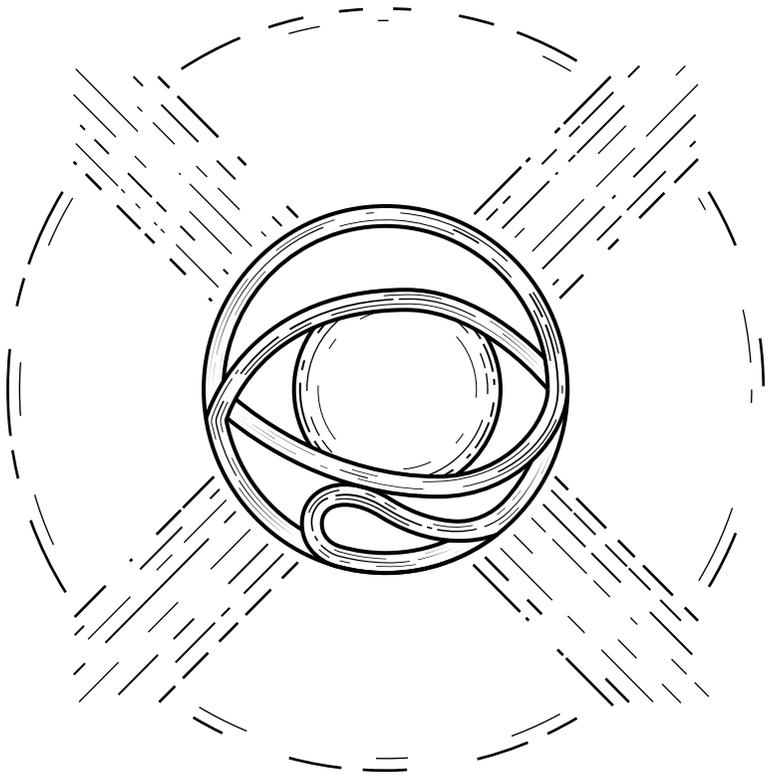


OCEAN BORN

A
NOVEL
BY
JACOB KOPAHMER

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TWISTED TREE
PUBLISHING

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Pronunciation Guide

1. Kaltingoo: Call-ting-goo
2. Veetsishocum: Vee-TsI-show-coom
3. TsiShoyāda: TsI-show-yay-dah
4. Abrevluant: Ah-brev-lu-want
5. HuhKle: Who-Keye-E
6. HAYAda: Hey-yay-dah
7. Ooh: Oh
8. TsE:TsE
9. Galgathon: Gahl-ga-thon
10. Matimaus: Mat-i-may-us
11. Chalie: Chah-Lee
12. Avreylium: Ah-Vrey-Lee-oom
13. Tsivreylium: TsI-Vrey-lee-oom
14. Cerulean: seh-roo-lee-ehn
15. Creynach: Cray-Nahk
16. VeKleSho: Vee-Keye-Show

Prelude

Perth

A man sat on the floor of a dimly lit room. Around him were metal industrial tables illuminated by pin lights emitting from tiny fixtures in the ceiling. Each table bore archaeological finds from around Australia all relating to the Aboriginal people.

“You’re not what I expected,” the man said shifting into the light allowing me to see him better. He was an Aborigine, older in age, his dark skin highlighted by shaggy, white facial hair. “At least, not for someone as important as you,” he finished.

“What does one expect?” I answered airily. I had been greeted in a similar manner for years now. At times I wish I was older, but then again, the greeting would only be along the lines of *“You’re still living, would have thought you passed years ago.”*

“True, one shouldn’t conjure dreams based on expectation... but we do anyhow,” the man answered with a chuckle. He was holding an object in his hands, but it was difficult to make out in the dark, some sort of V-shape. In a flash, and far swifter than I would have guessed, the man rose to face me, his demeanor totally changed.

“Akuna’s the name, head of Aboriginal preservation at the Western Australian Museum. What brings you to Perth?”

“Lost history,” I answered simply.

“I can assure you, the Aborigines history is not lost, not yet.”

“That is exactly what I hope for. Yet, as I look around this room and at the exhibits upstairs, I have seen nothing that even hints at what I’m looking for,” I responded.

“Many of our histories are oral, passed down from elder to elder since The Dreaming.”

“Yes, but you have been collecting that knowledge here, into written form in order to protect it in this modern age?” I asked. Akuna nodded slowly. Before entering this room, I passed through a hall lined with tomes, each carefully

scribed on the finest parchments. I doubted the information I sought would even make it into a book such as those. "You could say that you know most of the tales of your people?" Again, a nod so slight it was hardly noticeable.

"You make them sound like fantasy," his voice sounding accusatory.

"On the contrary, you'll find me far more likely to trust what you have to say than most anyone alive. I have come to trust the unbelievable, and change the accepted."

At these words my host began to pace his sanctuary, pausing at various tables to think, or delay. Then he held the object in his hand up to the light, the sweeping 'V' of a boomerang with faded and worn painted embellishments, impossible for me to make out at this distance.

"This very boomerang has been handed down in my family for many generations. It is a reminder, a promise... what brings you to Perth?"

"What dealings did the Aborigines have with outsiders?" I asked, but before he could answer I continued. "I'm not talking about the English or Pacific Islanders, no, long before any of them," I finished asking, cutting to the chase. I might as well get to it, this guy already seemed edgy.

Akuna let the boomerang fall from his hand and onto the table. Had my question surprised him? Or had he expected it, but hoped I would not ask? That would be impossible. No one suspected as I did, nobody else felt what I felt. To the rest of the world everything was in place, but not to me.

