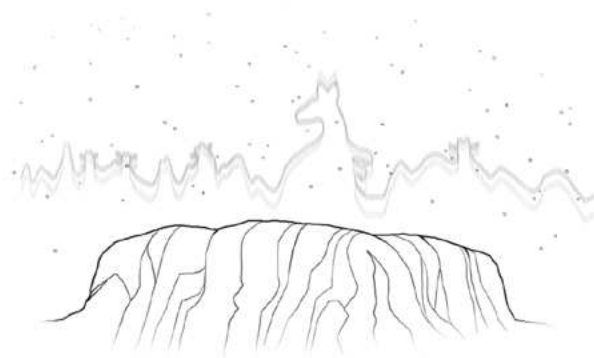


in which the Crew receive
their next assignment



AFTER THE KANGAROO HAD SOLIDIFIED EVER SO SLIGHTLY FROM HIS NORMAL HOLOGRAPHIC STATE TO BID THE CREW A FAREWELL THAT TIGER THE CAT TOOK TO BE ALMOST FOND, IF NOT TEARY, BEFORE FADING INTO THE DARKNESS, it was pitch dark at Uluru save for the pin-pricks of light overhead that were stars, and *only* stars, or so Tiger hoped.

He felt the fur stiffen on the back of his neck. 'Do you suppose Mick will be back?' he asked no one in particular, hoping that anyone who had an answer would chime in.

'Weren't you *listening*?' snapped Tark, the extra-terrestrial from the Planet Griffon disguised as a frog so as not to call *too* much attention to himself. 'I already answered that question!'

'Yes,' sniffed Tiger. 'But I hoped if I asked again that I'd like the answer more this time!'

Wanda the Blue-tongue Lizard stuck out her tongue, more to test the night air, than to make fun of Tiger's twitchy question. 'It would have been fair enough to ask *again*,' she said, 'if you hadn't had the *first* answer less than two minutes ago!'

Number 12, the now-*almost-completely*-retired-racing-camel, rapped each of his left hooves in turn against its right number to free it from a clog of sand before clearing his throat to speak. 'While it's true Tiger *just* asked the question, he did it at the end of *Tiger Tames the Min Min*, which for *us* may have been five minutes ago, but this is a new story entirely, and I believe that it took its author quite some months to write.'

'You don't know that,' piped in Syd the crow. 'It might end up very much the *same* story, or no story at all if the writer doesn't get a move on.'

'Writer?' Tark demanded. 'What writer?'

Number 12 snorted. 'The one who left us standing here in the cold night air for more than a *year* now pretending that it was five minutes, while he went off to do... other things.'

'Alexander's like that,' Tiger nodded. 'When he's working on one of his feature articles, he forgets to eat sometimes. Which is OK, except when he forgets to feed *me*.'

'Well, you'll have plenty of time to remind him,' said Tark, 'when we get back to base.'

'Oh, *goody*,' cried Tiger. 'You mean we can go home at last?'

'I reckon we've earned some R & R,' said Tark. 'Besides, Prince and Eudora will want a full update on Mick and his nasty starships. Before they tell us where we're going next.'

Number 12 anticipated Tiger's question. 'Rest and relaxation - that's R & R. What I was planning to get lots of, before you detoured me out of retirement!'

'Count *this* lizard out!' snapped Wanda. 'First you drag us up the east coast of Australia to the pointy Top End of Queensland. Then across the Simpson Desert to Uluru. With just a *slight* change of pace to plug that burst oil well. Ducking Min Min Lights all the way. I do believe that I've served my time!'

'And done it *very* well,' Tark said, pouring it on like thickened cream. 'Where would we have been without Judge Wanda?'

'Oh, go on,' Wanda said, her skin going ever so slightly sunset red despite its stubborn greenish black. 'Any *native* creature would have done the same in my place!'

'You can never take a compliment,' tittered Syd. 'But if you've got a better offer than saving the Earth and our fellow creatures, Wanda, just say so. I'm sure there are others who'll gladly take your place!'

Wanda eyed Syd. 'Once a scavenger, always a scavenger. I suppose I'll have to see it through - if only to keep you in line.'

Syd winked at Tiger. '*That's* settled, then. Though Judge Syd could have a nice ring about it!'

