

Not Quite Out in the Outback



Tiger and Tark were keen to head straight for the Outback after spreading the word about Project Earthmend up the coast of Eastern Australia, when Flute, now Prince's Right-hand Frog back at the Sacred Pool, teleported himself down between them. The campfire was crackling at their campsite by the billabong, and Tiger was just getting warm under the clear, starry night.

'Flute!' cried Tark. 'Long time, no see!'

'Yesss,' hissed Flute, keen to become a snake in his next assignment, if only Prince would let him, which he probably wouldn't, because then every Member of the Sacred Pool would want to adopt his favourite life form for his skin.

Tiger, suddenly feeling homesick for home, and especially for his human Alexander, gave Flute a big

Pooh-hug, or what he thought a homesick Pooh-hug would be, if he'd been Pooh Bear enough to manage it.

'Ooo,' said Flute, reddening, despite his very green tinge. 'It's nice to see *you*, too, Tiger!'

Tark was drumming his toes on the ground. 'Enough of old home week, Member Flute. Has Prince sent you to check up on us?'

Flute furrowed his brow as much as a frog can. 'Of course not. Prince has *total* confidence in you to follow his instructions.'

'And to take initiative as required?' Tark said.

'What's ini-?' asked Tiger.

'Doing what needs to be done, without having to be told,' snapped Tark, still a bit suspicious that Flute might have been sent to spy on them.

'Ah,' said Tiger, licking his lips. 'You mean, like cleaning your bowl *before* the ants get to it?'

'Exactly,' Flute and Tark said at once.

'All right, then,' Tark continued. 'Why *did* Prince send you?'

Flute gazed up at the stars. 'He and Eudora are feeling the heat from Inter-Galactic Command,' he said.

(IGC, as Tark called it for short, was the supreme body governing the Milky Way and nearly a dozen other galaxies in their neighbourhood.)

'It's not *our* fault that the Prime Minister got cold feet on the Carbon Trading Scheme,' said Tark. 'We got the Greenies and the solar industry behind it, but then...'

'Be fair!' Tiger piped in. 'We've been working our butts off the last few months. Sid's organised the pigeons in Sydney to poo only where it's needed to fertilise the gardens, and Wanda and D'Arcy the King Croc's Say No to Plastic Bags campaign at the Australia Zoo is taking hold.'

Flute shook his head. 'No one's blaming you – certainly not Prince or Eudora. But they *do* have their masters to answer to, and time *is* running short!'

'It's that big oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, isn't it?' Tark said, shaking his head. 'Maybe we should be heading East instead of West to spread the word?'

Flute sighed. 'I'm just the messenger, Tark. You and Tiger are to report back to Base – or rather the Sacred Pool – immediately for further instructions.'

'Prince's wish is our command,' said Tark. 'Prepare for teleportation.'

'Oh, goody!' said Tiger. 'Can I give the start-up command? Can I? Can I?'

'You stuffed it up the last time,' Tark grumbled. 'We ended up on *Friday*, instead of *Thursday* Island!'

'I never was very good about which day of the week comes first,' sighed Tiger. 'When you're a cat, it doesn't really matter.'

Flute chimed in. 'Give him another chance, Tark. He *is* a full Member, after all.'

'Oh, all right,' said Tark. 'But don't blame me if we end up down some dank Kalgoorlie gold mine instead of in Canberra!'

'You can buy a lot of Cat Gourmet with gold,' smiled Tiger, doing his best to remember the magic words.

Tiger must have got one of the words wrong or in the wrong order because they ended up landing squarely on the peak of Bradley and Myrtle Gower's roof – in total darkness. Tiger knew where they were even before his night vision clicked in. The barking that greeted them was unmistakably that of the Gowers' dogs Cleo and Tony.

'Oh, it's just Tiger and his mates,' Cleo called out to Tony. 'Stop your howling, will you?'

'Darn,' said Tony. 'I thought it might be an intruder at last. It's so *boring* here since you went away, Tiger.'

'It's nice to be missed,' Tiger sniffed. 'But you *could* have sent a few more pawcards, Tony.'

'Do you want the good news or the bad news about Tony?' Cleo said, as the crew slid down from the roof.

Tiger narrowed his eyes. 'OK, Cleo, hit me with the bad stuff first!'

'Well,' said Cleo. 'Tony isn't as young as they made him on Planet Griffon. He's been aging at seven times the normal dog years since he came back.'

'It wasn't *my* idea to come back,' muttered Tony. 'But I knew that Myrtle was missing me badly. And dogs are put onto Earth to look after the weaker species, right?'

'You forgot to mention you were missing *me*!' Cleo said, swatting him playfully on the bum with her forepaw.

'Oh, yes,' Tony said, quickly. 'That, too, I suppose.'

'OK,' said Tiger. 'I can live with the bad news, but what's the good news?'

Cleo put on her widest dog grin. 'He's not farting as much as he used to!'

'That's because Myrtle has us on a strict veggie protein diet,' Tony snorted. 'No more kangaroo stew.'

'So much for old home week,' Tark said. 'But may I remind you, Tiger, that we have to head for the Sacred Pool - pronto!'

'Can't I even say g'day to Alexander?' whined Tiger. 'He'll want to know I've come back.'

Tark was firm. 'He'll be asleep, like all good writers, dreaming of the story that got away.'

Tiger cast a wistful eye across the fence at the dark house next door. Tark was probably right. It could wait

until morning, that is, if Prince didn't send them off straight away on their next assignment. And perhaps they could call in on Myrtle afterwards for a slice or two of her Greenhouse Ginger Cheesecake. Tiger had heard via the Cat Grapevine Wi-fi network that Myrtle was putting a dash or two of a mystery liquor into the batter to increase impulse sales, which would be very naughty of her if it were true, but still all in the name of Project Earth-mend.

'Any word from Wanda?' Cleo called to them as they headed off toward the park. 'The snails are running amok through Greenhouse Place again!'

'Meaning you miss her,' Tony said, with a soft fart to underline the point.

'All right,' shuddered Cleo, doing her best to flick her tongue, lizard-like. 'I miss a Blue-tongued lizard - I admit it. But Wanda is special.'

'Of course she is,' said Tark. 'We made her a Member of the Sacred Few, didn't we? For getting that stubborn King Croc D'Arcy onside in the Cane Toad Birth Control Campaign.'

Tiger smiled as he remembered the ceremony. Wanda wasn't much on formalities, and she wasn't all that keen on frogs to begin with, even frogs that were really extraterrestrials in disguise, but she had to admit that the siliconoidal coating they gave her skin to increase her land speed, not to mention the power to pass judgement on polluting humans in thirty languages, including six dialects of Chinese was welcome, though she would never admit it to anyone other than Tiger, and only when he pressed a paw firmly down on her head to get the truth out of her.

As they crossed the road to the park, a car came whizzing around the corner, much too fast. With a quick thrust of his magic toe, Tark sent a beam of green light to meet the car squarely on its front, not

only halting it in its tracks but causing it to rear up like a stallion, its front wheels still spinning madly, with the driver and his passenger ending up in a tangle on the back seat.

‘Serves them right,’ Flute called out. ‘Maybe we should fine them for speeding, and put the money into the Project Earth-mend kitty.’

‘I’m a cat,’ Tiger reminded them. ‘So how come I don’t get to look after the *kitty*?’

‘No time for that,’ grinned Tark, in spite of his impatient mood. ‘But *they* won’t be going anywhere soon, fast or slow!’

Once they headed into the long grass beyond the footpath they were greeted by the squad of brown snakes Prince had trained as sentries to the Sacred Pool in exchange for a steady diet of insubordinate wild mice. Flicking their tongues excitedly, the snakes bowed their heads with respect to the Members as they passed.

‘You are expected,’ one of the snakes hissed. ‘But overdue.’

Tark narrowed his eyes at Tiger, who blushed beneath his fur. ‘I *almost* got it right,’ he said. ‘Much closer than the last time!’

‘Only perfection is close enough,’ Tark said. ‘But, yes, Member Tiger, your Crosshair Gyroscopy is much improved. But try to keep *both* eyes closed as you give the teleportation commands.’

‘I will, I will,’ Tiger promised. ‘I can’t help but be curious about the process. That’s a cat’s nature, you know.’

Padding along the familiar creek that widened gradually into the Sacred Pool, Tiger caught the scent of jasmine wafting on the night air. Sure enough, there were chunky candles outlining the perimeter of the

pond, and, as Tiger had a closer look at them, he noticed that they were in the shape of cane toads, remarkably realistic, *so* natural in fact that he wondered if they were dead cane toads recycled into waxen form.

'Quite right,' said Flute, reading his mind. 'In any campaign for the common good, there will always be those individuals who resist the Necessary.'

'But how -' Tiger asked.

