VULTURE'S GATE

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ALLEN & UNWIN

1

THE END

Callum felt the rumble of roadtrains, and froze. Black shadows skittered across the blinds as a convoy pulled up outside. Outstationers. If only he hadn't insisted on staying home alone. Instinctively, he dived for the floor.

The red neon sign at the gates of the compound flashed a warning across the surrounding desert, but Callum knew his fathers were still miles away.

Inside, the Elvis Presley cuckoo man jumped out of his clock and crooned the hour. Fighting down his fear, Callum crawled across the black-and-white tiled floor towards the kitchen, heading for the safety of the security apartment. Beneath him, the ground trembled. Above, the ceiling buckled and Callum covered his ears to block out the sound of Molotov cocktails exploding against the compound roof. One by one, every alarm in the Refuge was triggered, screeching against the invasion.

As he pushed open the swing door to the kitchen, still keeping low to the floor, he heard the first crash. Someone was

around the back trying to force the rear entrance. Metal grated against concrete. Any minute and they'd be through the second set of doors.

Callum combat-crawled on his belly across the floor as the rear wall exploded inwards and pieces of debris hurtled through the kitchen. A cloud of dust and napalm-scented smoke billowed into the air. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see the grille of a roadtrain slam through the café's outer wall, sending shards of glass and steel across the pink vinyl booths. Callum bit his fist to stop himself from screaming. Then he saw the back doors collapse, and men charged across the wreckage, shouting and hooting amid the wail of alarms. He scrambled to his feet and made a dash for the security apartment entrance. He punched the keypad. Nothing happened. The system had shut down to prevent invasion. He was locked out.

Callum screamed, his throat raw with terror, as two men grabbed his arms and swung him into the air. They slammed his body against a wall and then reached for him again. Any moment now, they would smash his head against the ground and leave his broken body in the wreckage for Ruff and Rusty to find; a bloody signature.

Someone grabbed his ankle and dragged him outside, through the smouldering debris. The last thing Callum saw before he blacked out was the Elvis cuckoo clock falling into the rubble of Ruff & Rusty's Roadside Refuge.

2

ROBORAPTOR GIRL

Bo put two fingers between her teeth and gave a long, low whistle. The roboraptors were a faint shadow against the horizon, keeping low to the ground as they moved in for the kill.

Bo gave them enough time to finish off their prey and then whistled again to bring the raptor pack loping across the plain. As each one drew close, she touched it lightly on the skull and murmured its name – Chinky, Thumbelina, Cinderella, Silky. They bobbed their heads and ululated happily before scurrying into the underground bunker. Mr Pinkwhistle was the last to return. He dropped a feral cat at her feet – a thin, stringy animal, but at least it was freshly killed. Anything was better than the salted desert rat she had been eating for the last few days.

She took the cat away from the burrow entrance and squatted in the dirt to gut and skin it. The hot, fresh smell of its flesh made her mouth water. She threw the skin into the branches of a hakea tree to dry, then scraped a hole in the

ground and buried the inedible parts of the cat.

By the time she crawled back down into the burrow, the roboraptors were in sleep mode, standing in a neat row against the rear wall of their den. Bo knelt in front of Mr Pinkwhistle and rested her hand on his blunt snout. Before switching him off, she stroked his spine until he began to emit a low, purring sound. The other roboraptors whined faintly in response, acknowledging Mr Pinkwhistle as the favoured hunter. Satisfied, she reached under the jaw of each one in turn and switched them off. The afternoon sun would have charged them fully and she wanted to make sure they stored the energy for tomorrow's dawn hunt.

Bo laid Poppy's recipe book on the kitchen table. Her grandfather's handwriting sloped across the paper like a horde of insects scurrying to the edge of the page. She smoothed the folio with one hand and twirled her meat cleaver in the other.

Bo's Cat Stew

One cat, skinned and gutted. Remove hind legs and rub with oil or fat – feral pig lard is best. Put in tin.

Add bush onions and pigweed. Scrape bitter seeds from handful of bush tomatoes and discard. Add bush tomato skins. Chuck in lump of rock salt. Seal tin tightly, push up through flue hole so sun beats down on solar lid, and boil. You know it's cooking at the right temperature when you can hear a rolling, bubbling sound against the metal base.

Poppy had filled the margins of the book with little drawings and tips on where to find the best ingredients, how to thresh wild grasses, how to pickle desert fruits and salt meat to store for the lean times. Bo wished she had his voice stored as well as his words. With the roboraptors at rest and the stew cooking

quietly in the solar flue, all she could hear was the thumping of her own heart.

When the meat was tender, Bo took a plate and sat in the entrance of the burrow, gazing out at the bleached desert. The stew tasted sweet, salty and bitter all in the same mouthful. The sun sank lower towards the horizon. She shut her eyes and tried to imagine she was sitting next to Poppy and he was telling her what a good girl she was, what a fine cook, what a strong woman she would be one day. The westering sunlight felt hot against her face and she pushed her hands against her eyes to stop them stinging. It was only when the sun dipped below the horizon and the cool desert night began to fall that she wedged a rock into the mouth of the burrow and went back underground.

3

LIQUORICE STRAPPED

Callum felt sore all over. Even his tongue hurt. The metal torque around his neck chafed endlessly and his ears were raw and bloodied where the Outstationers had cut out his microchips. But more unbearable than the physical pain was the emptiness he felt inside. After the violence of the kidnapping, he had expected worse to follow, but instead he had been left alone in the dark for days on end, only a sliver of light seeping into the back of the roadtrain as it rumbled across the desert.

There were two buckets in the truck, one for him to do his business in and one full of brackish drinking water. Once a day, someone poked a crust of bread or a piece of salted meat through a slit in the door. No one spoke to him, no one checked on him.

All he could do was sit and wait and hope that the Outstationers were holding him ransom. Ruff and Rusty would pay to have him released. But deep inside, Callum suspected that the Outstationers had no interest in selling him back to his fathers. For months they had been conspiring to drive Ruff

and Rusty away from the area, to rid the western desert of a last vital link to the Colony government. Without Ruff and Rusty's Refuge, there would be no safe house for Colony men trying to trade with the remnants of civilisation in the west. