, certainly, but stopping it suddenly like that would most likely trigger a shock wave in the star’s corona similar to the one that caused all the damage in the first place. We need to shut it down gradually.”

“Oh.”

“I was hoping you might have had some suggestions.”

“I, no, but hang on, what’s that on the side?”

“Where?”

“On the left, down near the bottom.”

Damien strained his eyes, trying to see what his son was referring to. “Can we move any closer to it?”

“I’ll try,” the pilot said, “but I really don’t want to bump against that thing. It gives me the willies just being this close to it. I’ve got a pair of binoculars somewhere, if that’s any help.”

“Thank you, yes, that would be a big help.”

“It looks like a small round hole,” Damien said.

“Let me take a look,” Damon said.

His father handed him the binoculars.

“Hey, I know what it is!”

“Well?”

“We need to bring Clem here.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a socket for that black dolphin amulet he wears around his neck. He said it’s the key for activating a lot of the Old People’s stuff.”

“Ah, I remember now, he used it to open that portal.”

“Exactly.”

* * *

Clem stared out the window at the planet below. He’d seen news footage of Huntress throughout the restoration process, but this was the first time he’d seen his home world in real life since leaving five years ago. Strangely, he didn’t think it looked all that much different.

One half of the planet was still frozen, the parts of it now in sunlight sparkling like jewels. The lakes of molten rock that once covered the other half had solidified, on the surface at least, and the toxic brown and yellow clouds had disappeared, so that was something, he supposed, but it still didn’t look very hospitable.

“The temperature around the equator is levelling out at about minus twenty,” Damien said. “We need to shut down the star-dimmer now to start melting the ice, and once that happens the place will look a lot better.”

“Will there be oceans?”

“Yes, we reckon there’s enough water to cover about three quarters of the planet’s surface once it all melts.”

“Wow!”

“I reckon it’ll be a pretty nice place once we’ve finished with it.”

Clem just stared, trying to imagine the blue seas and white clouds that would be coming soon.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, sure.” He looked back over his shoulder at the vista one more time, before following Damien to the control ship’s docking bay.

“It took us a while to figure out how to get to the star-dimmer,” Damien said as they walked along the narrow corridor. “On this side of the fold, the star’s corona is far too hot for us to take a ship through, while on the other side, the radiant energy would vaporise us before we got anywhere near it.”

“What about through subspace itself?”

“At first I thought the energy flux being diverted across would form an impenetrable barrier, but when we analysed it a bit more closely, it turns out there’s a safe passage through.”

“Do you think they designed it that way?”

“It seems likely. After all, they might have needed to carry out maintenance from time to time.”

“So why couldn’t they have just gone through and turned it off themselves?”

“That’s a very good question.”

“Do you think what happened might, um, might not have been an accident?”

Damien just smiled.

* * *

“Have you ever worn a spacesuit before?” Damien asked Clem.

“No, never.”

“The trick is not to hyperventilate. If you feel that starting to happen, just hold your breath for twenty seconds.”

“Um, okay.”

“Are you ready?”

“I guess so.”

Damien led him out of the airlock, slowly crossing the few metres of space separating them from the star-dimmer. He’d wanted to take the amulet and do it himself, but Clem wouldn’t be parted from it.

“Is it safe to touch the dimmer?”

“Yes, it’s not hot or emitting any radiation.”

Clem used one hand and his legs to clamp himself around the dimmer, before carefully clasping the amulet in his free hand and pushing it into the socket.

For a moment nothing happened, but then a cover on the side slid across, revealing a control panel.

“Excellent!” Damien said, but his joy was short-lived as he took in the myriad of controls and the incomprehensible labelling on them.

Clem stared at the symbols, forcing himself to relax as he turned his mind back to the ancient texts he’d once studied, texts written by the Old People and translated over many eons by the Black Delphinidae scholars. Looking at each control and indicator, he tried to build up a mental picture of how the device might be used. A vision opened in his mind of ancient technicians, floating in white spacesuits much like he was, adjusting each control and calibrating the dimmer until everything was just right. He saw now how the safe passage through the energy flux was maintained, and realised with a shiver that if they’d just barged in and started turning knobs up and down at random, they may well have imprisoned themselves inside the subspace shell surrounding them.

“I think I know what I have to do,” he said cautiously.

“Be careful now, and take your time. We need to shut it down gracefully.”

“The people who designed it knew all about that. There’s a safe shutdown procedure built into it, I’m sure.”

“You can tell that just from looking at it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then, go ahead and do it. You obviously know a lot more about this thing than I do.”

Clem held his breath as he reached inside and pressed the first button of the closedown sequence. A light flashed red three times

before turning to green. *'That's right,'* a voice said inside his head, *'wait till it turns green.'* He pressed the next button of the sequence.

"That should do it, I think," Clem finally said.

"Good," Damien said, breathing a sigh of relief that it hadn't exploded in their faces. "Let me just check with the control ship and see if they're registering any change."

"There's been no change in the opacity of the shell," the voice of the chief astrophysicist on board the control ship said inside Damien's helmet. *"Whatever you've done, it's made no difference here."*

"They said nothing's happened, but perhaps there's a time delay or something," he said to Clem.

"There shouldn't be. I'm sure I did everything right, I'm sure."

"It's not your fault. Perhaps the controls just don't work any more. That would explain why the Old People couldn't –"

"Are you there, Damien?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"You can call me an idiot all you want, but I forgot to allow for the time it takes for the light to get from the shell to here. The star's brightening now, brightening as I speak. You've done it!"

"Did you hear that, Clem?"

"Woo-hoo!"

"Let's get out of here before it decides to blow up or something, and don't forget your amulet."

As Clem pulled the ebony dolphin from its socket, the cover slid back across the opening, merging seamlessly with the skin of the dimmer.

* * *

"Welcome to Bluehaven, sir," the customs official said to the young soldier, handing him back his security pass. "Your presence here is welcome, of course, but I'm sure we won't have any trouble."

"I've no doubt everything will be fine," the soldier said, smiling, "but it always pays to be prepared."

“Of course, and I hope you get the chance to enjoy some of the festivities.”

“Thank you.”

The soldier passed quickly through the arrivals lounge, weaving his way around the many family groups gathered there, all winners in the Supreme Councillor’s ballot, no doubt.

His vehicle was waiting for him in the seventh row of the car park, just as the commander had said. Casually checking that he was unobserved, without making it *look* like he was checking, he threw his pack into the boot and unlocked the driver’s door.

The road north through Highcastle was busy but he was in no rush and was content to sit back and enjoy the scenery. It amused him that, in his former life as a Delphinidae student, he’d lived in the Temple compound for close on three years and yet had never taken the time to go touring around Dolphin Island or any of the other smaller islands on Bluehaven. Not that he’d be likely to be able to do that any time in the future, he thought, chuckling to himself.

The traffic thinned once he passed through Fornost, with many of his fellow travellers stopping there for a rest break, and soon he was descending through the winding cuttings to the coastal flats on the north-western tip of the island. There being no roads into the Temple itself, he’d be leaving his vehicle somewhere near the ruins of the old Imperial Palace and hiking from there to his final destination, and that prompted him to take a closer look at what was left of Morgoth’s old stronghold.

The commander had once told him he’d been there when the palace had collapsed all around him. *‘I was the only survivor,’* he’d said, *‘forced to listen to the cries for help from the thousands of soldiers buried alive in the ruins while those do-gooders from Earth jumped in their ship and flew back to celebrate their victory.’*

Now here the young soldier stood, peering through the fence at the desolate piles of broken masonry and hearing in his mind the screams of horror from those soldiers, victims of the man whose son he was destined to kill. But from amidst the clamour rose another voice, timid and weak yet unmistakable, the voice of a young man haunted by what he’d done that day.

‘I killed a man once. Everyone said I was the hero, because he was one of Morgoth’s men and had been responsible for the Meridian massacre, but I sure didn’t feel like one. That was eight years ago, but I still have nightmares about it. I don’t, I don’t think you ever get over something like that.’

The soldier covered his face as the conflict rose within him. “No Chris,” he said out loud. “I have my orders and will not be turned aside.” He picked up his pack, hoisting it over his shoulders as he marched back towards the east and the fulfilment of his destiny.

At the top of the ridge he turned right off the well-worn path, going cross-country instead towards the rocky outcrop south of the Delphinidae Temple. From there he’d have a clear view back onto the beach and the marquee where his target would be seated during the formal part of the day’s proceedings.

With the sounds of the joyous crowds drifting up to him, he quickened his pace, skirting behind what little cover there was on the open ground and hoping no-one would spot him and raise the alarm.

After what seemed an age, he finally reached the narrow spur of rock jutting out into the sea at the end of the beach and, finding a suitable crevice in which to hide, began removing his weaponry from his pack and carefully assembling it.

* * *

Mark tapped the microphone in an attempt to attract the attention of the crowd of revellers.

“Everyone, if you can spare me just a few moments of your time, there’s a short ceremony we perform on Earth to mark the anniversary of a birth, or in this case, two births.”

Two servants from the Temple stepped forward, each carrying a huge cake bearing five burning candles.

“We begin with a song, and I’d like you all to sing along as best you can.”

*Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,*

*Happy birthday dear Loraine and David,
Happy birthday to you.*

Loraine was the first to take a big huff, easily blowing out the five candles atop her cake to the cheers of the crowd.

“Now it’s your turn, David,” Mark said, but the boy had turned away, staring instead at the rocks lining the far end of the beach. “Davie, what is it?”

* * *

The soldier steadied his weapon, centring the sights on the boy’s head as he watched his sister blowing out the candles. His finger squeezed gently on the trigger, careful not to make any sudden movement that could send his shot wide; for he knew he’d only have one chance, just one shot at removing the threat to the civilised governance of his entire galaxy. *‘Drago, your vessel is sunk.’*

In his mind’s eye he could already see the boy’s head exploding, spraying blood and gore across Mark the Bewildered, pretender to Morgoth’s crown, and the treacherous High Priestess Lorina who’d once cast him out of her Order. He’d wanted to shoot them both as well, but the commander had insisted it be only the boy.

‘They’ll suffer much more, living with the death of their son,’ he’d said, and he was right of course. The commander was always right. *‘Here we don’t guess, we act, and when we act things happen, the right things.’*

“The right things,” he whispered, trying to convince himself, but that other voice, the one that had unnerved him so badly at the palace ruins, echoed once more in the back of his mind.

‘I killed a man once. I don’t, I don’t think you ever get over something like that.’

“No, not now,” the soldier said out loud, but at that moment the boy turned his head, staring straight at him with his big brown eyes and those deep black pupils, pools of coldness and death. Yet what he saw on the boy’s face wasn’t fear, or even defiance, but a simple pleading, a pleading for help.

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

“– when the stars grow dim,” Pip whispered as his finger fell away from the trigger. The gun slipped from his hands, bouncing down the rocks before plunging into the sea, while he stared in bewilderment at the scene before him, his gorge rising as he realised the horrific act he’d almost committed. But before he could turn away and empty his stomach, his legs seized up in excruciating cramp and he tumbled backwards down the rocks, striking his head and knocking himself out as he came to rest at the water’s edge.

A face, and hands reaching out to him, but then he was gone, far from the pain and suffering of his world.

* * *

“Davie, what’s wrong?” Mark asked.