'What about you?' Tark asked Number 12. 'Are you game for the next phase of Project Earthmend?'

Number 12 managed a smile as much as any camel - ex-racing or otherwise - could. 'My race against the emus brought it all back - the thrill.'

I can't see myself moping around a paddock all day, flicking away blowflies day in and day out. Sign me up!

'And I'm certainly keen!' Tiger chimed in. 'After all, what's an adventure without a *leader*?'

'Excuse me, *Earthling*,' Tark snapped, stretching his magic toe. '*Who's* in charge here?'

Tiger gulped, eying Tark's toe, which was already glowing an eerie green with just a hint of blood red in it. 'Um, I meant to say *deputy* leader.'

'Of course you did,' Tark said, more kindly, while his toe faded back to its normal frog-like hue. 'Now we must all teleport back to the Sacred Pool for further instructions.'

'The Sacred Pool?' said Number 12. 'Is that some kind of oasis?'

Wanda laughed. 'It's in Canberra, the watering hole for most of Australia's politicians!'

'Oh,' said Number 12, deflated. 'I've never met a politician before. But I hear you can't trust them as far as you can buck them.'

'That's not *entirely* true,' said Tiger. 'The previous Prime Minister was rather fond of Myrtle's Greenhouse Ginger Cheesecake, so it was a snap to sign him up for Project Earth-mend. He's still onside, but I don't know about the one we have now.'

Wanda shook her head. 'Myrtle will take care of him, or her, if it ever comes to that again. Wait and see!'

'We won't have to wait long,' Tark said, tilting his head toward the sky as if a transmission was coming in. 'Prince wants us to report back, pronto.'

'But Canberra's *days* away from here,' sighed

Number 12. 'Even if we keep up a steady trot. And do the politicians even allow camels there?'

'Of course they do,' said Wanda, sounding very much like Judge Wanda again. 'If not, I'll have the law changed!'

'T-thanks,' said Number 12. 'I suppose I could take a *bath* in tea-tree oil, or something.'

Tiger had never heard of tea-trees, let alone their oil. It sounded rather disgusting if it had to be licked off afterwards.

'Walking is *so* twentieth century,' Syd said. 'Even if we went as the crow flies - meaning me - it still would take more than a day to get there.'

'Have finger, will travel,' Tark reminded them. 'Ready for teleportation?'

Tiger always enjoyed their teleportation trips, especially after Tark had adjusted the settings on the Module from hidden to translucent so that they could actually *see* where they were going, even from the dizzying 50,000 feet or so he kept them at to avoid bumping into airplanes. It didn't matter if you were a cat of slightly heavier than average build, an aerodynamic crow, a Griffon shaped as a frog, a lizard with no disguise at all, or a camel with no place to bend and fold up your legs, as you hurtled through the atmosphere. Up there, all were equal, just a bundle of cat, camel, lizard, and ET related matter on its way to a pre-defined destination before landing and reconfiguration - in this case, at the Sacred Pool.

Even before they slowed for the touchdown, Tiger could smell Jasmine and see the wavering light of hundreds of candles dotted around the Sacred Pool.

A Welcoming Ceremony: it was good to be home!

There was singing, too. It seemed that Flute, who'd been right-hand frog to Prince in Tark's absence, had been keen on gospel singing ever since he'd downloaded tracks from the Soweto Gospel Choir on iTunes. Thinking that the 'Griffon Gospel Experience' had a good ring to it he decided to audition Members for a small group to perform at special occasions such as when Eudora returned from meetings at Inter-Galactic Command. Since the other frogs were getting a bit bored with hollowing out nap-tunnels for the winter months ahead, or scratching away moss from the boulders around the Sacred Pool, Flute had no shortage of Members lining up to sing. Which was a bit strange since, as Tark had told Tiger more than once, there were no choirs, gospel or otherwise, on Griffon. If Griffs sang at all, it was in the privacy of their home cubicles, between the setting of Griffon's middle sun and the rising of its third.

So it was that the Crew was greeted by a chorus of "Walking on Sunshine" in perfect five-part harmony, with two male and two female parts, plus Flute singing descant over them all. Number 12 did his best to join in with a hollow but throbbing bass, while Tiger and Wanda danced to the beat. Prince sat on the big boulder at the center of the Pool with his eyes closed, while Eudora perched on her usual branch, with something of a smile, or at least the closest thing to one Tiger imagined a raven should be able to manage.

Moths crisscrossed then hovered over the Pool, transfixed by the singing, which made it

easy for the frogs to have a quick snack in between breaths. If there was one thing Tiger regretted about being a cat, it was the nuisance of pads on his paws, which made it difficult for his applause to be heard. Wanda's attempt wasn't much better, and Syd didn't even bother, but Number 12 made a pretty good show of it by thudding his hooves against the nearest rock.

Tark hopped up to the edge of the Pool and gave a low bow to Prince and Eudora.

'I come with greetings from *the* Kangaroo,' he said, 'who wishes us well with Project Earthmend.'

'We will offer rain to Uluru in thanks,' said Prince, 'for his help against Mick and the Abell 2218s.'

'But *the* Kangaroo is a spirit,' Tiger noted. 'I doubt that he needs fresh grass to eat.'

'Point taken, Member Tiger,' said Eudora. 'But I'm sure that his brethren - the *real* kangaroos - will make good use of it.'

'Speaking of Mick,' Prince said. 'Inter-Galactic Command reports that his starships are regrouping somewhere between Neptune and Pluto. The fact that they remain within this solar system is not a good sign. Perhaps they will lick their wounds before returning to finish their assignment - to destroy the Earth, or at least neutralize its human inhabitants.'

Eudora's red eyes flared. 'No doubt about *that*,' she said. 'Abell 2218 robots are not programmed for surrender. For them, there are only two possible outcomes - total victory or total defeat.'

'There must be *something* we can do to stop them,' Tiger said.

'Yes,' said Wanda. 'What about Inter-Galactic Command? Can't they stop Mick and his crew?'

'Of course,' said Prince. 'But it's all a matter of timing. Inter-Galactic Command is like your United Nations, except on a much larger scale.'

'Yes,' said Eudora. 'Much larger – and grander!'

'They will have to meet,' said Tark. 'And put it to a vote.'

'A vote?' squawked Syd. 'Whether or not to save the Earth! What's not to save?'

'You go on like a human,' Eudora scoffed. 'They too assume that Earth is the center of the universe. Well, it isn't! The delegates from Inter-Galactic Command will decide if this minor planet is worth saving if a show-down with the Abell 2218s is likely, which could have far-reaching consequences for stability in this galaxy.'

'But what about your mission?' Tiger said. 'They sent you to *save* the Earth, didn't they?'

'Not to watch it be destroyed!' grumbled Number 12, pawing at the bank so hard that chunks of mud spilled into the Pool.

'We have a strong case,' said Eudora. 'And I'll be returning in due course for a meeting to put it to them.'

'Can I come with you?' Wanda offered, assuming her Judge Wanda tone.

'Wanda's *very* good at putting a case,' nodded Tiger.

'I think not,' said Tark. 'I need you to keep the lizards and amphibians here onside.'

'But thanks for the offer,' said Eudora, with an uncharacteristic display of warmth.

Wanda narrowed her eyes. 'We can't just sit here, waiting for Mick and his crew to come back,

guns blazing!

'All Mick and his robots need is an excuse,' said Prince. 'If the Project fails, he'll have it.'

Tiger felt his heart fluttering with excitement. 'So what should we do now? Tell us!'

Prince sighed. 'If humanity and other living beings here are to have any chance of survival, we must go to the most important place on Earth to convince humans that the time to embrace Project Earth-mend is *now*.'

The Crew looked at each other and shook their heads.

'But we're already *in* Canberra,' said Tiger.

'No,' said Eudora. 'You'll be going some place much more important than Canberra.'

'Sydney?' asked Syd.

'Haven't you been paying attention?' Wanda scoffed at him. 'We've already been to Sydney!'

'Then *where*?' Tiger pleaded.

'The Big Apple,' said Prince. 'I understand that if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.'

'Isn't that a song?' asked Tiger, trying to hum the lines.

'The Big Apple?' Wanda said. 'But Stanthorpe is in the middle of nowhere!'

It was Eudora and Prince's turn to shake their heads.

'Never heard of Stanthorpe,' said Eudora. 'We mean the real *Big Apple* - New York City!'

'Ah!' the Crew replied at once.

'We're going to New York City!' said Wanda.

'New York City!' said Tiger.

'New York City!' said Number 12.

'Where's New York City?' said Syd.

For once the rest of the Crew was grateful to Syd for speaking up. None of them knew exactly, or even generally, where New York City was.

‘Isn’t that where all the gangster movies are made?’ said Tiger, trying to make it seem like less of a question than it actually was.

‘No, that’s Hollywood,’ said Wanda, a bit more certain of where *that* was – somewhere near Disneyland.

To help the Crew tune into where they were headed, Tark shape-shifted into a young Frank Sinatra, complete with starched shirt, tuxedo and microphone, to sing “New York, New York”.

This time it was the other Members’ turn to applaud, and Tiger marveled at how they managed it with just frog toes. But then again, they weren’t really frogs, were they?

‘Are we sure Elvis won’t be jealous?’ Wanda laughed, referring to Tark’s fondness for imitating The King now and then.

‘While I’m at Inter-Galactic Command,’ Eudora explained, ‘you will make your way to the Big Apple and address the United Nations.’

‘Right,’ said Tiger, doubtfully. ‘But don’t we have to be *important* to get in there?’

‘At this moment in time,’ Prince said sternly, ‘there’s nothing more important than Project Earth-mend. And you are its ambassadors!’

‘Besides,’ said Tark, ‘President Obama has been re-elected, and he knows us!’

‘Not to mention his friend Madonna!’ smirked Wanda.

‘I love Madonna,’ said Number 12. ‘She can have a free ride on my hump any day!’

‘Don’t be rude!’ said Wanda.

Number 12 looked confused, but just let it pass.

What Alexander had planned as a Welcome Home Party turned out to be yet another bon voyage for Tiger and the Crew. He had decked out the greenhouse in soft, blinking lights – solar, of course, and left over from Christmas, but they were the best he could do on short notice, which it always was, when Tiger, Wanda, and the others had returned from assignment.

Myrtle Gower from Next Door had directed her husband Bradley to give their dogs, Tony and Cleo, a tea-tree oil shampooing and instruct them to be on their best behavior or they would have to go home. Tony liked the tea-tree treatment because it soothed his skin, but Cleo put up stiff resistance to the tin bathtub because she thought it was beneath her station ever since Myrtle had bathed her as a pup in their proper ceramic tub inside the house. Meanwhile, Myrtle made homemade dips, since she could not trust Alexander to buy proper ones fit for inter-galactic royalty such as Prince and Eudora. And of course, she baked an especially rich version of her Greenhouse Ginger Cheesecake since she'd also invited the Prime Minister to attend.

'Don't you think you should tell Alexander that the PM might be coming?' Bradley mumbled, as he towed down the ungrateful Cleo. 'After all, it is *his* house we're going to.'

'It's in the greenhouse,' Myrtle said, splitting hairs. 'Since we launched the Project there with Eudora and Prince, I've thought of it as neutral ground, a kind of *sacred* place for all of us.'

When she did finally tell Alexander what was up, he simply shrugged. He was so used to surprises from Myrtle by now, and he was so happy to have Tiger back, if only for a brief time, that he couldn't be bothered worrying about who else might be coming.

As it happened, the PM's stretch limo arrived at Greenhouse Place just as the procession of frogs was weaving its way across the intersection from the park. It took several minutes for the parade to finish, after which the PM's car slowly trailed up the street to Alexander's house. Just as they made it up to the driveway, Eudora landed on the car and gave its occupants a hard stare through the windscreen. Ever so briefly, the windscreen seemed to sizzle before returning to its solid state.

Alexander had put on a fresh shirt for the occasion, and even thought about putting on a tie, but that's as far as he got - thinking about it.

'Never mind,' Tiger said, already sniffing at Myrtle's salmon dip. 'Until she signs up for the Project, she can take you as she sees you.'

It was a tight squeeze, but most of the frogs managed to fit either on the ledge of the bright red spa or in the pot plants lining the greenhouse.

Syd made himself at home on Alexander's shoulder just before Eudora did the same on Bradley's. Bradley was so surprised by this that he lifted a hand as if to swat Eudora off, but the hand froze in mid-swat.

'I wouldn't do that, if I were you,' Eudora said to Bradley, giving him an even harder stare than he had to the PM's car. 'You might pull a muscle!'

Sure enough, Tiger could see a beam of light

grazing across Bradley's arm, after which he winced in pain.

With a wilting smile, Bradley let his arm drop to his side. 'The thought never crossed my mind,' he said, rubbing his arm. 'Hope you're comfy up there!'

As the PM got out of the car, Tiger's jaw dropped. 'That's not the PM,' he said. 'That's a man. Our PM is a woman!'

'Sorry,' piped up Flute. 'There was an election, and the one you mean is out.'

'But I liked Julia,' pouted Tiger.

Prince shrugged. 'One politician is very much like another, so, if you want the other one, I'm sure it can be arranged.'

He nodded to Tark, who flicked his toe at the PM. Then and there, the PM changed into a woman.

'Thanks, Tark,' said Tiger. 'That's more like it!'

The new – or rather old, but not really old, but rather female – PM came in just then, followed closely by two burly bodyguards.

'My, my,' she said, extending a hand to Alexander. 'Thanks for having me back. It's... cosy in here.'

'She thinks it's crowded,' Tiger said under his breath to Tark, forgetting for an instant that the PM wouldn't understand him.

'I can make it bigger,' Tark said, extending his magic toe. 'But the hedge Next Door would have to go.'

'Better leave it,' said Wanda. 'Those bodyguards are probably packing big guns!'

The PM spotted Prince and gave him a slight bow. 'Your... highness,' she said. 'Is that what I should be calling you?'

'Prince is fine, Prime Minister,' said Prince.

'Oh, call me Julia,' laughed the PM. 'All my friends do. And, come to think of it, my many opponents do, too. But not as nicely.'

Prince took it all in. 'Julia, may I introduce Eudora, our Supreme Commander and First Delegate to Inter-Galactic Command?'

Eudora dug her claws deeper and deeper into Bradley's shoulder until he got the hint and shuffled over to the PM at which point Eudora extended a regal wing to her.

'We were on the very best of terms with the previous PM,' Eudora said, 'And hope to be with the next one. I trust it will be the same with you.'

The PM seemed to stiffen slightly but then relaxed. 'Be assured of that,' she said.

Tiger found it all a bit confusing, even though he'd asked to have Julia back. If she was the past, even though she was the present, too, what did that make the future PM - annoyed?

Glancing around, the PM spotted Myrtle.

'You must be Mrs Gower,' she said. 'I've heard so much about you and your fabulous cheesecakes.'

'The way to a woman's heart,' Tiger whispered to Tark, 'is through her cheesecake!'

Myrtle smiled and cocked her head a bit. 'Thank you... Julia. Then you must know why I make all these cheesecakes.'

'Yes,' said the PM. 'It's all about this Project Earth-mend, isn't it. Raising funds?'

'And awareness,' said Myrtle. 'The previous PM was very supportive.'

'As anyone with sense would be,' said the PM quickly. 'And how many cheesecakes did he buy on his visits?'

‘Two or three at a time,’ said Myrtle.

‘Then I’ll have four – no, make that six,’ laughed the PM. ‘Not good for my waistline, but I have very hungry staff members, or at least I did before... now what was that I was thinking of?’

‘Nothing important,’ said Tark.

The PM scratched her head. ‘Well, I’m sure it won’t go to *waist!*’

Her bodyguards laughed on cue and were quickly joined by a chorus of titters from the frogs after Prince let out a chuckle.

The PM was icing sugar in Myrtle’s hands after that. Not only did she place a standing order for six Greenhouse Ginger Cheesecakes a week, she promised to cut through as much red tape as possible to double the country’s renewable energy sources within five years.

‘We did well, didn’t we?’ Alexander asked Tiger, after she had left, following her bodyguards with their stacks of cheesecakes. ‘Or rather, Myrtle, Prince and Eudora did.’

‘Hey, don’t forget *my* contribution,’ Tiger said, carefully licking the last bits of salmon dip off his whiskers. ‘I gave her the hard stare, so what choice did she have?’

‘Only trouble is,’ said Wanda, ‘she’s not PM anymore. Maybe we should have let the real one in.’

Prince smiled. ‘We can time travel into the future as well as the past. Give it time.’

Confusing or not, they had to agree it was a great way to start the push toward the Big Apple.