'Were they turned into candles, complete with twilight-sensitive self-lighting wicks?' Flute went on.

'Eudora's my guess,' said Tark. 'She's always coming up with clever schemes for *constructive* realignment of chromosomes!'

At the mention of Eudora, a pair of blazing red eyes appeared in the gum tree overhead.

'Correct, Member Tark,' said Eudora, puffing up her raven feathers until she was twice her normal size. 'I found a way to channel their native durability into a practical use. I suggested to Inter-Galactic Command that we use them for lighting on trans-stellar journeys as an alternative to the starkness of our solar tubuals, and I'm pleased to report that I have been short-listed for a Suggestion of the Year Award.'

'Well-done, Eudora!' said Tiger. 'It might even catch on here as a fund-raiser for Project Earth-mend!'

'But where are the others?' Tark asked.

'Here!' came stereoscopic voices out of the darkness, metamorphosing into frogs along the bank. 'And here!' The lighting of an extra-large floating cane toad candle revealed Prince on his usual regal rock in the middle of the pool.

'Majesty,' cried Tark and Flute at once, bowing their heads. A second or two later, Tiger realised his mistake and bowed his head, too, as Members were expected to do before Prince would speak. It was probably because he was distracted by hopeful rumblings in his tummy

as he wondered if there would be any breakfast laid on after the meeting.

'Thank you for coming at such short notice, Members Tark and Tiger,' said Prince. 'Eudora and I would not call you in unless the matter was urgent.'

'Most urgent,' affirmed Eudora, dropping down to a thinner branch, which wavered beneath her weight. 'I have just returned from Griffon Central Command, where there is much agitation about a certain matter.'

'We are working as quickly as we can,' Tark insisted. 'If they think that we can -'

'No,' said Prince. 'It is not *you* or even we that they are concerned about, but rather a certain -'

'Human,' Eudora inserted. 'A specimen with inside knowledge of our planet, however fragmentary.'

Tiger winced. There could only be one human they could mean. Only one who had been transported to Griffon for Species Examination and Classification.

'You mean Bradley, don't you?' he said. 'Bradley Gower?'

'Precisely!' Eudora said, snapping her beak so loudly the sound echoed across the pool. 'He is about to breach our planetary sanctity!'

'But how?' Tiger asked. 'He's been back on Earth for months. Myrtle's taken him back - on condition that he accept that her duty to Project Earth-mend comes before cooking his dinner. He's a shadow of his former bossy self.'

'It would have been better if he had stuck to his dream of taking over a golf course on the Nullarbor,' said Prince. 'Much better - than this!'

'I don't believe it,' Tark declared. 'This over-stuffed excuse for a human is hardly capable of unbalancing a civilisation as advanced as ours.'

'If only that were true!' said Eudora, grinding her beak. 'He's writing a book telling all about his time on Griffon!'

Tiger sniffed. 'Look, Eudora, it's no big deal. Just ask Alexander - hardly anyone on Earth reads any more. At least not *serious* books. They're too busy with their iPads and 4D 10.1 Dolby Immersive Theatre Systems. Everything's virtual down here, except maybe for eating, and they're working on that, too. You don't go out to play tennis anymore. You do it on your Wii, with half the sweat.'

'You may be right, Tiger,' said Prince. 'But it may not stop there. First comes the book, then the eBook, Oprah, and the film. J K Rowling may be looking for a new plot...'

Tiger winked. 'My agent will hold out for six figures.'

'It won't come to that,' said Eudora solemnly. 'The human must be destroyed before this book is finished.'

'No problem,' said Tark, flexing his toe, which pulsed from lurid green into a searing red. 'I always said that human was a waste of space. Just give me the word and I'll deal with him.'

Tiger had to agree with Tark about Bradley's worth. This was the man who had stood between him and seconds on Myrtle's lamingtons. And *firsts* on her Ginger Cheesecake. Next to elephants, cats had the longest memory and always bore a grudge.

But then Bradley *had* helped Alexander put up the greenhouse for mates' rates. He did have undying faith in life on other planets. He *could* be the missing link in understanding between the ETs and your average sausage-loving human.

'Let me speak to him,' Tiger offered. 'Maybe I can convince him not to publish.'

'He won't listen,' scoffed Tark. 'The oaf doesn't believe that animals can talk, remember?'

Tiger got all puffy around the eyes. 'Let me try, please?'

Prince frowned. 'There is some wisdom in what Member Tiger says. We did not come to Earth to destroy but to save life. If we have to pick and choose which life is worthy, our quest for cooperation among the species will be doomed.'

'What about the cane toads?' Tark inserted. 'We chose to exterminate heaps of them in name of renewable candles!'

Eudora's eyes flared. 'Watch your tongue, Member Tark. It is not for you to question the decisions of your superiors.'

'No matter,' said Prince. 'Questioning can be healthy. Questioning can lead to positive change. But we must never lose sight of the bigger goal - survival of this planet - and its life force. Even when certain individuals may be... misguided.'

'I was misguided, once,' said Tiger. 'I caught birds for sport, even when I wasn't hungry. But I was cat enough to accept my mistake and extend the paw of friendship to them. If I could change my ways, perhaps Bradley can, too.'

'I am with Tark,' Eudora said. 'There is much to be done yet, with Project Earth-mend. The IGC grows more impatient by the day. We cannot afford to put up with an individual who would undercut the sanctity of Griffon.'

'And I am with Tiger - for now,' countered Prince. 'How can we lead if not by example? We must show tolerance and be prepared to forgive when remorse is shown. But there is not much time, Member Tiger. You have until sundown tomorrow. After that, I will not be able to spare your human.'

Not *my* human! Tiger thought. Why am I even doing this? I must be going soft in the head for the lack of Salmon Paté. Maybe Alexander has a spare can?

It was a homecoming worthy of Puss in Boots. Alexander stood in the doorway, rubbing his eyes in disbelief that his dear Tiger had come back at last.

'But you look so *thin!*' Alexander said, picking him up and spinning around. 'You need some R&R out in the greenhouse!'

'Easy, Al,' urged Tiger. 'Vertigo happens, you know. I wouldn't want you fainting with me in mid-air!'

'Yes, all right,' said Alexander. 'I'm just so *happy* to see you. You promised to email me, you naughty cat!'

'You try to get Wi-fi up in Cooktown,' sneered Tiger. 'It's hard enough to ring ahead for takeaway pizza! Though they *do* have some very nice fish platters up there.'

'You're back,' said Alexander. 'And that's all that matters.'

'But not for good,' said Tiger. And then, more gently, 'And, I'm afraid, not for all that long.'

Midway through a can of Salmon Paté that Alexander had put away just in case Tiger dropped in on such a day, Tiger spilled the beans about Bradley and the bolt of cosmic lightning poised even now over his head.

'That's dreadful!' Alexander cried. 'But writing a *book*? Bradley? There must be a mistake. According to Myrtle, Bradley never lifts a book unless it's about golf. So how would he know how to write one?'

'No mistake. The Griffs are onto him, big time.'

'How could they know what he's doing in the privacy of his house?'

Tiger shrugged, as only a cat can shrug. 'You know how Google and Amazon have these virtual spider thingies that harvest stuff from the Internet? Well, the Griffs have something much more powerful that can sniff out anything said about Griffon and its

inhabitants. And *their* spider has made a big black mark over the Gowers' humble abode.'

'Nope,' insisted Alexander. 'I'll get to the bottom of this - and prove your ET friends are wrong for once.'

There was a lovely baking smell wafting from the Gowers' house, so lovely that Tiger couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it on his way home to Alexander's. The unmistakeable smell of pumpkin scones. These were scones to die for. No compromises in Myrtle's recipe. No *light* this or *fat-reduced* that in her kitchen. No wonder her Greenhouse Ginger Cheesecakes had brought in Climate Change Sceptics from far and wide and raised enough money to put solar collectors on every primary school in Canberra and most of New South Wales, with more on the way. Even a former Prime Minister, now a bit itchy in retirement, regularly made the pilgrimage from Sydney in his hybrid car to Myrtle's garage storefront to be sure of getting the *genuine* article rather than some Home Brand imitation. The current Environment Minister stopped by weekly, almost always banging his head on the doorway in his excitement (he was so so tall and so so bald) to buy an armful of cakes and get Myrtle's latest advice on how to push through legislation to reduce our carbon emissions to a few faint toe prints in the sand.

Myrtle came to the door within seconds of Alexander ringing the bell.

'Come in, come in!' she cried. 'I was just saying to Bradley how *lonely* it is with Tiger still on the road, and how Tony and Cleo have nothing better to do these days than nibble off each other's fleas. There's the lounge - make yourself comfortable while I get this batch of scones out of the oven.'

'Oh, yes,' murmured Tiger, his eyes rolling back. 'Please do. Bring it on!'