“There’s a man on the rocks over there,” he said, pointing down the beach, “but I think he might have hurt himself.”

“I’ll get someone to check it out,” Mark said, turning, but Anton, whom Frank had loaned him to keep an eye on things, was already sprinting down the beach.

David took a deep breath, the man on the rocks now forgotten as he blew out his five candles to the cheering and applause of the crowd.

The Old People

Pip opened his eyes to the bright daylight streaming into his room, wondering how he'd managed to sleep through reveille, before recognising his surroundings as a hospital ward. Thinking he must still be recuperating from his heat stroke on Huntress, he shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs of what must have been a long and terrible dream, but when he tried to roll over he discovered he couldn't move his legs, and the reality of it all washed over him.

"Pip Ingle, what the devil have you been doing to yourself?" his old specialist asked as he walked into the room. "Didn't I tell you to go easy on those legs?"

"I, um, I think I got drafted into the military."

"I guessed as much from the uniform you were wearing when they brought you in here. We had to cut it off you; I hope you don't mind."

"No, burn it, destroy it, whatever; I never want to see it again, or those horrid boots." He shuddered. "Doctor, I, um, I can't move my legs."

"Are you at all surprised by that? You're thigh muscles are just so much minced meat; we've had to anaesthetise you from the waist down otherwise you'd be in unbearable pain, and I'd have been severing the base of your spinal cord had Damien not thought he could help you."

"Will I, will I be able to walk again?"

"I doubt it."

"But the commander said the pills he gave me would stop the cramps, and they did."

"Were they the pills we found in one of your pockets?"

"I guess so."

“They were powerful hypnotics; I think your commander brainwashed you with them.”

“Gosh.”

“Damien says they’ve just about worn off now, but you’ll probably be getting a few headaches in the coming days.”

“Who, um, who brought me in here?” The last thing Pip remembered was falling off the rocks with his legs cramping up beneath him.

“We did,” Frank said as he and Anton strode into the room. “I had Anton stationed at the birthday party, fearing there might be trouble, but I’d never dreamed the trouble would be you.”

“I found you half-drowned at the base of the rocks,” Anton said. “What were you doing there?”

“I, um, the commander wanted me to shoot David.”

“Was this your commander?” Frank asked, showing him a photo.

“He looked a little older, but yes, that’s him.”

“Hoskins,” Frank said. “I should’ve known he’d be behind this.”

“Who’s Hoskins?”

“He was once Brett Farley’s offsider, before weaselling his way into the civilian government and becoming Kevin Simmons’ aide.”

“I knew I’d seen him somewhere before,” Pip said, flicking his fingers. “It must’ve been during the television coverage of his election campaign.”

“There’s every chance Hoskins will attempt to recapture or kill you, so I’m leaving Anton here to keep watch.”

Pip gulped.

“Damien thinks –” Frank began, but at that moment Damien entered the ward.

“What is it I think?”

“You said Pip might still have a part to play in, um, in whatever’s happening.”

“That’s right,” Pip said. “David told me he needs my help to stop Drago.”

“David said that?” Frank asked.

“Our minds touched just as I was, um, about to shoot him. He knows Drago’s trying to take over his body, and we have to work together to stop him.”

“Not for a while yet,” Damien said. “For now the only work you’ll be doing is trying to mend those legs of yours.”

“Do you think, do you think there’s anything you can do for me?”

“I can’t magically make your muscles regrow, if that’s what you mean, but I can direct your body’s own healing resources, show them what to do to repair at least some of the damage, but it’ll be a long slow process and I don’t want you to expect miracles.”

Pip grimaced, close to tears. “I, um, I’ll be grateful for whatever you can do.”

Damien nodded, placing his hands on Pip’s numb thighs. “Right, let’s begin, shall we?”

* * *

Pip opened his eyes to see two people looking down on him.

“Mum? Dad?”

Richard Ingle smiled. “We came as soon as that man Halliday contacted us. What happened to you?”

“He said you were abducted by the military,” Patricia Ingle said. “Is it true?”

“Um, yeah, I guess so,” Pip said, sitting up and hugging them as best he could.

“My poor baby,” she said, holding his hand in a vice-like grip.

“I, um, I tried to come home, but you weren’t living there any more.”

“That was the weirdest thing,” Richard said. “Five years ago now, I guess it would’ve been, someone called to tell us we’d inherited a mansion on Bluehaven, in the town of Goldwater on the southern coast. At first we thought they were having us on, but our solicitor looked into it and it seemed genuine enough, but they insisted we not tell anyone we were going. Anyway, we’ve been living there ever since.”

“The doctor said they’d be discharging you into our care,” Patricia said.

“You’re not, your not angry with me, are you?”

“Of course not!” Richard said. “Mr Halliday said they’d taken you away and drugged you. We had no idea you were in any sort of trouble.”

Pip stared into space for a few moments. “Um, Dad, there’s something I need to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember, when I was little, probably about five or six, we went to the aquarium?”

“We went there a few times, I think.”

“It was a really hot day, and we saw some flat-tails in the tank and some crabs, and then, and then right down the bottom there was a pool with a black dolphin in it.”

“A what?”

“A black dolphin, and then I had a really bad attack of the cramps.”

Richard shook his head. “I know the day you mean, but the pool at the bottom was empty. I’d told you they had seals in it, and you were really excited about seeing them, but when we got down there that section was closed. The attendant said they were remodelling it or something, and the seals had been taken away.”

Pip stared at him. “But, but I’m sure there was a black dolphin in it, and the man said it was the only one in captivity, perhaps the only one still alive anywhere in the universe. Surely you remember?”

“I’m afraid there wasn’t, son. Truly.”

“You always had a very active imagination, Pip,” Patricia said.

“But I couldn’t have imagined it, could I?”

“I think you must have,” Richard said, “but you were right about the leg cramps. You screamed and screamed, and I didn’t know what was wrong or what to do. I think it was the first attack you’d had.”

“You’re right,” Patricia said. “I remember now, you rang me from the hospital to tell me what had happened, and I almost crashed the car getting down there.”

Pip shook his head. “There’s no black dolphin, then?”

“Only in the story books,” she said. “That’s probably what put it in your head, that book you were reading about magical people with their evil king who lived inside the mind of the dolphins.”

Pip couldn’t believe his ears. “What book was that?”

“I can’t remember now, it was so long ago.”

“You wouldn’t still have it, would you?”

“No,” Patricia said, blushing. “We threw out all your old stuff like that after you left home.”

“Please, Mum, try to remember what it was called. It could be really important.”

“I’ll try, but you had so many books when you were young, and they’ve all sort of merged together in my mind now.”

“There was one that really scared you,” Richard said, “but I’m not sure if it’s the same one. It was about a place where the sun exploded and the people went into the darkness where they built a fabulous city with a strange name.”

“Not Hades?”

“No, that’s the city of the dead, and these people were alive. It was something like *forgiveness*, but that’s not it.”

“Redemption,” Patricia said.

Pip gasped as a million bright lights suddenly flashed inside his head. “You must pass beyond Redemption when the stars grow dim.”

“What did you say, sweetheart?”

Before Pip could answer, the doctor entered the ward. “Ah, you’ve found him I see.”

“Yes,” Richard said, “but I think he’s a bit delirious.”

“Really? It’s probably just the after-effects of those pills he was taking.” He held his hand up in front of Pip’s face. “How many fingers?”

“Um, two.”

“Good boy! Now who’s the king of the galaxy?”

Pip stopped himself from saying *Drago* just in time. “Um, Mark the Bewildered.”

“Well done. I’m sure he’s fine, and I have good news for you. I’ve spoken to Damien and he’s happy for you to take him home with you.”

“That’s wonderful!” Patricia said, almost hugging the doctor. “When can we take him?”

“Whenever you like. I just need him to sign the discharge papers, and then he’s all yours.”

Pip snatched the pen from his hand and scrawled his signature on the forms. *'Redemption,'* he thought again.

* * *

"You have visitors," Richard said, poking his head into the living room where Pip was propped up on the sofa watching television.

Frank walked in, accompanied by a tall gangling young man in his early twenties.

"Clem, is that you? You're, um, you're all grown up now!"

Clem blushed. "How are you feeling, Pip?"

"Not too bad, and the stuff Damien's been doing is helping a lot. I have some movement back in my legs now."

"That's good to hear," Frank said. "We were wondering if you'd feel up to a little travelling."

"Yeah, sure, if you don't mind pushing me along in a wheelchair."

"My young assistant here should be quite capable of doing that."

Clem nodded.

"Where are we going?"

"To Huntress, of course."

Pip gazed in wonder at the planet below. The last time he'd been here, half of it had been a frozen wasteland while the other half consisted mostly of lakes of molten rock. Now there were seas, with vegetation clearly evident along the coastlines, and in the blue haze of the atmosphere, white fluffy clouds floated here and there.

"We still have a fair way to go yet," Frank said, "but the ice is melting pretty quickly now and the sea level's rising noticeably every day."

"They reckon we'll be able to establish the first permanent settlements in about a year," Clem said.

"Gosh," Pip said. It only seemed a couple of years to him since he'd become the ogres' hostage, with his five years in the military now mostly a blank space in his mind. "Will the ogres be coming home soon?"

"We think in about two years," Frank said. "We need to be sure they'll have adequate fresh water and productive farmland."

A flash of reflected sunlight on the horizon caught Pip's attention. "What's that?"

"It's the edge of the ice-sheet," Frank said, "the part of the planet that was once in perpetual darkness. That's where we're taking you now."

The ship landed on a large flat expanse of ice. All around them were makeshift buildings, while behind them was what looked like an incredible frozen city.

"We've found hundreds of ancient settlements preserved under the ice," Frank said, "but this one's caused quite a stir amongst the archaeologists."

"They think it might have been Drago's palace," Clem said, pushing Pip's wheelchair across the ice and into the nearest building.

"You, um, you haven't found his remains, have you?" Pip asked.

"We've found lots of scattered bones, but they're too badly decomposed to be able to identify. This place was flooded after the apocalypse, and it probably took many thousands of years for the water to freeze."

"Oh, I see. I guess I'd been hoping to get some idea of what my adversary once looked like."

"Don't worry; you'll see him soon enough," Clem said.

A man dressed only in a pair of white shorts with gold trim burst out of a side door, almost bumping into Pip's wheelchair.

"Sorry," he said, before taking a good look at who was sitting in it. "Oh, it's *you*."

Pip had at first been puzzled, then hurt, dismayed and finally resigned to Damon's not wanting to see him or even call him during his long convalescence. Frank had repeatedly warned him not to call Damon, but wouldn't elaborate; only saying time would eventually heal the wounds.

"Hi, Damon," Pip said, trying to sound as cheerful as he could.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Frank and Clem wanted me to see Drago's palace."

"You have a nerve, after what you did to Mark and Lorina, and what you tried to do to David. Honestly, Pip, I don't know what's gotten into you."

“But isn’t, isn’t all this here, this palace, proof I was right?”

By now all the staff had turned to watch.

“Okay, I admit Drago really did exist, but I’ve seen no evidence, no evidence at all, that he’s in any way connected with the Dolphins, or poses any threat to the Order or anyone. All that stuff about reincarnated kings is just made-up stories meant to frighten little kids.”

‘You were reading about magical people with their evil king who lived inside the mind of the dolphins,’ Pip remembered his mother saying to him when they’d come to take him home from the hospital. Was Damon right; could it all just be made-up stories?

“I hope I’m wrong,” he said, “honestly I do.”

“No you don’t. You just want to play the hero and save the galaxy by killing this so-called threat, and if you destroy the Order in the process, well why would you care since you’ve been excommunicated anyway?”

“That’s enough, both of you,” Frank said. “Keep going, Clem, and Damon, get back to your work.”

“Yes sir,” Damon said, shaking his head and turning back in the direction he’d come from.

“We think this may have been Drago’s throne room,” Frank said as they entered a huge hall, its translucent domed ceiling soaring what Pip thought had to be hundreds of metres above them. On the side walls were frescos depicting winged lizards or dragons, while filling the front wall, behind a dais supporting a golden throne, hung a huge portrait of a man with dark skin, almost black, deep brown eyes with pupils like pools of frozen pitch, and atop it all, in glaring contrast to everything else, a thatch of bright red hair. Although much older than the eight-year-old David, the resemblance was so striking that Pip wondered how Damon could deny there was any link.

“He turns away if anyone tries to mention it,” Frank said, as if reading his thoughts. “Some day, though, he’ll just have to accept it, and when that happens he may well turn to you for support.”

Pip nodded, without taking his gaze off the image of Drago. *‘It’s the eyes,’* he thought, *‘those black pupils, pools of cold and absolute death.’*

'Kill him!' the voice of Sergeant Croft echoed in his head, and in his mind's eye he saw again that face exploding in a mass of blood and shattered bone.

"Are you okay?" Clem asked, although he sounded far away.

"Yes, bad memories, that's all," Pip managed to say.

"Come and I'll show you something else," Frank said.

Clem pushed him along behind Frank to the back corner of the room. There, a patch of the dragon fresco had come away, revealing something much older beneath it. Pip stared, trying to make sense of the image, when all of a sudden it hit him. Like a camouflaged animal hiding in the forest that you suddenly see appear as if out of nowhere, the creature leapt out of the flaking paint at him, assaulting his mind just as much as Drago's portrait had.

Peering out at him from behind swaying seaweed and corals, its eyes sad and mournful and full of loss, was the unmistakable form of the Black Dolphin.

"You can see it?" Clem asked.

"Yes, the Black Dolphin."

Frank nodded. "I can't see it, and nor can anyone else here except Clem."

"What's it mean?"

"It means you're a Black Delphinidae adept, Pip, perhaps the most powerful one alive."

* * *

"Come in," the elderly voice said, and Clem pushed Pip into the dimly lit room.

"This is Jacob, my grandfather," Clem said. "Grandfather, this is Pip."

"Forgive my darkened room, as bright lights hurt my eyes these days. Come closer, Pip, so I can see you better, and do not fear me; I'm but a humble seeker of truth."

Pip manoeuvred his wheelchair towards the old man sitting in an armchair in the corner.

"Clem tells me you've seen the Black Dolphin."

“Um, yes, a few times now,” Pip said.

“Amazing. I saw Him once, long ago, although I’m not sure now whether I might just have been dreaming. Young Clem is quite gifted, I’ve known that since he was born, and now he’s seen Him in that palace they’ve discovered, but you must be very much in His favour.”

“Clem said I’m an adept, but what does it mean?”

“Look at me, Pip, and tell me what you think I am.”

Superficially, the man looked Elvish, and Pip was about to say as much before noticing his eyes. While blue, they were a different blue to that of the people of Bluehaven; a deeper colour, less bright but seeming to glow with greater power in the dim light.

‘*What are Tivinel?*’ Pip recalled asking the ogres during his time as a hostage.

‘They were the high people, tall and fair-skinned like you Elves, and were the cause of all our troubles.’

A chill ran up Pip’s spine. “You’re not a Tivinel, are you?”

The old man smiled. “You’re half-right, Pip. We’re the half-castes, the progeny of Tivinel and Gomerall from the olden days. The pure-blooded Tivinel treated us with disdain, and we mostly lived apart, building our homes in the limestone caves high in the mountains.”

“So what happened to your people when the star-dimmer failed?”

“The caves protected us from the worst of the climatic upheavals, until the planet slowed so much that we had to become nomadic to avoid being alternately cooked and frozen. Our people followed the twilight zone around and around until the rotation finally stopped and we settled in our permanent village where you first met my son and his family.”

“Gosh. Have your people lived there all that time?”

“Indeed. Some tried moving north or south, but the pummel trees would only grow in our region so they eventually returned. Our population remained around ten thousand or so, although when the colonists arrived and built their prison, our ranks swelled somewhat as escapees were integrated into our community. It was probably a good thing too; otherwise we might well have been suffering the consequences of too much inbreeding by now.”

“I sensed Clem’s psychic powers the moment I met him. Do all your people have those powers?”

“No, being of mixed blood to start with, and then with the added dilution of the colonists, our powers are quite varied. My son Edwin and his wife carry little of our heritage, whereas, as you’ve seen, in Clem it’s quite strong. Likewise, your parents show little evidence of our trait.”

“My parents? But surely not, they were born on Bluehaven, weren’t they?”

“They were, yes, and so were your grandparents, but in the generation before that, many from our community felt uncomfortable with the activities of the Colony under Thornton’s government and emigrated to Bluehaven. Your great-grandparents were amongst those.”

“Gosh. Have you met my parents, then?”

“Yes, several times. I met your father on Meridian when you were young, and sensed straight away that you were a very special child. Do you know why they called you *Pip*?”

“Dad said it was because I was very small.”

“Huh, I like that! Always the joker, your father was. No, a pip is a seed, and from a tiny seed a great tree might someday grow. Even then, we saw in you the potential for greatness.”

Pip blushed. “Um, were you responsible for my parents moving back to Bluehaven?”

“Yes, well not just me, all of us. When you became involved with Mark and Damon, we feared your parents might be at risk, so we signed over a land-holding on Bluehaven to them. You can imagine our shock when we learnt you’d been abducted by the military as a result, and I’m truly sorry for what happened.”

“No, that’s okay, you weren’t to know. Gosh, Mum and Dad in the Black Delphinidae, I never would have guessed.”

“And we hope, for your sake and ours, that no-one else has guessed either.”

“So what is it I must do?”

“Clem has asked me to teach you in our ways, if you’re agreeable, that is.”

“I, um, of course, just as long as I don’t have to do any running.”

“No, nothing like that. Your confrontation with Drago will be a battle of psychic powers, and it’s those skills we need to hone.”

* * *

“Take my hand and project our spirits into Sheol,” Jacob said.

Pip did so, closing his eyes as he visualised pushing himself through the psychic membrane separating the real world from that realm. When he opened them again, he was in total darkness, apart from the brightly glowing spirit standing beside him.

“Well done, you’re doing it a lot quicker and easier now.”

“You’re right,” Pip said. “I’m having much less trouble than when I first tried it.”

“We’ll see how well your navigation skills have improved. Take us to the portal on the Meridian space station.”

Pip clapped his hands, listening intently to the reverberation through the chambers of Sheol. “This way.”

“I think it’s here,” Pip said as he came to a stop, still holding Jacob’s hand.

“Let’s see if you’re right. Generate some light for us, if you can, but not too bright.”

Pip closed his eyes again, concentrating this time on projecting out the glow that manifested in his spirit. When he opened them, the space around them shone with a dull orange light.

Directly in front of them, and silhouetted against the grey walls of Sheol, stood the black rectangle of the portal.

“Spot on this time,” Jacob said, smiling warmly.

“Do you want us to pass through it?” Pip asked.

“Good gracious, no. Our physical bodies are still in real space back in my room, and if we were to pass out through any of the portals, we’d become fully detached spirits, ghosts if you like.”

“What would happen then?”

“Our physical bodies would die.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t want to forget that, Pip. We’ve lost a few of our most promising adepts that way.”

“I won’t forget, I promise.”

“Good. Now see how quickly you can take us back into our physical bodies.”

Pip closed his eyes once more, pushing upwards and outwards with his thoughts until he felt his body wrapping itself around him.

“You’ve done exceptionally well today, Pip,” Jacob said, releasing his hand.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Clem said, knocking at the door.

“No, not at all, come on in. We’ve just about finished for the day.”

“Thank you, Granddad. Frank sent me to fetch Pip.”

“He’s all yours.”

Pip picked up his walking stick, turning his head back before passing through the door. “Thanks for the lesson.”

“Not at all, and don’t let Clem or Frank overexert you.”

“I won’t,” Pip laughed.

“What’s up?” he asked Clem once they were outside.

“Frank reckons everything’s now ready for the ogres to come home, and he and Damien have decided you should be the one to guide them through the portal.”

“Why me?”

“You were their hostage, remember?”

“I haven’t forgotten. I hope they’re not too angry with me for escaping.”

“You didn’t escape, you fell.”

“But I didn’t try to go back again.”

“Don’t worry about it. If they’re angry, so what? They can only come home if you open the portal for them.”

“I guess so.”

“How are your legs now?” Clem asked, changing the subject.

“Still pretty stiff, and I can’t go far without my walking stick, but it sure beats that wheelchair.”

“Yeah, I’m glad I don’t have to push you around in it any more. You’re a lot heavier than you look!”

“Thanks; with friends like you, who needs enemies?”

Clem grinned, but Pip’s thoughts turned back to Damon, the friend he’d lost but still needed; perhaps more than ever.

* * *

“Are you ready?” Frank asked.

“I guess so,” Pip said, wishing he could be anywhere else but here.

A marquee covered the portal, keeping any sunlight from falling on it while two young boys, children of the former fringe-dwellers who’d been born in the refugee centre on Cornipus, cleared away the rubble Damien had covered it with almost nine years ago. He and his team of Barefooters had completed their work a full year ahead of schedule, and Pip hoped that would count in his favour as he prepared to face the wrath of his former captors.

Before him stood Clem, wearing his coveralls rather than the Black Delphinidae shorts Pip had grown accustomed to seeing him in. The galaxy’s media were here in force, broadcasting this moment live on all the news channels, and he’d thought it unwise to attract any undue attention. On either side of him stood Edwin and Val, looking as proud as punch, while to their left stood Frank, shouting orders to all and sundry.

“You may open the portal now, Clem,” he said. Clem bent down, pushing the head of his ebony dolphin into the socket embedded in the ruined wall beside it, and the metal plate quickly disappeared beneath a shimmering light.

With Frank’s help, Pip crouched down, pushing his cane aside as he lowered himself into the portal. He was prepared for the ninety-degree rotation that occurred as he emerged from the vertical opening in the wall of Sheol, but even so, he still managed to tumble ungracefully out onto the floor. Immediately dozens of flickering lights appeared all around him.

“You have returned to us, little Elf,” one of the ogres said.

“Yeah, sorry, the portal opened when I was leaning on it and I fell out.”

“We know; we saw it happen. Have you learned much from your time outside?”

“Yes, I’ve learned a lot of your history and I’ve seen the face of Drago in the remains of his palace.”

“It’s good you know the peril we face. Can we go home now?”

“Yes, Damien and his Barefooters have fulfilled their bargain, and you may return to your world.”

“Thank you, Pip, and may the dimming of your stars be averted.”

“And yours,” Pip said, not sure if it was the right response, but the ogres didn’t seem to take offence. “You may pass through the portal now.”

“After you, little Elf.”

Pip leaned into the opening, trying to shift his balance as the direction of gravity rotated and he emerged from the horizontal portal beneath the marquee. Frank and Clem quickly bent down to help him up before he had a chance of falling back into it.

Taking hold of his cane, he hobbled aside as the ogres began emerging out into the daylight. The first thing he saw was a tuft of bright pink hair, followed by a short olive-skinned body that couldn’t have been any more than a metre tall. He held his hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh, as more and more of the pink-haired knobbly-kneed midgets emerged in front of him.

‘We, um, we can’t see them, right,’ he remembered saying when they’d first encountered the ogres in Sheol, *‘so we assume they’re big and fierce with long sharp teeth. But perhaps they’re not. Perhaps they’re little midgets with pink hair, pointy noses and knobbly knees.’*

“At least their noses aren’t pointy,” Clem whispered to him, and he had to bite his tongue to stop himself from laughing out loud.

The last of the ogres emerged from the portal, slightly taller than the others and with hair more grey than pink. He stepped out into the warm sunshine, sniffing the air and looking up into the clear blue sky dotted here and there with puffy white clouds, before turning back to Clem.

“You have kept your word, bearer of the Black Amulet,” he said in the common tongue. “I hold your oath fulfilled and return our hostage to your care.”

“I am honoured to have been of service,” Clem said in the Barungi’s native language.

“May the grace of the Black Dolphin be with you both,” he replied in that same tongue, bowing low to Clem and Pip in what would have been a comic gesture in any other circumstances.

‘There are no black dolphins,’ Pip remembered being told by the ogres, and he wondered yet again just what the Black Dolphin was.

The Dimming of the Stars

“One, two three, go!” Mark said, sending David and Loraine sprinting down the sand and into the water. They swam confidently out beyond the breakers to where the Dolphins were waiting for them.

“I still haven’t been able to sense anything of Loraine’s psychic powers,” Lorina said. “The Dolphins reckon everything’s fine, and the seed’s definitely in her, but still, I can’t help but worry.”

“I’m sure they’re right,” Mark said. “I mean, just look at her, out there swimming with them as if she were one herself. Surely that’s as good a sign as any.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but it’s a mother’s prerogative to imagine all sorts of dire ills for her children.”

“Speaking of Dolphins, Damien tells me they’ve started appearing in the seas of Huntress. They must’ve created an underwater portal from Sheol, I suppose.”

“It doesn’t take them long, that’s for sure, although I’d have thought the water would still be too cold for them.”

“Maybe they’re autothermic.”

“You know, I don’t think anyone’s ever considered that, but I suppose they must be since they gave Damien that gift.”

“It looks like those Barungi on Huntress, the ones we used to call ogres, might be autothermic too. Damien said they’re roaming all over the planet, including the ice sheets, without anything more than the crude shorts they were wearing when they came out of the portal.”

“I still can’t believe the most fearsome creatures known to us were really those funny little pink-haired people.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty wild,” Mark chuckled. “Did you see the look on Frank’s face when they all came bounding out? He must’ve been biting his tongue pretty hard.”

“Who was the one leading them out, the one with the walking stick? I didn’t get a good look at his face.”

“Either did I, but he was a friend of Clem’s, I gather, probably another of the fringe-dwellers.”

“Damien’s invited us to go there for a formal visit,” Lorina said. “It’ll be a good chance to meet up with Edwin, Val and Clem.”

“Yeah. Now here’s a thought; why don’t we combine the visit with Loraine and David’s tenth birthday party?”

“That’s a wonderful idea, honey. I’m sure the kids will love it.”

* * *

“How’s that feel?” Damien asked as he removed his hands from Pip’s thighs.

“Good, yes, really good.”

“You’ve made a remarkable recovery, that’s for sure. I’d like you to try walking short distances without your cane, just to strengthen those muscles a bit more, but don’t overdo it, okay?”

“Yeah, sure; *moderation* is my middle name.”

“Great. Well I’ll see you again in a couple of weeks for our next session.”

“Um, Damien, there’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Fire away.”

“On that planet that you and the Barefooters all went into exile on, was there, well, was there anyone else living there?”

Damien sat in silence, looking directly into Pip’s eyes.

“You’re asking about the Tivinel, aren’t you?”

Pip nodded.

“Yes, they were living in the mountains west of where we made our settlement. We would’ve been content to leave them alone, after all it was a pretty big planet and there weren’t very many of either of us, but they went totally berserk, calling us *infidels* and *Drago’s folly* and plenty of other insults in between. We had no idea at the time

what it might have been about, but when they went from verbal abuse to burning our homes and destroying our farms, we had to act.

“I’m not proud of what we did, and I’m not trying to make excuses, but things happen in the heat of battle, things we later regret. The other Barefooters can claim they were made in the image of the warlords, and so killing is in their nature, but I was just as bad as them and I can offer no such excuse.

“We drove the Tivinel before us, destroying their homes and villages in a frenzy that would’ve made Thornton proud of us, and ultimately trapped them all in a box canyon. With no way for them to escape, we set fire to the dry scrub across its mouth, watching with glee as the wind swept the flames up through it, killing every last one of them in its path.”

“Gosh.”

“To this very day, that canyon is haunted by their restless spirits, and none of us would go anywhere near it. It was that final act that cemented our vow to remain in exile and not to allow the birth of any new Barefooters; and yet here we are, back again amongst the very people we were trying to protect from ourselves.”

“Do you intend going back into exile?”

“We came here to help Mark and to restore Huntress, and we’ve achieved both our goals in spite of the misgivings expressed by the Proctor. If we stay, we run the risk of one of us trying to use our powers for political gain, and that’s the sure-fire slippery slope to instigating another Barefooter-led dictatorship.”

“When do you think you’ll leave?”

“We’ve decided to stay at least until Mark’s visit here, and we’ll probably make a formal announcement of our intentions then.”

“I, um, I’m really going to miss you.”

“And I’ll miss you too, Pip. You’ve been an inspiration to me, to all of us, that’s for sure.”

“What about Drago?”

“I think, Pip, that’s a battle you, and you alone, must ultimately fight.”

Pip nodded, now so close to tears, he thought if he tried to speak it’d just turn to blubber.

“You’ll do okay, Pip, I know you will.”

“Th-thanks, Damien.”

“What’s going to happen will be very hard on Damon. I know you two have your differences, but when the crunch comes, and if I’m not here, I’d like, well, I’d very much appreciate it if you could be there for him.”

“I will, I promise.”

Damien patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure your parents must be very proud of you.”

“Ah Pip,” Frank said, almost bowling him over as he stepped out of Damien’s office. “Just the man I want to see.”

“Um, yes?”

“You’ve no doubt heard that Mark, Lorina and the twins will be coming here for a state visit in four weeks time.”

“Yes, it’s been on all the news channels.”

“I’m not sure quite how to put this without offending you, but, um, given your previous history, it might be best if, well, if you weren’t here.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I’d like you to go back to Bluehaven and spend the time with your parents.”

“Okay then, and I’m not offended.”

“Are you sure?”

Pip sighed.

“You’re a marvel, Pip.”

“Be careful; if people keep telling me that, I might start believing it.”

“I wish all my staff were so easy-going.”

Pip thought this was a reference to Damon, but held his tongue.

“Just see Karen in the office and she’ll arrange transport for you.”

“Thanks, Frank.”

“No, thank you.”

* * *

Jason held Jenny’s hand as they descended from the shuttle, followed closely by Chris, Sandra and their six-year-old daughter.

“I’m glad you could all make it,” Frank said, dressed to the nines and looking very official.

“I’m amazed at what you and your people have done here,” Jason said. “When I last saw Huntress it was a desolate twilight ruin, but now, I’d scarcely believe it was the same planet.”

“What’s the story behind this island?” Jenny asked. “From the air it looks like something from a fabulous fairy story.”

“Quite incredible, isn’t it?” Frank said. “The archaeologists say it was once the palace of the Pasha, the ancient king of Huntress. We’ve decided to hold the official functions in the grand forecourt, to showcase both the history and the future of this world.”

“I’ve been looking forward to it so much,” Jenny said. “I can scarcely believe our grandchildren are turning ten already.”

“Yes, time flies so quickly these days. So how’s everything going back on Earth, post Gallagher?”

“It’s really good. Colonel Piper and his team did a wonderful job repairing the damage caused during the invasion, and since then Mark’s been keen to set up diplomatic and trade missions between our two galaxies. It’s great to see so much good will on both sides.”

“Mark’s breathed new life into this galaxy, that’s for sure,” Frank said. “I’d have hardly believed it possible, after the stagnation of Morgoth’s rule and then the fiasco when Kevin Simmons was running the place.”

“We’re both so proud of him,” Jason said.

“And so you should be. Now Chris, I haven’t seen much of you lately. How are you and Sandra faring?”

“Quite well, thank you. Sandra completed her studies at the Temple on Bluehaven and is now a counsellor helping those still suffering in the aftermath of the invasion.”

“It’s hard at times,” Sandra said, “but very gratifying to see the positive results we’re achieving. Chris did a degree in psychology and is now working towards his doctorate.”

“Excellent,” Frank said. “What’s your field of research?”

“I’m investigating the links between Sheol and certain parapsychological manifestations.”

“Ghosts and goblins,” Sandra said, forcing a chuckle out of Chris.

“It’s a fascinating field,” he said, “and already finding application in the treatment of some psychiatric illnesses.”

“And of course we now have our own little goblin to look after,” Sandra added.

“I’m not a goblin, Mummy.”

“Of course you are, sweetheart.”

She kissed her daughter on the forehead as they approached the crowd of people gathered around the official podium.

“Come and I’ll introduce you to the dignitaries,” Frank said.

The podium was on a platform built out over the water. Mark was unsure why that was, but it was part of the original structure that had been preserved in the ice so he presumed it must have been done that way for a reason.

Beside him stood Hamati, the Barungi chieftain representing his people; Clem, representing the fringe-dwellers, now known as the Huntress free-settlers; Russell, representing the former prisoners in the Colony and whose evidence led to the conviction of the former Governor and his henchman, Smithers, for a variety of crimes including the slaying of the baby Dolphin; Damien, the Fisherman, representing the Barefooters who’d brought about the restoration of the planet; and Damon, representing the Delphinidae who’d provided much of the logistics support over the last ten years.

Behind Mark sat Lorina and the twins, the latter both with eyes fixed firmly on the two huge birthday cakes each bedecked with ten unlit candles.

Unseen by them, but growing rapidly in number, were the Dolphins, swimming silently just below the surface beneath and behind the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Frank said, in his self-appointed role as Master of Ceremonies, “on behalf of the Barungi, the free-settlers and all those involved in the restoration of Huntress, I welcome our Supreme Councillor and Head of State, Mark the Bewildered.”

“Praise the Bewildered One,” cheered the crowd until Mark stepped forward, raising his hands to silence them.

“Keep it short, Mark!” someone yelled.

“Thanks for the advice,” Mark said, grinning, “and I’ll do my best to honour it. Ten years ago, when I first came to power, I spoke of a world, this world, that had long ago suffered a terrible calamity when its sun had suddenly dimmed. I spoke also of a people, survivors of that horrific event, who’d been trapped in Sheol for millions of years, awaiting a day when their world might be restored. Thanks to Damien, his Barefooters and all the hard-working support staff here, that day has arrived, and I officially welcome home Hamati and the Barungi people he represents.”

The crowd cheered and applauded as Hamati stepped forward. Frank lowered the microphone for him.

“I speak on behalf of all Barungi when I say big thank you to Damien and other men and women who make all this happen, and to Clem, bearer of Black Amulet, for honouring truth-seekers’ pledge. We be good people now, work with you Gomer and Elves for happy and peaceful galaxy.”

“Thank you, Hamati,” Mark said, looking a little bewildered. “I indeed welcome your offer of peace and respect your right of self-determination. Ten years ago, I also spoke of a prophecy claiming that the leader of the original inhabitants of Huntress would rise up against us. Hamati, by your words today, you have proved that prophecy false!”

The crowd cheered in acclamation as Hamati accepted Mark’s offered hand of friendship, a gesture of allegiance that could never be honourably broken. David, however, growing weary of the speeches and handshaking, slipped unseen from his chair and crept silently back towards the edge of the platform. A lone Dolphin broke the water with its head, smiling and nodding, beckoning him forward.

“Today we also remember those who have suffered more recently on this world,” Mark continued. “For a million years, Huntress was used as the galaxy’s penal colony, a place where those deemed unfit for society could be pushed out of sight, and out of mind. I know, as for a short while I was one of those. Undoubtedly some of the prisoners deserved incarceration, but many didn’t, and in any case, none deserved the inhumane treatment by the authorities running the Colony, nor the poisoning of their bodies from constant exposure to this world’s toxic atmosphere or the drugs that hastened their demise.

I announce today that the Colony, and its surrounding crater, will become a permanent memorial to –”

“Oh my God!” Jenny cried out from amongst the crowd. “David!”

As everyone turned their attention to the back of the podium, David toppled over, plunging, in what looked like slow motion, into the icy water below.

At the moment the boy touched the surface, the sea around him erupted in a boiling mass of grey bodies and fins, pushing him rapidly away from the podium.

Mark turned and leapt, shoving aside the startled dignitaries as he sprinted towards the edge and dived in after his son. Lorina stood, watching with her hand over her mouth, as his head broke the surface.

“Where is he?” Mark yelled, spitting out water in the process. “I can’t see anything down here through the Dolphins.”

“Behind you and to your right!”

Mark turned in the water and tried to swim, but the Dolphins held him back. By now, Clem, Damon, Damien and Hamati had joined him, but they too were held back by the Dolphins. Hamati took a deep breath before plunging beneath the surface.

“Lorina, tell them to let us through!” Mark yelled.

“I’m trying,” she said, grimacing with her eyes tightly closed, “but they’re not listening to me!”

“He’s gone under!” Frank yelled as David’s head disappeared below the surface. Mark and the others struggled frantically against the wall of Dolphins, but there was no way through.

A tuft of greyish pink hair broke the surface just below the edge of the podium, followed by the rest of Hamati’s head. He reached down, his head going under again as he pulled David out of the water and into the waiting arms of Lorina and Jenny. Within moments they had him up on the deck.

“I’ve had first aid training,” Sandra said, pushing forward. “Roll him onto his side.”

She knelt down beside him, pulling his jaw open and allowing a torrent of seawater to flow out. After checking his pulse, she was about to roll him onto his back to commence resuscitation when he

coughed up another large quantity of water. Wheezing at first, his breathing soon settled as Lorina cradled him in her arms.

David opened his eyes, and for the first time, Lorina saw the depths of cold blackness in his pupils.

“Let go of me, woman,” he snarled, pushing her away and scrambling to his feet. For a moment another cough wracked him, but then he straightened up, looking around at the ancient palace and the crowd of people surrounding him.

“What are all these Gomerals doing here? Where are my Tivinel?”

Hamati, with help from Mark and Clem, pulled himself up onto the podium, staring in awe at the red-headed boy standing before him.

“Is that you, Hamati?” David asked, probing him with his eyes. “What have you done with my Tivinel? Answer me!”

“Your mind powers no longer control the Barungi, Drago,” Hamati said, staring back at him. “The Elf spirits we consumed while exiled in Sheol have strengthened us against you.”

David’s eyes bulged. “Perhaps that’s true, but I have other powers.”

Those around him gasped as Hamati’s hair burst into flames. He turned and ran, diving back into the water to extinguish the fire.

“You, half-caste,” David said, pointing at Clem. “Escort me into my palace.”

“Your will, my lord,” Clem said, taking him by the hand and leading him up the steps to the huge golden doors, with Mark and the others following close behind.

David climbed onto the dais at the end of the hall, seating himself on the golden throne beneath the portrait of Drago. Lorina gasped, her eyes darting up and down between the face of her son and the face in the painting, looking forlornly for any difference, any difference at all.

“Oh God, what have we done?” Mark whispered.

“Where are my Tivinel?” David shouted, but only silence filled the hall. He looked around the room, taking in all the Gomerals faces staring at him in a mixture of anger, awe and disgust.

“Very well, but if I’m to be kept in the dark then perhaps the rest of this galaxy should be too. Half-caste, loosen their tongues. Activate the star-dimmers!”

“As you wish, my lord,” Clem said, bowing before walking casually over to the side wall and inserting the head of his black amulet into a socket. A concealed panel slid aside, revealing a set of controls not unlike those on the Huntress star-dimmer.

“Clem, don’t!” Frank shouted, running towards him, but David pointed a finger at him, dropping him to the floor.

The others watched on in shocked silence as Clem reached into the panel and began keying in the activation sequence.

* * *

Owen stepped from the courthouse, trying to put the terrible morning behind him. In what should have been a straight-forward acquittal, the judge had constantly overruled his points of order while allowing the prosecution the most blatant twisting of the law, leaving his defence in tatters. The jury had retired to consider their verdict, a mere formality now it seemed, and he hoped a walk through the park and some lunch by the fountain might lift his spirits a little.

He was halfway across the road when the light began to dim. At first he thought a cloud had passed over the sun, but a quick glimpse upwards proved otherwise. An eclipse, perhaps, he wondered, as he’d witnessed several of those during his time on Bluehaven, but he remembered now that Meridian had no moon.

A chill ran up his spine as he feared his sight might be failing, but then the streetlights flickered on all around him, eliminating that possibility. He looked skywards again, but what had minutes before been their dazzlingly white sun, was now just a faint reddish disc.

On Nimber, Commander Hoskins was inspecting his new recruits when the light began to fade. As the red-alert siren wound up into its raucous scream, he grabbed the nearest field telephone and called General Gallagher.

Holiday-makers on Shimmel, businessmen on Hazler, farmers on Amber and Sontar, miners on Ignus, spice-growers on Frizian, academics on Cornipus, soldiers on Pulper; all looked up in despair as their respective suns faded and went out, plunging those worlds into perpetual darkness.

* * *

On Bluehaven, where the sun still shone, Pip watched in horror as the events of the day flashed before him on the television screen.

“Chaos continues across the galaxy as the suns on ten of our principal worlds have been extinguished. Traffic gridlock has been reported in many of our cities as people attempt to flee to the countryside, while gangs of looters are running riot through business districts, stretching police resources to the limit.

“There are unconfirmed reports that the star-dimming devices, apparently put in place millions of years ago, were activated from Huntress by David Collins, the ten-year-old son of Mark the Bewildered and now the reincarnated king of the ogres.

“General Gallagher, who ten years ago warned of such an event, has declared a state of emergency, and with the full support of the Council, has taken over governance of the galaxy. We understand a strike-force is already on its way to Huntress to meet this challenge head-on, while military scientists are analysing the dimming devices in an attempt to deactivate them.

“All civilian space travel has been suspended until this crisis is resolved, and citizens are advised to remain in their homes.”

“Why hasn’t our sun gone out too?” Richard asked.

“Perhaps it’s because there’s still Dolphins living here,” Patricia said.

“Could be,” Pip said, “although I doubt if Drago has any further need for them now that he’s taken over David’s body. No, I think there’s a much simpler explanation.”

“Well?”

“Bluehaven has a twin on the other side of the subspace fold, which means there’s another star directly opposite our sun.”

“I get it,” Richard said. “With a star on each side of the fold, there’s nowhere to put the dimmer.”

“Exactly.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I need to get to Huntress.”

“But they said all space travel is suspended. I don’t know how —”

Before he could finish, a gunshot rang out, followed by the sound of someone kicking in their front door.

“Ingle!” Commander Hoskins shouted. “Get yourself out here, on the double!”

Pip stood, walking casually out into the hallway.

“You failed me once, Ingle, and you’ll be facing a court-martial and a firing squad if you fail me again. Now move it!”

Sergeant Croft dashed into the room, grabbing Pip by the arm and pulling him out.

“You can’t do this!” Richard shouted, but by then it was too late.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten how to shoot,” Croft said as he bundled Pip into the shuttle craft waiting on his parents’ front lawn.

“No, but why me? Surely your other soldiers can shoot just as well as I can.”

“None of our other soldiers are Black Delphinidae adepts,” Hoskins said. “Now strap yourself in and I’ll brief you on what General Gallagher wants us to do.”

“Drago can not only read our thoughts, he can see into our futures and anticipate any action we might take against him,” Hoskins said once they’d made the jump to subspace. “That’s how those star-dimmers came to be there; he knew, millions of years ago, that someday the people of the galaxy, the Gomerals as he calls us, would rise up against him, and so he took what he considered to be precautionary action.”

“But if that’s true,” Pip said, “what hope do we have against him?”

“You are our only hope, Ingle,” Hoskins said, echoing the words the Black Dolphin had once said to him. “You are invisible to him.”

“But, but how?”

“I don’t know why or how, only that my information came from a reliable source.”

“Gosh.”

“Gallagher wants us to create a diversion, while you sneak into his palace and take him out.”

“Is there no other way?”

“Are you questioning your orders, Private?”

“Um, no, sir.”

“Good. There’s a weapons simulator in the back of the spacecraft. I suggest you go and hone what little skills you have.”

“Yes sir.”

* * *

Jacob, Edwin and Val stepped forward to meet them as Pip, Sergeant Croft and Commander Hoskins emerged from their shuttle. Overhead, some twenty fighter craft circled the palace.

“He’s in the throne room, Commander,” Jacob said.

Pip started following as Hoskins and Croft marched towards the steps, but Hoskins turned and said, “Not you, Ingle. They’ll show you where to go.”

Pip turned back to Jacob and his family. “Are you, but, but how, why?”

“War makes strange bedfellows, Pip.”

“Come and we’ll show you the secret way in,” Val said.

“Drago’s taken control of Clem,” Jacob said as they started walking around the side of the palace. “He’s a strong adept, but unable to shield his mind. You, on the other hand, will be invisible to him.”

“That’s what Hoskins said. How long, how long have you been working for him?”

“It’s actually the other way round, Pip,” Edwin said. “Hoskins is working for us.”

“Now you have me really confused.”

“The Black Dolphin’s curse takes many forms,” Jacob said. “For me, it’s foresight; I can sometimes see the future. But the future’s not

set in stone, like many would believe; rather it's a multitude of possibilities, some more likely, others less. I see things that could happen, outcomes that might be possible if a whole lot of prerequisite events take place.

"I told you once that I met your father when you were young. What I didn't tell you was that our meeting took place in an aquarium."

Pip stopped walking, staring into Jacob's eyes as a shiver ran up his spine.

"We met on the lowest level, where the seal pool was closed for refurbishment. You were six years old, I expect, and were just beginning to show signs of your abilities. When I touched you I saw a vision of what your future may hold; a future in which the threat of Drago could finally be eliminated. Much had to happen along the way, though, many things that would be unlikely to occur of their own accord."

"You planted the Black Dolphin memory in me," Pip said, "and crippled my legs."

"Your cramps were hypnotically induced, but I'm afraid the damage they've done is real enough. It was the only way, Pip, the only way to bring you to this here and now, in a condition where you could achieve your goal."

Pip shook his head. "I'm just a piece of meat, then, a means to an end."

"That's not true," Val said.

"Did you kill the baby Dolphin?" Pip asked, ignoring her.

"Hoskins and his mate Smithers did that," Jacob said.

"I planted the evidence to incriminate Mark," Edwin said. "I became Anthony Starling, the college cleaner, so stealing the fish tank and planting the knife in Mark's office was pretty easy. Getting the bucket from his laundry was a bit trickier, but Mark and Lorina provided the ideal opportunity when they put on a staff barbecue at their place."

"Did my father know what you'd done?"

"No," Jacob said. "I told him you had the makings of a powerful adept, but that was all. I'd gone by the time your legs cramped up."

Pip again shook his head. “What if I just turned around now, what if I just said, *‘to hell with your plan, to hell with your future’*?”

“You could do that, certainly, and that’s one possibility I’ve foreseen, but if you did, Pip, Drago would win and everything you’ve ever loved, all of your dreams, would be destroyed.”

“Clem once told me that the Black Dolphin’s curse meant hope for his people but death for me. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“That’s some choice you’ve given me; let Drago win or die defeating him.”

“I’ve only foreseen the outcomes, not determined their nature; only fate can do that. Were it within my power, I’d find an option where you could defeat Drago and live, but I cannot.”

“So either way I lose.”

“Yes, Pip.”

‘I killed a man once,’ Chris’s voice echoed again in his mind. *‘I don’t think you ever get over something like that.’*

‘Sometimes people die, no matter what we do.’

Pip closed his eyes, rubbing them with his clenched fingers as if it would help him decide; but it was a decision, he knew, he’d already made long ago.

“In that case, I, um, I’d better not disappoint the Commander. Perhaps he’ll think better of me when I’m dead.”

Val tried to hug him, but he pushed her away. “Where must I hide, and what must I do?”

* * *

“Ah, the cavalry have arrived, I see,” David said as Hoskins and Croft strode into the hall. He waved his hand above his head, causing the translucent dome to become transparent and revealing the circling fighter craft.

“Deactivate the star-dimmers, Drago,” Hoskins said, “or we’ll destroy this palace and you along with it.”

“With all due respect, Commander, I don’t think so.”

David raised his hands again, and as everyone in the hall watched with disbelieving eyes, the fighters opened fire on each other,

exploding into molten fragments of metal before falling harmlessly into the sea around them.

“I’ll ask you all one more time,” David said. “Where are my Tivinel?”

The hall remained silent.

Pip crouched down in his hiding place, an alcove on the side of the hall, steadying his weapon as he took aim at David’s head. A squeeze on the trigger, that’s all it would take and it’d be over.

‘No,’ the voice of the boy David, the human boy, whispered in his mind. ‘Drago may not be able to sense you, but he’ll sense your bullet and deflect it before it can strike him. You cannot stop him with your weapons, Pip, but there’s another way, a better way.’

Pip sighed, lowering his gun and hoping he’d know what he’d have to do, hoping also that he’d have the courage to do it.

“Very well,” David said, turning again to Clem. “Half-caste, implode their stars.”

“Wait!” Damien said, stepping forward. “Your Tivinel are dead, Drago. The Barefooters and I killed them after they destroyed our homes and farms.”

“You!” David shouted. “You and your sister were supposed to have parented my vessel a million years ago. You failed me then and you have failed me now!”

“I wish now,” Damien said softly, “that my failure had been complete.”

As David raised his finger towards him, a sizzling filled the air, a concentration of enormous energies focused onto him. Damien stood firm, though, resisting him in spite of the smoke now rising from his skin.

‘You must pass beyond redemption when the stars grow dim,’ the voice of the Black Dolphin echoed in Pip’s mind.

‘There was one that really scared you,’ his father’s voice now said, ‘but I’m not sure if it’s the same one. It was about a place where the sun exploded and the people went into the darkness where they built a fabulous city with a strange name.’

'Not Hades?'

'No, that's the city of the dead, and these people were alive. It was something like forgiveness, but that's not it.'

'Redemption,' his mother said.

Redemption. You must pass beyond Redemption.

"No!" Pip shouted, dashing forward out of his hiding place. "Damien is mistaken; I know where your Tivinel are."

David stared at him, probing his mind. "If you speak the truth, little one, bring them to me!"

"I can't; they won't listen to me. I must take you to them."

Pip held his breath, steeling his mind against more of Drago's probing. For a moment he sensed David's soul as well, weak and suppressed but nonetheless trying to help him. He smiled.

"Very well, take me to them. How do we get there?"

"I must take you through Sheol. Allow me to touch you, my lord, so I may pull us through."

Again Pip felt Drago probing him, but once more he let him see only what he wanted to.

"Come forward," David said.

Pip placed his hand on David's shoulder. For a moment, the power of Drago's spirit within that body almost overwhelmed and broke him, but he closed his eyes, grimacing as he withstood the psychic onslaught. Gradually he steadied himself and, wrapping his essence around Drago's, pushed them both through into Sheol.

Pip immediately sensed a third essence standing with them. "David?" he asked.

"What trickery is this?" Drago said, struggling to pull himself free.

"It's no trickery," David said, his voice soft and child-like but full of confidence. "I can help you find the way to the Tivinel."

"Very well," Drago said. "Lead on, both of you."

The darkness of Sheol disappeared as they emerged onto the slope overlooking the River Styx. The grass had disappeared entirely now, and only scorched dirt remained beneath their feet as David pulled them down towards the bank.

“Welcome to the City of Redemption, my lord,” the ferryman said to Drago, ushering them on board his waiting vessel.

“Is that you, Charon?” Drago asked.

“Yes, my lord. Is it the Tivinel you seek?”

“Indeed.”

“Make for the Barefooters’ Retreat. Your guides will know the way.”

Pip nodded.

“Very well,” Drago said. “Take us across.”

Pip glanced at David, who smiled and nodded back.

“This place is in need of some repair,” Drago said as they led him through the ruined city. Almost all the towers had collapsed in upon themselves, with the few still standing leaning dangerously askew. Graffiti covered any remaining walls, while a cold wind blew litter through the long-deserted streets. “I must speak with the Tivinel about this when we reach them. This is simply not acceptable, not acceptable at all.”

Pip and David again exchanged glances.

The Barefooters’ Retreat remained standing, although its doors had fallen from their hinges. Pip quickly led them down into the basement, but came to a halt before the closed portal.

“The Tivinel are through there,” he said, “but, um, I don’t know how to open it. Last time Clem was with me and he had the key.”

“Don’t worry,” David said. “I can open it. My grandfather taught me the trick.”

David stepped forward, placing his hands on either side of the portal before closing his eyes and grimacing in concentration. For a moment nothing happened, but gradually, a shimmering light began to form at the centre of the metal sheet, spreading outwards and consuming it.

“The portal’s open,” he finally said, standing back from it. “Your Tivinel await you.”

“After you, David,” Drago said.

“Um, no,” Pip said, “you first, my lord.”

“Is this some form of trickery?”

“No trickery, my lord. Take my hand, and we’ll step through together, if you like.”

Drago took Pip’s hand, pulling him through into the portal. A moment before he passed through, Pip turned back to David and whispered, “Don’t follow us; go back to Huntress, as quick as you can!”

David looked confused, but at that moment Pip’s head disappeared through the portal.

* * *

“Do you want us to pass through it?” Pip had asked Jacob during his training, when he’d located the portal leading out of Sheol to the Meridian space station.

“Good gracious, no. Our physical bodies are still in real space back in my room, and if we were to pass out through any of the portals, we’d become fully detached spirits, ghosts if you like.”

“What would happen then?”

“Our physical bodies would die.”

Now he’d done precisely that; his spirit, along with Drago’s, passing through the portal out of Sheol and onto the Barefooters’ planet of exile, while their physical bodies remained on Huntress. David’s spirit, he hoped, would return to reoccupy his body, saving the child, but for Pip and Drago there’d be no going back.

The track leading down to the Barefooters’ village was in darkness, with cold starlight twinkling overhead. Pip felt a chill pass through him; an effect, he supposed, of becoming a ghost.

“What have you done to me?” Drago’s spirit asked.

“The Tivinel are up this way,” Pip said, not answering his question but instead leading him back along the track and towards the mountains.

“I can hear them calling to me,” Drago said as they approached the mouth of the canyon, now pulling Pip forward. Pip could hear nothing, but felt a chilling menace growing all around him.

“Long have we waited for you, lord Drago,” a voice cried out of the darkness.

“My beloved Tivinel,” Drago shouted, “my vision has been fulfilled. Not only has our devastated world been restored, but we now have whole galaxies of civilisations to rule. The Gomeral have multiplied and spread, but under the supervision and control of my Delphinidae and Barefooters, and now is the time, my faithful Tivinel, now is the time to return to our home and take up our role as lords of the universe.”

“Are you totally bereft of reason?” the Tivinel spirit said. “We’re dead, all of us, and now you’re dead too. We can’t even return to Sheol from this place.”

Drago turned to Pip. “Faithless half-caste, is this true? What is it you’ve done? You’ve deceived me, yet that shouldn’t be possible! Why haven’t I foreseen you? Who are you? WHAT ARE YOU?”

“He is your doom, Drago,” the Tivinel said, “the agent of the Black Dolphin, and he has delivered you to us. You sabotaged the star-dimmer, yes we know that now, destroying our world and condemning us to misery and death, all for your stupid vision of ultimate supremacy.

“In the darkness we built a city for you, a city called Redemption, hoping you’d return to us and lead us to enlightenment; but no, instead you fled with your dolphins, scheming schemes and breeding Gomeral to fulfil your mad desire for dominance.

“You began with dishonour when you murdered the Old Pasha, and it was with dishonour that you ruled over us. But no more! Spirits of the Tivinel, this is our moment of fulfilment, our moment of triumph! Consume him!”

Ghostly forms, tall and slender like Elves, but more evanescent, more dream-like, surrounded Drago’s spirit, while all around them a white glittering began, sparkling points of light like the fireworks Pip had enjoyed as a child. The lights swirled, faster and faster, forming a vortex, drawing the Tivinel ghosts and Drago’s spirit into its core.

Pip wondered if he too would be drawn in, but in one final explosion of light, the vortex consumed itself and disappeared, leaving him alone in the night, one lonely ghost on this planet of exile, his to haunt for the rest of eternity.

* * *

The bodies of David and Pip stood facing each other at the front of the hall, motionless like statues, while those gathered before them watched on in silence, expecting a host of angry Tivinel to appear from a spontaneous portal at any moment. To the side stood Clem, his hand poised ready to activate the destruction of ten of the galaxy's principal worlds.

"What's happening?" Jenny whispered to Jason, but before he could think of an answer, Pip suddenly fell to the floor, while at the same time Clem's hand jerked away from the control panel, a look of confusion on his face.

David blinked, staggering a little before leaping down off the dais and running to Lorina.

"Mummy, Mummy, Pip took Drago away, and he can never come back, never again!"

Lorina held him tightly, smothering him with kisses.

"Clem," Frank said, pulling himself back onto his feet. "Do you think you can deactivate those star-dimmers?"

Clem stared into the control panel, scratching his chin. "Yeah, I think so."

"Do it then."

He pressed the first button of the shutdown sequence, waiting for the indicator light to flash red three times before turning green.

Paul Hoskins pulled his field telephone from his belt. "General, it's Hoskins. Mission accomplished, I believe. Can you give me a sit-rep on our suns?"

"They're brightening again as I speak. Well done, Hoskins!"

"Thank you sir," he said, closing the call. "Clem, the star-dimmers have shut down."

Clem nodded, smiling.

"Dad!" Damon cried, running towards Damien where he was kneeling beside Pip. "You're all burnt!"

"Don't worry about me, son; it's your friend here who's in real trouble. I think, well, I think he's dead."

Damon wailed, a cry of such heartbreak and anguish it would haunt all of those present for the rest of their days.

The Black Dolphin

A black cloud passed across the stars, a cloud Pip was sure was in the shape of a dolphin. *'You have passed beyond Redemption, for the stars grow dim. Remember that, Pip, in your years of sorrow ahead.'*

Years of sorrow; just how many years would he have to endure haunting this world? A million? A billion? A million billion? The Black Dolphin's curse. *'Perhaps there's hope for our people, if you find the truth, but not for you.'*

He'd found many truths along the way; the truth about his parents, the truth about his cramps, the truth about the Dolphins, and the truth about his friends. Were they rejoicing in his death? Were Mark and Lorina dancing on his grave? Doing a polka, perhaps, with little David and Loraine?

His thoughts turned inevitably to Damon; not the adult Damon, Brother of the Delphinidae, but the little boy who'd come to his rescue when the schoolyard bully was trying to pull his head off. *'Look, here comes the Easter Bunyip!'* he'd yelled, so ridiculously absurd, even for a small child, that the bully had loosened his grip and Pip had escaped. They'd become the best of friends from that day forward, until, well, until the truth started becoming uncomfortable for him. *'Don't thump the messenger,'* Frank had admonished him, and he'd apologised to Clem; but for Pip, whose message was the antithesis of everything Damon believed in, there'd be no apology, no forgiveness.

Pip wept now, as much as a ghost can weep, but when his eyes cleared he saw a dark shape floating before him, a dolphin shape.

"The future is veiled," the Black Dolphin said, *"for there is much uncertainty and grief, but do not despair, for hope springs eternal in the love of family and friends. You have passed beyond Redemption,*

although that city will soon be gone, and there are years of sorrow ahead, undoubtedly, but it's not the end for you, Pip, just the makings of a new beginning."

"What are you?" Pip asked.

"I am many things. I am the souls of the dolphins, imprisoned by Drago's mind long ago but now set free, thanks to you. I've also been called the spirit of enlightenment, the essence of growth, the seed of sentience. And now I am you, for you are not only my emissary but my guide. We are entwined, Pip, and whatever the future holds, it is our future, together."

"But —" Pip said, but the dolphin had gone, leaving him alone once more under the cold dim stars.

* * *

Jason stared at the scene in front of him, lost in thought. Damien and Sandra were still working on Pip, applying CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in what now seemed a forlorn attempt to keep his physical body alive until his life-force could return. Next to them squatted Damon, still sobbing and wailing in a manner that seemed dangerously close to insanity.

He'd first met Pip when he and Damon had come to Earth to help Chris, back at the time Mark had been arrested. The three of them had then gone on a rescue mission, trying to save Mark from the prison colony on Huntress, but they'd ended up in Sheol and Jason had projected his spirit into the darkness in an attempt to guide them home.

He remembered now how he'd entered a chamber associated with an inhabited world somewhere in the universe, and for a moment had entertained the thought of passing out through a portal onto that world.

He'd reminded himself, though, that his physical body was still in real space back in Brisbane, so if he'd emerged through the portal he'd have been a fully detached spirit, a ghost.

He'd imagined he could've just floated around, rattling a few chains and scaring some kids before coming back through the portal again into Sheol, but was that really true?

'Pip took Drago away, and he can never come back, never again!'
David had said.

'The portal into this world is one way,' he remembered the Proctor saying back on the Barefooters' planet of exile, and then it hit him.

"I know what's happened to Pip!" he shouted. "Chris, I need you and Clem, and Damon if you can stop him howling for a moment, and Jenny, see if you can find that Barungi chieftain and bring him in here."

Chris crouched down beside Damon, trying to arouse him from his grief, while Jenny dashed from the hall. A few moments later she returned with Hamati by her side, his greyish-pink hair now singed black.

"Chris, I need you to open a portal into Sheol, with Damon's help if necessary, and then Hamati, you must lead us to that planet where Damien and the Barefooters were. Can you do that?"

"Of course; Barungi know Sheol like backs of hand."

Chris helped Damon to his feet, guiding him shakily over to join them, tears still running freely down his face.

"Damon, there's a chance we can save Pip, but we need your help. Do you remember when you aided Chris in opening that portal into Sheol?"

Damon nodded half-heartedly.

"Right, everybody join hands in a circle and let's do it, okay?"

Damon sniffled, but wiped his eyes and nodded a bit more enthusiastically.

Jason closed his eyes, trying to remember what he'd experienced the last time they'd done this. It had been like a pinpoint of pain, radiating out from Chris and passing through each of them, drawing them into Sheol, and he concentrated on that memory, trying to will it to happen again.

The floor beneath his feet changed from the coldness of the palace marble to a feeling of nothingness, and Jason opened his eyes to darkness.

"Are we all here?" he asked as he experienced the chilling and the heat that marked a physical transition into Sheol.

"I think so," Chris said. "Clem?"

"I'm here."

“Damon?”

“Yeah.”

“Hamati?”

“Hamati here. Follow me; we go through old Tivinel city, that shortest way.”

“Lead on,” Jason said, “and everyone hold each other’s hands tightly, please.”

They reached the bank of the River Styx to find the ferryman and his boat waiting for them.

“It’s been quite a busy morning,” Charon said from beneath his black cassock. “Are you heading for the Barefooters’ Retreat too?”

“Yes,” Jason said, “if it’s still standing.”

“You’d better hurry; I don’t think this city will last much longer.”

“What will happen to you then?”

“I still have that key you gave me last time. Perhaps I can find somewhere on Earth to ply my trade.”

A chill ran up Jason’s spine as the ferryman laughed.

“The ferryman was right,” Jason said, looking round at what was left of the city of towers. “Clem, can you remember the way to that inn?”

“Yeah, it’s this way,” Clem said, leading them into the ruins.

In the basement of the Barefooters’ Retreat, Clem pushed his amulet into the socket, opening the portal once again. “Do you want me to leave the amulet in there, so it’ll stay open?”

“No, this portal’s one way, according to the Barefooters,” Jason said, “and in any case you may need it on the other side.”

They each passed through into the shimmering light, Clem at the tail to whip out the ebony dolphin with a quick flick of the wrist as he entered the portal.

It was night on the Barefooters’ planet, the air cool and damp under a clear starry sky.

“What do we do now?” Chris asked.

“We need to find Pip’s spirit,” Jason said.

“We should’ve brought a fortune-teller then.”

Damon glared at him.

“Sorry, but, um, I have no idea how we’re supposed to do that.”

“Do you think the Proctor or any of the other Barefooters who stayed behind could help us?” Clem asked.

“I doubt they would, even if they could,” Jason said. “Anyway there’s no time. Clem, does your amulet give you any psychic powers?”

“The amulet, no, it’s just a trinket with a bit of clever technology built into it, but my grandfather told me I’m a strong Black Delphinidae adept.”

Jason put a hand on Damon’s shoulder, fearing he might be about to thump Clem for uttering such blasphemy, but Damon merely nodded.

“Reach out with your mind and see if you can find him,” he said. “My father told me Pip was also supposed to be a powerful adept.”

* * *

Pip looked up. He thought he’d heard a voice, but it was probably just his imagination playing tricks on him. Do ghosts have imagination? He imagined they probably did.

He heard it again, and this time there was no mistake. It sounded like Clem, calling him from further down the hill. Without wondering how that could be possible, he dashed off down the track, running as fast as his ghostly legs could carry him.

* * *

Jason felt a coldness swirl around him, a puff of wind perhaps although the air seemed still.

“He’s here,” Clem whispered.

“Pip,” Jason said, feeling stupid talking to an invisible ghost, before remembering he’d done the same thing with Jenny’s spirit when he’d been seventeen years old. “If you can hear me, Chris and Damon are going to open a portal into Sheol, and we need you to follow us through. Can you do that?”

“He said he’d try,” Clem said.

“Right, everyone join hands and Chris, do your stuff.”

Again he felt that coldness swirl around him.

“I have him,” Clem said as they found themselves once more in Sheol, “but I think he’s unconscious.”

“Keep hold of him,” Jason said. “Don’t lose him, whatever you do, and Hamati, lead us back to Huntress if you can.”

“This way,” Hamati said. “Is long way, so we must run fast.”

* * *

“Sandra, stand clear,” Damien said as a shimmering light appeared directly over Pip’s body. “I think they’re coming through.”

As they stepped aside, the shimmering expanded and brightened, engulfing Pip until he was no longer visible. Other forms appeared within it, moving and shuffling, until with a final flicker the light disappeared, leaving Jason, Chris, Damon, Clem and Hamati standing in a circle around him.

Sandra dashed back to Pip, prepared to resume her CPR, but before she could, he drew in a sharp breath. Quickly rolling him onto his side into the coma position, she checked his pulse and nodded. “He’s alive.”

Chris wrapped his arms around her, while Damon did the same to his father.

“Easy, son,” Damien said. “I still have third degree burns, remember.”

Jason bent down beside Pip, brushing his hair away from his face while listening to his slow steady breathing. Something touched his mind, a fleeting thought. *‘Thank you.’*

* * *

Pip opened his eyes, finding himself once more between the sheets of a hospital bed, but this time it was his chest rather than his legs that hurt. He pulled back the top sheet, inspecting his bruises.

“Sorry, I might have been a bit over-zealous with my CPR,” Sandra said.

“Not at all,” he said, smiling. “I’m alive, aren’t I?”

“You have Jason to thank for that,” Chris said. “He was the one who figured out where you’d gone and what had happened to you.”

“I think I have all of you to thank,” Pip said.

“Damon’s been here ever since you were brought in,” Sandra said, “but we’ve just sent him home to get some rest.”

Pip nodded. “Did, um, did David get back safely?”

“Yes, he’s fine. Mark and Lorina have taken the twins back to Bluehaven, and Mark’s resigned as Supreme Councillor.”

“Gosh.”

“I don’t think he had much choice. A lot of people were blaming him for what happened.”

“That’s a bit unfair, isn’t it?”

“Since when are politics supposed to be fair?” Chris said.

“Good point. So who’s his replacement?”

“They’ve called for nominations, but so far the only candidate is Alistair Blunt from Cornipus.”

“The bunyip-baiter?”

“Yes, although he still denies those allegations.”

“Maybe you should stand, Pip,” Sandra said.

“Me? But who’d vote for me?”

“I think you’d romp it in, after what you’ve just done. You’re the galaxy’s number one hero.”

“Gosh.”

“If you want to be Supreme Councillor, you’ll have to stop saying *gosh*,” Chris said.

“Gosh.”

Chris shook his head and sighed.

“I, um, no, I think the Black Dolphin has other plans for me.”

“Clem was telling us a bit about the Black Delphinidae,” Chris said. “Apparently the Old Pasha, the one Drago murdered, was an emissary of the Black Dolphin.”

“I didn’t know that, but it explains the old paintings in the throne room. There were frescos on the walls with Black Dolphins hidden in them, but Drago had them painted over with his dragon motif.”

Chris and Sandra both turned around as Clem entered the ward.

“Ah, we were just talking about you,” Chris said.

“Nothing too bad, I hope.”

“We were discussing the Black Delphinidae,” Pip said.

“Yes, that’s what I came here to see you about, as well as to see how you’re doing, of course.”

“I’m a bit sore,” Pip said, rubbing his bruised chest, “but otherwise fine.”

Clem removed his Black Dolphin amulet from around his neck. “This is now yours, Pip.”

Pip looked him in the eyes, touching his mind for a moment before accepting it. “I’m greatly honoured, of course, and there’s lots you’ll have to teach me.”

Clem blushed. “Me, my grandfather, and all those who came before us, we were just stewards, keeping the creed alive until the next Emissary came along. The amulet is your token of office, Pip, and I offer myself as your most humble servant.”

Pip sat up, grimacing as he strained his chest muscles, and placed his hand on Clem’s bowed head. “Thank you, Clem, and may your stars never dim.”

“You’ll have to explain all that to us later,” Sandra said to Clem as she led him and Chris from the ward. Pip had almost dosed off again when Owen entered, accompanied by Frank Halliday and Paul Hoskins.

“Commander?” Pip asked, expecting to be told to leap out of bed and do fifty push-ups.

“You can just call me Hoskins now, Ingle. I’ve resigned my commission and, on the advice of my friends here, will be throwing myself on the mercy of the courts.”

“I too will be facing the judiciary,” Frank said, “on account of having escaped lawful custody.”

“I’ll be appealing extenuating circumstances,” Owen said. “Whether the judge will buy it is another matter.”

“So, what will you be doing with yourself, afterwards?” Pip asked Frank. “I mean, now that you’ve found the Lost Barefooters and solved the great mystery of the Mind of the Dolphins.”

“There’s a lot of Tivinel and Barungi history turning up that Jacob wants me to translate and catalogue, and I guess that’ll keep me busy for a while.”

“I’m sure it will.”

“There’s also some stuff on the Black Delphinidae in our own archives that I’m sure you’d be interested in looking at.”

“Yes, I would, thanks.”

Frank reached over, shaking Pip’s hand. “It’s been an absolute pleasure working with you these past ten years, an absolute pleasure, and I’m just so proud of you, really.”

Pip blushed.

“Um, Ingle,” Hoskins said, “I’ve always been a military man, you know, and spent most of my years serving under ruthless power-hungry men like Hal Farley and his son Brett. If some of that rubbed off in my treatment of you, I apologise. I was right about one thing, though.”

“Yes?”

“You’re tougher than you look, Ingle, a lot tougher.”

“Um, thank you, sir.”

“If you ever change your mind about this Black Delphinidae stuff, I’m sure General Gallagher could find a posting for you.”

“I, um, yes, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Hoskins saluted him.

“Um, good luck with it all, Pip,” Owen said, now shaking his hand. “I once said Mark was my hero, but not any more. Now you are.”

Again Pip blushed.

“Come on,” Frank said, “I think we’ve embarrassed him enough.”

Frank, Owen and Hoskins had just left when Damien and Damon entered the ward. Damien, bandaged from head to toe, looked like an Egyptian mummy or the Invisible Man.

“Gosh,” Pip said. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine,” Damien said. “They say the burns are only superficial.”

“Um, how are you feeling?” Damon asked nervously.

“A bit sore,” Pip said, rubbing his bruised chest, “but otherwise okay.”

“The Barefooters and I will be leaving in a few days,” Damien said. “I just wanted to say goodbye and wish you well for the future.”

“Do you really have to go back into exile?”

“It’d be too big a risk if we stayed here, Pip.”

“I’m sure going to miss you.”

“And I’ll miss you too. If nothing else, you’ve sure given my healing skills a good workout.”

“Um, Pip,” Damon said, “I’ve, um, I’ve decided to go with Dad.”

“What? Why?”

“The Delphinidae was my life, and now, well, now it’s all gone and I think if I stayed, I’d just wither away to nothing.”

“But Damon, hey, no, there must be other things you can do, surely?”

“I’m sorry, Pip, but no, I’ve thought about this long and hard, and I think it’s for the best.”

Pip leaned forward over the edge of the bed, wrapping his arms around his friend. For a moment Damon hesitated, before wrapping his own arms around Pip.

“It’s all going to work out fine,” Damien said. “I’ll now have the chance to teach my son to fish.”

Pip chuckled, releasing Damon and sliding back down onto his bed.

“You, um, you take good care of yourself,” Damon said.

“You too,” Pip said, trying to blink away the tears. “You too.”

* * *

Mark stood alone on the beach outside Bluehaven’s Delphinidae Temple, turning his head and nodding grimly as Pip walked up behind him.

“She’s been out there for hours,” he said, pointing beyond the breakers to where Lorina was standing chest-deep in the water. “She’s calling the Dolphins, but of course they don’t answer; they’ll never answer, never again.”

Mark sniffled, wiping a tear from his eye.

“May I?” Pip asked, and Mark nodded again. He ambled down to the water’s edge, wading out and jumping over an incoming wave before standing alongside her.

“The dolphins are free now,” he said. “It’s what they wanted, I know.”

She turned and looked at him, her face a mask of impassiveness.

“When I was a kid back on Meridian,” Pip continued, “we used to sing a song. *Oh Elfstar with your silver beams, take us nightly in our dreams; to Bluehaven, our long lost home, where ancient Dolphins vainly roam; in search of what they cannot find, with many souls but just one mind.* They’ve now found what they were looking for, I’m sure, and their souls are free.”

“Everything they taught us,” Lorina whispered, “all their so-called wisdom, was just Drago’s lies.”

“No it wasn’t. You’re smart people; you’d have sensed the falseness in Drago’s words straight away. No, he was a strong telepath, perhaps the strongest ever known, so what he did was find your own wisdom, way down deep in your souls where you didn’t even know you had it, and gave that back to you. The wisdom of the Dolphins was really your own, and it’s still just as valid now as before, perhaps even more so.”

“But the Delphinidae don’t stand for anything now. We’re no different from any of the other religions that have been and gone.”

“All religions stand for something; they stand for people trying to be kind to each other, trying to find a deeper meaning to life than just eating and procreating. It’s our religions, our beliefs and ideals, that make us what we are, that make us human.”

“Is that what your Black Dolphin told you to say?”

“No, it’s what I’m saying. The Black Dolphin’s not a creature, or even a spirit; it’s a concept, an ideal, something greater than ourselves that we can nonetheless aspire to. It’s what it is that makes us whole, our collective sentience, perhaps.”

“Long ago we persecuted the Black Delphinidae; put them to death for saying words like that.”

“Is that what you want to do to me?”

“No Pip, I want you to forgive us, and perhaps some day, even take us into your fold.”

Pip smiled, taking her by the hand and leading her back onto the beach. “That I can do, my lady; that I can do.”

“David’s hair is darkening,” Lorina said as they sat together in the Temple’s common room, sipping hot chocolate.

“Yeah,” Mark said. “His roots are going black while mine are going grey.”

“With the death of the Tivinel,” Pip said, “there can never be another Pasha.”

“And a good thing, too,” Mark said.

“Loraine has no psychic powers,” Lorina said, “so the line of High Priestesses has also ended.”

“Our kids are just two perfectly normal ten-year-olds,” Mark said.

“So what are you going to do now?” Pip asked.

“We’ll be going back to Earth,” Lorina said, “to be closer to Mark’s family and my grandparents.”

“Do you think you might reopen your old college?”

“What’s the point? The Delphinidae are finished.”

“With all due respect, my lady, I don’t think they are. Perhaps you need to refocus, but your spiritual teachings and your work in education and health care are just as valid and important as ever.”

“Maybe,” Mark said, “we could make the college a school of intergalactic studies, so the people of Earth and the Milky Way could learn more about the societies here and what makes this galaxy tick.”

“Yes,” Lorina said, “and we could bring students from here to study Earth’s cultures.”

Pip smiled. “That sounds like a wonderful idea, and you’d have my full support in such a venture.”

“Thank you, Pip,” Lorina said, kissing him on the nose.

“Whatever you decide, I wish you well, and please, stay in touch.”

“We will, don’t worry,” Mark said.

Epilogue

Pip sidled in through the front door of his house, unloading his groceries and scratching his pet bunyip behind the ears before sitting down in front of the ultranet terminal. The bunyip leapt onto his lap, curling itself around into a perfect circle while staring intently at the screen.

“You know, Snooky,” Pip said, “sometimes I wonder if you can actually read.”

Snooky lifted his head, looking at him with his big brown eyes, eyes that hid some deep but alien intelligence, perhaps.

Pip shrugged, turning back to the screen. From amidst the clutter of official correspondence and unsolicited advertising, an e-mail marked *Personal* caught his eye. He opened it.

'Hi Pip,

The Proctor finally allowed us to set up the ultranet node Dad brought with us from Huntress. We had to build an enormous antenna for it, and the transmission delay is many hours, far too long for any real-time conversations, but at least we can communicate and that's the main thing.

Dad reckons all the Barefooters are aging rapidly now that Drago's spirit's gone, so I'd appreciate any tips your mother might care to give me about looking after the elderly. I've also been teaching them how to cook, trying to wean them off their diet of tea and lettuce leaves. It seems, now their days are numbered, they don't crave death quite as much as they thought!

I've never been much good with words; well you know that, you've known me long enough. I should've said this before I left, but I was too much the coward I suppose. What I mean is, I said some pretty

terrible things to you, back when, well you know, and I'm just so sorry, Pip. I was blind to what was going on around me, full of my own importance I guess, but that's no excuse and I'm not trying to make excuses for what I did. I was an absolute dork, and if you hate me forever, well I deserve it.

A time will come, in not too many years from now, when all the Barefooters will be gone, my father included. Time enough, perhaps, for me to bury my demons and start afresh. When that happens, I'd like to return and become a Black Delphinidae acolyte, if you'll have me, of course.

I once scoffed at you when you said Mark was your hero, and you were hurt, because you saw something noble in him and thought I was trying to take that away. Perhaps I was, but my real reason for scoffing was that, in my mind, you were always the greatest hero of them all, the way you stood up for what you believed in and never let anything wear you down.

In that, if in nothing else, I was right.

*Your friend,
Damon.'*

Snooky looked back at Pip, wondering why those words on the screen had made his master cry.