Leaving the boomerang, its appearance diminished by the darkness, Akuna moved around the large room. I calmly began to move towards the heirloom he had left behind.

"There were none before us," he said cryptically trying to avoid an answer.

"But some came after?" I pressed.

"Our histories are clear. The Dream Time brought us about as the Ancestral Spirits moved across this continent. We lived off the land, there were no others."

I reached the boomerang as he said this. The conversation had taken a rather odd turn. I had never

suggested there were others at their beginning, yet, here he was trying to hide something about their origins. Momentarily turning my attention to the boomerang, the words seemed to resonate through my mind.

A Promise.

I held back the urge to ask about the promise. In the center of the boomerang there was a symbol. At the peak of the 'V' was a pale yellow circle. Branching from it across either side was an icy-blue cross. Three of the four spaces between the cross arms were bare wood, the last side was pale green with a blood red band at its end. I had both the urge to touch the boomerang and to withdraw from it, the strangest sensation, I started inching towards it. Only to have Akuna hurry over and pick it up, holding it close and looking even more curiously at me.

"I cannot tell you what you seek," he said flatly, again his disposition changed.

"You can't, or you won't?"

"I cannot give you what I do not have," he said imploringly.

"Does this have to do with... your promise?"

Even now Akuna was gazing at the boomerang as if his eyes were asking it for permission to say something.

"I mean no harm to your people or their knowledge," I tried to reassure.

"That is not in question here," he paused, sighing deeply. "Best intentions... suffering...is there a dawn?" Akuna mumbled almost inaudibly. Shaking his head and emerging from his trance, he continued.

"The information you seek is an oral tradition not even I have been granted. I have only guessed at it, and not to the extent to which you have come to know!"

I let the silence consume him. It seemed the best option now. Still, he did not lift his eyes from the artifact in his hands until finally making up his mind.

"I will not be the one to break the promise," he said finally. "I will only tell you to seek answers elsewhere."

With that Akuna turned resolutely and started to walk away toward the back of the room. Surprised by yet another sudden change in the man, it took me a moment to decide

upon my next tactic.

“I found something while diving, years back.” The man stopped, so he had been waiting for further information about myself, about why I had come. “It started it all for me, my life’s quest, the task which consumes me, and keeps me from the life I am supposed to lead.”

“Perhaps it is not the life you were meant to lead?”

Akuna said quietly, still with his back turned.

“It was a stone map, the size of a table, carved intricately and showing different locations around the world. I have decided that they are locations of lost cities. One of them marked a spot in Western Australia,” I explained.

“You’ve found these cities?” he asked.

I hesitated. Did I really want to reveal any more? All my years of work I had always been so careful to keep an absolute secret.

“Only one...”

Akuna didn’t move. “There are no hidden cities here,” he spoke in a hushed voice.

“This map is not of a people that modern humans know of,” I went on, undaunted.

“What makes you suspect that?”

“Where I found it, what else lay with it, what I have found since!” I answered.

The Aborigine unexpectedly turned and tossed the boomerang end-over-end towards me, its shape only just glinting in the light. As I caught it, the same strange sensation of longing and revulsion stole over my body only with such power that I nearly fell to my knees, then it had passed. Akuna watched, expecting something to happen, but after several seconds he seemed to make a final decision.

“You may find the answers you seek by traveling to the village of Djarindjin. I make no guarantees, but I hold to what I said earlier, no matter *who* you are, I will not be the one to break the promise.”

This time he turned and did not stop, but as I started to place the boomerang on the table, he called out, “It is yours now, I was only its steward.”

Djarindjin

As I stepped outside the museum and into the brilliant sunlight, squinting and holding a hand to my eyes, a black Cadillac awaited me. Sliding the boomerang into my left pocket I made for the car.

Taking my normal spot in the rear right, the familiar voice of my driver, Frederick, spoke.

“To the airport, Mr. Johnson?”

“You know me far too well. Yes, and I assume you took the liberty of having a bush plane made ready?”

“Of course, and one more thing, sir, Benjamin is holding for you.”

“Do you actually call him that?”

“It is what he prefers...” the driver’s voice trailed off.

“What could he possibly need me for? I want to think while I am driving!” I said exasperatedly to myself. Never the less, I reached forward and turned on the monitor located on the back of the seat. Sure enough, his square-jawed, military-like face was waiting.

“Ben, it’s three o’clock here, that makes it what, midnight there? What could possibly be so important that you call me at that time?”

“Awfully bright there, where are you?”

“Perth...”

“Of course, Australia. You know, it wouldn’t kill you to let your best friend know where you are flying off to, especially when so much rests on your decisions.”

“You obviously know how to reach me.”

“There are places you go that no one can reach you...” he paused here, raising an eyebrow.

That’s good to know.

“But you’re in your car, are you heading back?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ve been on the ground here for six hours, of course I’m not heading back yet! I’m off to a village and I suspect the Outback. I’m gonna really go where I can’t be found.” This was an exaggeration. Djarindjin was a small town, nestled right on an Australian beach; but then again, I never knew

what would happen. There was that time in the Congo... I still can't figure out how I ended up in Madagascar, something that involved an angry village, the military, some smugglers, and a parade of rampaging elephants.

"Had to ask..."

"You said you had problems that needed my attention?" I questioned.

"Yes, I mean...I never said that," Ben said, trying to remember.

"I assumed," I added.

"Every time you leave, which has been more than a few times, strange occurrences arise. I shouldn't have to deal with things like; disgruntled refugees in the Congo, calls for rebellion in Sudan, threats over our water quality in Europe, or the protests about your products' effects on the Earth," Ben let it all out in one wild slew of rapid recitation.

"Are there really people complaining about the process that allows us to live on, in peace? Would they rather not have water?" This was the first I had heard of this little quarrel.

"Aren't there always? They are calling themselves water purists or something to that effect. They say water should only be drank from natural sources. I wasn't aware the ocean was created in a lab."

I sat there in silence waiting for Ben to continue, but he remained silent.

"So, that's all of the issues that have come up since I left?"

"There have been a couple more..."

"Oh good, I thought that was a rather short list."

"Yes, well," Ben said shifting a little. "Seeing as you have this down to an art, and I am just here to oversee operations of your company's creative ideas, perhaps you could give me some advice on the keeping world peace side of things," Ben half begged.

"Isn't Paul supposed to be dealing with those issues?"

"Actually," another voice spoke from off-screen, before the clean-shaven, younger, and diplomatic face of Paul came into view. "Actually, you hired me to sit in and listen for you, not try to accomplish what you have always done."

For a moment I sat in the car, blankly staring at the two on the monitor. It was as though I didn't know who they were. Why had I chosen these two?

Because they are both brilliant.

"Paul, I hired you to sit in for me and that includes working out solutions to problems that come up at the World Peace Organization. Frankly, the only problems I am used to are how few of the members actually show."

The two looked at each other, then back to me. The silence was killing me!

"Why are the refugees disgruntled?" I finally coaxed. Their expressions told me all I needed to know. "Know the problem!" I exclaimed. "Then develop a solution. Don't be one dimensional, the refugees have a problem, the Congolese have a problem and you can bet that the Zambians have a problem if they have refugees. Know the problem... Better yet, anticipate the problems."

Paul took the hint and sulked out of view. A thought whispered in my mind.

Brilliant but in need of confidence.

Seconds later he reappeared. I gave a large sigh.

"How do you deal with the Russians?"

To this, a large smile crept onto my face. "To the extent possible, I ignore them." Paul opened his mouth to argue, but I held up my hand. "Irakily is straightforward, be the same with him."

As Paul turned to leave I swore I heard a muffled, "That'll go over well."

Ben remained, his eyes fixated on me.

"Listen, Ben, we're coming up on the airport soon and this time I may be out of touch for a longer time. What is it you want to know?" I knew he had been speaking for Paul at the start of this conversation, but he still remained, why?

"What are you doing?"

"I am exploring."

"You really are never going to tell me." My look told him all he needed to know. This time he let out the sigh. "All right then," he said, not put-off, but somehow determined.

The monitor went blank.

Perfect timing at least, my Cadillac pulled onto the

tarmac, stopping a few feet from a single-engine Cessna. The engine was running and the pilot greeted me with a thick Australian accent as I stepped from my vehicle.

“Where to, mate?”

“Djarindjin, as close as you can take me.”

“Lambadina is less than two miles out.”

“If that’s as close as you can make it,” I finished, stepping up into the passenger seat, a questioning look on his face. Moments later we were flying low over the Western Australian Outback, the pilot pointing out landmarks as we flew. I found this vital to pass the time as our trip would take several days. We passed over Lake Moore and Lake Barlee, if you could call it a lake as my guide pointed out it hadn’t filled with water in seven years. Next we passed directly over Lake Austin, then came the Collier Range, and the Great Sandy Desert for what seemed an eternity, finally following the coast to the Dampier Peninsula and Djarindjin.

As we began to descend, the pilot looked towards me. “You might want to hold on, this will be a little rough.”

I loosely held on to the handle to my right, but we were coming down on the runway. It was straight ahead of us, and in the distance I could see the village. I realized soon after that the pilot wasn’t heading for the runway. As we passed quickly overhead, I could see only a narrow, red rocky road below us. Now I gripped the handle. We struck the ground smooth enough, but then we hit the first of the pot-holes. We bounced, skidded and finally eased to a stop just outside the village of Djarindjin.

“Crickey, is that close enough for you?” the pilot asked. I smiled and patted his back.

“That was perfect. I would like you to be my personal pilot from here on out,” I said. He looked dumbfounded. “Think it over, I’ll pay well.”

Leaving the plane I headed straight for the village. Our entrance had caused a reaction I found most helpful, as dozens of people began swarming to see what had caused the commotion. I scanned the people looking for someone that could be an elder, but I saw none. I continued on looking. It wasn’t until a young woman pulled on my arm

that I stopped.

“You seem intent on finding someone,” she said.

“I came to speak to an elder.”

“That would be Ganan, he lives there,” the woman said pointing to a small house directly beside us.

“Thank you...”

“Taworri,” the young woman said.

“Thank you, Taworri.”

We quickly moved towards a pale yellow, single room house. It had two windows on either side, with raggedy white curtains in each. Taworri approached with me as the crowd parted. They were all murmuring, but what I could not tell. I caught several glances towards the boomerang, followed by a mix of indignation or was it curiosity?

Taworri motioned for me to stay outside as she entered. There was a look of excitement in her eyes. It took but a moment before she returned, beckoning me in with her hand. I did not hesitate. The people had gone silent until the door closed behind me, at which time an even louder chorus of murmurs arose than when I had arrived.

On the far wall was the kitchen. It held a small gas oven, a tiny refrigerator, and sink with the plumbing exposed beneath. To my right sat a small cot, and several riji loin cloths hanging from an old oak coat rack. The elder, who was actually middle-aged, sat to my left on an old worn out tan couch. In places the fabric had worn through exposing the padding. He was tracking my every move, his eyes burning into me, but for a moment they shifted and lingered on the boomerang in my left pocket before once again staring intently into my own.

“I have come from America seeking answers. I’ve searched for years with little to show for my efforts, only tiny hints to keep me going, and now I am here seeking the knowledge of an ancient people...” The elder, Ganan, held up his hand and shook his head.

“I cannot give you the answers you seek,” he began. My head fell. I had come all this way for another dead end! “Without a payment,” I felt my spirits brighten. “The boomerang in your pocket would suffice,” he said, his eyes suddenly hungry.

What would you give him that for?

The question consumed my mind.

A terrible trade, surely there is something else.

The words came to me before finally settling on saying, “Surely there is something besides an old piece of wood that you would find interest in?”

Ganan’s eyes fell, his hopes dashed, but it only took him a moment to reply.

“You will go into the Outback, bring me back a treasure, a fitting replacement for the relic which you carry. If I deem it worthy, then you shall have the information you seek. If it be unworthy, you will never receive that which I have to offer.” He leaned forward on the couch and a look of significance stole over his face. “I know far more than most. Without my knowledge your quest is over.”

I am sure this was meant to frighten me into handing over the boomerang, but I would not let such an artifact go so easily. I grabbed the handle of the door, leaving without another look.

The Outback

Outside the house and back in the blazing sun, I allowed the rickety door to close roughly on its own accord. Some of the locals had gone, but others were huddled under the sporadic groves of coconut trees. They perked up when they noticed me walking back towards my plane, many pointing and whispering.

I couldn't believe it at first, the elder so easily rebuffing my inquiry. He had swatted it away as he would a mosquito. However, given my progress on my quest thus far, I was no longer surprised by the time I reached the small plane. My pilot was napping with his back against the front wheel, and as I reached for the door he spoke.

"Back already? You sure don't linger, mate."

Before he could jump to his feet I waved my hand for him to remain, and then realized I had offered him a job and didn't even know his name...

Oh well, figure that out later, for now, call him Auz... short for Australian.

"I've been delayed, a common occurrence I'm afraid. You may want to ask around, find a place to stay, I will be away for several days," I explained.

The pilot looked slowly towards the tiny town, then back towards myself.

"There isn't exactly a Holiday Inn here, mate. No, I'll be roughin' it then," Auz said as he rose and walked to the side of the plane. "I'm used to it, got my tent, cot and supplies for a week in here, always keep it stocked." He finished by rapping hard against the plane for good measure. We both looked curiously as he did this. A short scream had accompanied the pounding of metal.

Moving to the door, and opening it, the two of us peeked into the rear of the Cessna. Sure enough, a young woman sat there peering sheepishly back at us. It was Taworri.

"What are you doing in my plane?!" Auz half shouted.

"Take it easy, I met her in the village," I directed at my pilot, "What *are* you doing in his plane?" I finished by looking, what I hoped was kindly, towards Taworri.

She did not speak immediately, calculating or afraid I couldn't say, but eventually she moved forward and said quietly, "What will you bring as payment?"

So, she had eavesdropped on my conversation with Ganan. My expression must have given away my thoughts because she smiled and said, "Don't be surprised, I often listen to father's conversations."

"Ganan is your father?" I confirmed. Taworri rapidly nodded, looking proud. "And you know a lot about your people from listening?"

"Yes, and asking him many questions, and exploring..."

"You mean, you know your way around the Outback?" I exclaimed, unsuccessfully concealing my excitement. She could prove a useful guide if true.

"More than most know," she said to herself.

"Great!" No need to hide my excitement now. "I usually don't have much help on my escapades...perhaps you would be willing to guide me through the Outback, and help me choose a fitting gift for your father?"

Her face turned cold and unreadable as she considered my request.

Never play poker with this woman. Surely she wanted to tag along?

She looked at Auz.

"Isn't he going with you?"

"He's just my pilot..."

"I was just about to set up camp here by my plane," Auz said comfortably.

"I'll go with you," Taworri said suddenly. "You will stay at my place," she directed towards my pilot. He stopped grabbing the tent from the plane and looked at her.

"You mean that run down..." he was interrupted as Taworri realized what he was going to say.

"No, I have not lived with father for many years. Follow this road to the edge of town. Mine is the home overlooking the beach, can't miss it."

Auz shrugged, grabbing a rucksack from the plane and started down the street after a gracious thank you. Despite how he acted, I couldn't help but feel that was one Australian who had never slept in a tent his whole life.

The Australian sun was starting to hang low on the horizon, shadows stretching across the rocky, red soil. I breathed it all in, pausing for a moment from my quest...it didn't last long.

"If we hurry we can make it to my nearest enclave before dark!" Taworri shouted enthusiastically, grabbing my arm at the wrist and pulling. She barely gave me time to grab supplies. I managed to fill my cargo pants with snacks, a compass, journals, and I just managed to throw a canteen over my shoulder before she became irate. Together we were swept into the wilds with the evening breeze.

The terrain was easy going, but full of brush. Had it not been for Taworri I would have been lost in minutes, but she seemed to see an unknown path as we turned this way and that, generally heading south and a little east. The entire time she did not speak but had a look of utmost concentration. I felt if I were to speak, she would lose her focus and we would be lost.

We rounded a cluster of Coolabah trees and our clear path ended, blocked by a thicket of thorny brush.

"Wrong turn?" I ventured.

To my surprise, she jumped to the ground and started crawling through the terrifying, thorny, monster of a shrub.

Don't do it.

The fleeting thought came; but totally ignoring it, I dove. The thorns tore at my clothes, dug into my skin, scratched at my face, but I emerged!

We were standing at the edge of a gently sloping granite face; the opposite sides were impassable cliff faces, at the bottom of which sat a pool of water, glistening orange, accented by spots of vegetation around its edges. Taworri had already reached the bottom and made her way to the back of the pool, where sat a cave recessed into the cliff face. It was littered with white Aboriginal cave paintings, glowing purplish orange with the nearly fallen sun.

Inside the cave, which would easily fit a dozen people, were the paintings I saw from afar. Hundreds even thousands of paintings, at first they seemed so simple;

white or reddish-brown paint, depicting hands, people, or a variety of animals, but the longer I gazed upon them, moving in closer and taking a step back again, there was something deeper to these works.

Taworri simply sat with her back to the pool watching me. There were layers over layers of paint and I wished I could see the depictions beneath those which were present today. The ceiling was covered in blown handprints, but it was a large kangaroo that held my attention.

“There are many kangaroo paintings in Australia,” Taworri said, following my gaze.

I nodded and thought to myself.

But not quite like this one.

“He was done by my father, his last painting.”

“Were many of these done by your father?” I asked.

“Oh no, that is the only painting father did in this place. He said these paintings were special, this place sacred, and that the stories shown here should remain never to be covered by new stories.”

“Why would you cover any of the paintings, aren’t they your histories, and your guides?” I said turning around to face her.

“It is true that we paint over older paintings, but we never remove what is painted before us, that way those stories live on never to be erased. But these are special, these are the first.” I did not hear anything further about the art, because, atop the cliff I saw the silhouette of a person crouched between a small gap in the bushes.

Forgotten were all thoughts of Aboriginal art. Taworri looked concerned as my gaze remained fixed on the spot. My legs began to carry me around the pond, and towards my quarry. I had begun to run only vaguely hearing questioning calls from Taworri.

My heart was pounding by the top, not having run so hard in months. At the spot where I saw the figure, there was no trace, no broken twigs, and the rocky ground would conceal any footprints. The sun was nearly set, darkness disrupting my vision as I peered around the hidden pool. There was nothing, no sound, no movement. Yet, there had been something there, a person.

The falling sun can play games with the mind, cast ominous shadows.

As I reentered the cave I made no mention of why I ran off. I didn't want to worry Taworri. The light was soon replaced by a deep purple sky and the first dappling of stars were beginning to make themselves known in the moonless sky. Ignoring my new friend's pleas to stay in the cave, I lay beside the pool with my back to the cave, and a watchful eye on the surroundings. I could not sleep tonight.

It wasn't long before Taworri slept, but I stayed up until the heavens were alight with a brilliance few have ever witnessed. At some point dozing off, only to awake with the warmth of the morning sun.

Taking a somewhat crushed snack from my pocket, I began to eat my meager breakfast. Only then did I see Taworri coming down the slope with a couple of Goannas and a sack of berries. It took her only a few minutes to have a fire going. Soon we were feasting on a surprisingly delicious Goanna berry stew! The meal, although unconventional, lifted my spirits and very nearly pushed out all thoughts of the events of last night. Today I would find my gift for Taworri's father.

We journeyed south in the scorching heat of the February sun. Having traveled from the blustery Colorado plains just days earlier did little to help matters. On top of everything else was the grass and brush, at times difficult to move through and always scratching and grabbing at our exposed limbs. Such is the life of an adventurer, but I still don't have to love every aspect of what I do.

"I don't know what father expects you to find out here. There is nothing of value, at least not the value of that boomerang," Taworri said suddenly.

"Somehow, I don't think he expects me to find anything."

"So, you will give up?"

"Oh no, I always find a way. For every barred path, there is a tunnel."

"Perhaps, I am your tunnel?" She ventured.

As we moved on in silence for a tick, I pondered what she had said. Maybe Taworri would end up being of help in

the future if my gift doesn't please the elder.

If you find one.

Around midday, we entered a clearing made up largely of red boulders and surrounded by mangled Bloodwood trees. Happily, Taworri moved to a particularly large boulder in the shade of one of the trees. Glad for the rest, I sat down wiping my brow with my already soaked shirt. My guide scuttled around, moving from tree to tree gathering something from the branches and trunks. For several minutes, she knelt and dug with a flat stone, finally coming back with a large chunk of root, and a dozen or so small, woody balls.

"Eat, bush coconuts!" She said excitedly, and then gave the golf ball-sized fruit a whack with her stone. Inside was a white flesh similar to a coconut, along with a curled up bug. I followed suit, not caring about what I was eating. We finished by sucking on the roots of the Bloodwood tree, which held a remarkable amount of water.

"Quite the useful tree," I acknowledged.

"There is more. If the tree is damaged it flows kino, a blood-red sap that can be used to treat injuries and tan kangaroo leather," she added to the trees list of great qualities.

"They certainly are special."

An idea stole over me, but it would have to be just right. I arose moving swiftly around and looking, surely this would be it! Taworri looked on curiously, but let me roam between the large rocks. That's when I saw it, on the opposite edge of the clearing, a lone Bloodwood, only a couple of feet tall, but growing out of a hole in a small boulder that had filled with the red earth. Its shape was perfect, a single windblown trunk, with its canopy stretching reaching the opposite way that the wind had tilted the trunk. It would be a load to haul back, but with a little pruning, this would be a fitting gift.

As I stood up straight with my prize, once again I laid eyes on a figure. This time it ducked behind the brush. Could I be sure of what I saw? It was so fast. I almost gave chase but thought better of it. No, I would just keep an eye

out, best not to let on that I noticed if there was someone out there. Who could possibly want to follow us out here?

“The villagers seemed a bit strange towards me, are they always so reserved, and prone to speaking behind visitors backs?” I asked as we headed back. I wondered if it could be a nosy Aboriginal from the village.

“They are suspicious and probably spreading stories.”

“About me, why?”

“Because of what you carry,” she said flashing a glance at the boomerang, still protruding from my pocket.

“This,” I said pulling it out. As I did a gust of wind swept across the Outback.

What a strange coincidence.

“There are legends, and tales, and half-truths. The Boomerang Master is why I got into our history as a child, wanting to know more and to learn the truth. So my knowledge grew, as did my taste for more of our people’s history.”

“Can you tell me?”

“If you were the Boomerang Master, I would do you an injustice...” she hesitated and took a deep breath.

“Are you a bad man?” she asked.

The question came as a shock as I nearly dropped the tree and boulder. Just who is this Boomerang Master supposed to be?

“Everyone struggles with the evil things in life.”

“So you are,” she looked grave.

“No, because I cling to something far more powerful than evil.”

“What is that?” Taworri questioned.

“The same as everyone, faith, love, and trust. Without these, there could be only evil.”

Taworri gave a smile, but then it faded.

“What if someone shatters your trust, rejects your love, and steals your faith? What if many people did those things?”

What a strange question, how could someone destroy *my* trust, *my* love, or steal *my* faith? Faith is a gift, a person could surely lose these values towards myself, they could

do terrible deeds towards me, even try to kill me, but that would not rid me of the traits I valued so highly.

“One doesn’t simply lose these things,” I tried to explain. “They are always there.”

Taworri stopped and looked back at me almost pityingly.

“It’s called pain, and enough of it can break anyone.”

“I’ve forgotten pain.”

“Nobody forgets pain, you can try, but eventually it will consume you.”

This conversation had taken a turn I never imagined, but I was through with it. I trudged on with my small tree and boulder which was getting heavier with every step. My water was long since depleted, and my strength beginning to wane. That is until we stumbled upon a gravel road. My spirits immediately rose, and to further enhance the feeling, a truck could be seen barreling toward us in the distance. I set the rock down and flagged the driver.

We arrived back at Djarindjin around dinner, the Cessna still sitting outside of town. At least my new pilot hadn’t taken off without me. As we moved through town and towards Taworri’s home I noticed, with a smile, that she lived immediately next to a small complex with three large silos, each with the words, “Genesis Water Creation, by Johnson Design.”

“So, you live next to this area’s water station, does this mean...”

“Yes, I am the chief of operations. Which isn’t saying much, I only have one other employee.”

“Impressive, although I’m not surprised after our short adventure together. They only want the best to run these water facilities.”

Taworri didn’t say anything, but I got the feeling she wasn’t used to flattery.

The house was large for a beach house, the front, which faced the ocean, had a wraparound porch, and a towering wall of glass windows. The roof, made of crushed shells, sloped from the pinnacle back down towards the village, all the way to the ground. The only way to enter was on the beachside of the house.

I sat my tree inside, on a table in front of the windows, and was heading for a shower when a voice called out.

“Love the new accent you brought, incredible house by the way,” he added to Taworri. “So you’re back, and you weren’t even gonna say hello?” My pilot shouted from the kitchen, which was separated by a large island at the rear of the house.

I waved unenthusiastically at him as I continued following Taworri towards the loft stairs.

“Alrighty mate, but don’t fall asleep. I have quite the dinner I’m makin’ up for tonight, what with that elder, Ganan, coming over and all.” I only hesitated for a moment, how could he possibly have known, or was it mere coincidence?

“He figured you would be back tonight,” Auz finished.

Taworri showed me to the bathroom. As she left she said, “I knew as father had...I hope what you say is true, don’t be a bad man, okay.” She left quietly, and anxiously.

A shower had never felt so good. It went beyond wiping off the grime of two days in the Outback. It was a chance to contemplate the happenings of the previous days.

The man I saw at the hidden cave. I was forgetting something about the cave, but no matter how hard I thought, nothing came to me. It wasn’t the art, or the pool, not even the figure, something about the rock. Then there was Taworri, was she a guide, or someone to keep a watchful eye on, a person they considered dangerous? Probably the latter.

Are you a bad person? The Boomerang Master.

The words rang clearly through my mind. The boomerang, it had grown on me. I no longer felt the odd draw and repulsion, rather, we felt as one, as if it were meant to be.

Ganan did not arrive for dinner, so the three relative strangers sat together looking out at the ocean from the comfort of the dining room table, an impressive piece hand carved from Outback stone. Dinner had been largely silent, so when a loud rapping shook the door, all three of us jumped in our seats. It was Auz who snapped out of the

trance first, running to the door, and admitting the awaited elder.

He strode right in. Instead of walking to us, he headed straight for the boulder and tree I had claimed from the Outback. He shifted slowly around it, observing it from every angle.

“That is an amazing piece, it speaks to me,” Ganan said as he continued to gaze at the tree. I smiled inwardly. “When did you add this?”

“Today,” Taworri said strongly.

“Oh?” he said knowingly. Turning around, he strode toward the single, large, kangaroo leather sofa. We all rose to join him, my two new friends sitting next to him on the couch. I stood in front of them all.

“Are you pleased that I took such an interest in the tree?” Ganan asked.

“I am.”

“I don’t like it,” he spoke nonchalantly.

“After you found out we brought it back,” I retorted.

For a split second, I swore I caught a glint of a smile, not on his lips, but in those normally stoic eyes.

“I could never accept the tree.”

“Why not?” Taworri and I said together.

“Because it is too perfect here, so here it shall remain,” the elder explained. A smile actually spread across his face.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if this meant I would have to go back out to find him another gift, he spoke again. “I will accept it as a suitable gift. Anything good enough for my daughter is far too good for myself. You may ask whatever you would like.”

A wave of relief stole over me. Where to begin? I had so many questions now, what with the happenings in the desert.

Focus, you are here for a reason!

“What can you tell me about outsiders, from around the Dream Time?”

“The first question you ask, I have no answer for you,” he looked genuinely crushed, and Taworri, surprised.

“I cannot hold the knowledge of all time, I hold some understanding of our peoples, and other elders know even

more of the story.”

“Before I went out on this crazy quest, you told me without what you know, my quest would be over. Have you at least heard of a people or a city from long ago?”

Ganan looked at his daughter, then at Auz. They both took the hint and immediately left the room. I knew better than to think Taworri wouldn't be too far, she would never miss this information.

“As the Boomerang Master, I must tell you. There are whispers of such a people, but I also must fear, because I know far more about your future than you could ever guess. There are some things known that are fact, bound to occur, time and again the prophecies foretold have occurred. Now here you are...the stranger with the boomerang.”

My look betrayed me. I held little store in this sort of thing...prophecies.

“Look, anyone can come up with vague references to the future that can then be taken as the telling of the future. The problem is they could have related to hundreds of events...” I tried to explain, but he shook his head so violently I stopped to keep his head from popping off.

“The Prophetics are not vague. They are clear and they are truth.” Ganan said this with absolute authority. I began to find myself trusting his word about what he called the Prophetics. “So, I say this hoping beyond all that I have, be the good man and not the bad.”

There it was again! Having heard this story already I assured him of my goodness. This seemed to ease him some, but I still sensed some trepidation as he continued.

“What I told you before is true, without what I will tell you now, there would be no hope for your quest. There is a group of Aboriginals who live deep in the Great Sandy Desert. They are experts at concealment, and are the only group still unknown by outsiders.”

“You mean, they have had no contact, they're completely unknown?”

“Precisely, you will be hard-pressed to find them even with the advice I will give you now. They will always stick to the remotest of waterways in the summer, but as the wet months approach they will move closer to the coast, surely

they are west of the Percivals.”

“There is a lot of desert west of the Percival Lakes.”

“Precisely, good luck to you,” he said smiling and got up to leave.

“Wait, you’re leaving already?!”

“There is nothing more I can give you for your quest.”

“What of this Boomerang Master business?”

“I’m sure Taworri has explained that to tell you more would surely cause you more harm than good.” Of course she had, but I still needed to know.

“I will either see you again, or I will not,” he said in parting, leaving me standing in an empty room, in front of an empty ocean view.

The plane’s engines were fired up before sunrise. Of course, I couldn’t keep Taworri away, not with the promise of a knowledge her father didn’t even possess. The plan was to fly down the coast to where one of the larger seasonal streams confluence with the ocean, and then, follow it low to the ground, looking for the Aboriginals. We would land and continue on foot when we were to the point of return for fuel.

That had been the plan and it started out accordingly. We were deep inland having seen nothing, no sign of any type of life below us when it all went wrong. As I looked out my side window, I could see a tiny dark figure, then an odd flash, and bang!

“Oh, crikey!” Auz yelled dumbfounded.

My stomach dropped as the plane went into a dive, the propellers gone, the wings damaged.

How will you get out of this one?

But there was no getting out of this situation. Taworri sat curled in a ball crying. Auz had just looked back at me yelling something that I couldn’t make out. The last thing I saw was the desert sand and rock closing in! I threw out my hands instinctively just before hitting the ground. As we hit, an envelope of darkness consumed us.

My eyes opened, expecting to see the red dust of the Outback. Wait, what had I been doing? Flying? No,

crashing! A wave of pain ripped through my entire body where I lay. My eyes clenched from the pain. Slowly, I allowed them to relax and open. I was not lying in the desert, nor was there any wreckage near me, and my new friends were nowhere to be seen.

“Quite the fall you took there, young man.” An elderly woman stood in the doorway of a large, golden glass building. In fact, I was surrounded by these towering skyscrapers, reaching far higher than any I had ever seen before, which was saying something.

The woman came out, helping me to my feet.

“Just where did I fall from?” I asked.

“A long way,” she said absently. “Come on inside, there’s some work to do on you.”

I paused, looking up at the beautiful building. Then I moved my hands over my body. I could feel a distant sort of thudding pain, but I could move, and looking myself over, I could see no injuries. Shrugging, I passed into the entry. It was a stark contrast to the exterior; it didn’t feel like the same building. The light did not shine through the glass cladding, and it appeared more like a tavern than anything else.

The floor was roughly chopped flagstone with hefty oak tables, widely spread throughout the expansive space. The only source of light were sparse glass columns, each filled with a vortex of spiraling fire, reaching from floor to ceiling.

“Come on then, you don’t have all day,” the woman said with a cackle.

She passed through a slender doorway in the farthest corner of the room. I hastened to catch up. When I arrived, the room was slightly larger than a cupboard, and it contained absolutely nothing; no chairs, no table, and no door...so where had the elderly woman gone? I looked again and then checked outside the door.

“Really! You’d think you’ve never been here before.” I spun around to see the woman standing in the doorway. “Come on,” she said again. This time I ran after her, but again she had vanished!

“Where’d she go?” I said aloud.

“Oh dear,” her voice came from the room, but she was

nowhere to be seen.

“Interesting,” the voice spoke.

“What?” I began to ask before a strange sensation of moving without trying came upon me, and my eyesight became a rush of blurred light. Just as quickly, it stopped. I stood now in a spherical room, at what I guessed to be the very top of the tower.

The woman stood in midair, directly in front of the small platform upon which I currently stood. Now I knew two truths: I was either dreaming or dead. Given my predicament, before I wound up in this place, I suspected the latter.

“Oh, wipe that look off your face, you’re not dead. If you were, you certainly wouldn’t be here, now would you? Come on out here, you’ll feel much better,” she coaxed.

The situation seemed strange enough already, so I took a step. Immediately my leg felt as though it were wrapped in a warm towel on a cool winter’s day. The pain ceased and I felt quite supported by the air. Stepping off completely, the feeling doused me from head to toe, and I immediately fell asleep.

I awoke much later. Darkness had shrouded the hundreds of skyscrapers. I looked around for the woman but she had gone. Then the most incredible sight grasped my eyes. In the distance stood a tree, its trunk dark as obsidian, yet in areas bursting with hairline seams of blinding light, and stretching higher than the buildings which surrounded it. The tree’s canopy branched over the tops of the buildings, with its leaves illuminating the heavens above it and casting a lustrous glow on the city beneath. I had to get there.

As if sensing what I felt, my body moved back to the platform. Stepping back on, all the pain which I had before, gone. Once firmly on the platform, I was again rushing through space. Upon reaching the cupboard, I immediately sprinted from the building. Outside I followed the street which led directly towards the tree. Maybe it was due to the sheer scale of this place, but as much as I ran, I seemed to make little or no progress towards the tree. I stopped and

bent over double, heaving for breath.

“One doesn’t make it to the tree by running.”

I looked up to see an elderly man on an old wooden swing, hanging from the porch of an old wooden house. It was a stark contrast to the towering buildings on either side.

“Perhaps I could catch a taxi,” I retorted.

“Or, you could just arrive...this is all yours after all,” the old man calmly replied motioning to everything.

I made to argue, but the man shrugged, then nodded in the direction which I had been running moments earlier. I looked, then spun my head to look again. Somehow, the tree loomed overhead, now only a seconds walk away! I looked back at the old man, but he and his house had vanished.

“This is one messed up dream,” I said.

I strode towards the fifty-foot limestone wall which encircled the tree. A gate stood open, its solid corten steel doors paralleling the entry street. Inside, the path meandered through a lush garden, brimming with flowers, vegetables, fruits, shrubs, and smaller trees. The garden was impressive by itself, but despite its beauty, it could go unnoticed due to the tree in the midst of the garden. The tree imposed its presence with a trunk thicker than the cluster of three, aged, live oak canopies beneath which I currently stood. I gazed in awe at the ever-reaching canopy with countless shimmering golden-white leaves.

At the base of the tree, its trunk flared out as a plethora of roots dug deep into the white earth. The path led to a spot where two roots crossed, forming an opening in the tree’s base. I reached the threshold, dwarfed by the opening, and came to an abrupt halt. Shivers convulsed through my body and a cold sweat ran from my brow. There was something about this that seemed off. Fear.

From the caliginous depths appeared the form of a man. His skin was as pitch black as the tree which overshadowed him. He wore a form-fitting, charcoal suit, which accentuated his thin but strong features. We stood for a moment observing each other, then he spoke, except I could not hear his voice; either that or he was only moving his mouth.

I took a step closer. Perhaps he was whispering, but he broke off, looking sad. The figure made a half turn back towards the tree and spoke again. I could not hear the words, but I could feel them penetrate my skin and resonate to my bones. It was power, knowledge, and emotion, only on a level beyond explanation! My vision began to cloud with a white haze. I could feel warmth beating down on my face and my hands were touching something rough... stone and gravel. I could smell a mix of dusty wind, mingled with smoke.

My eyes flew open, the sun blinding me. Squinting, I realized I had awakened. I lay on my back in the reddish sand of the Australian desert. Rolling to my side, I saw the debris of the plane crash strewn over the landscape, some still smoldering. Where were the others?

Sitting upright, I looked around. Part of the fuselage lay several feet away. Hobbling quickly to the only intact remnant of the Cessna, I dared to look inside. Both Auz and Taworri lay next to each other. I could see no injuries, but they were still.

“Auz, Taworri?” I managed to call out in a raspy voice. When they didn’t respond I ripped off the loosely hanging door and ducked into the plane. First leaning over Taworri I felt her warmth; I smiled as her body gave a twitch at my touch. Shifting to Auz I moved my hand to his neck, but before I could touch him, he spoke.

“No need, mate, just takin a kip.”

I nearly laughed with relief.

“Well, stop kippin’. We’ve got Aboriginals to find.”

“Did you call me Auz?”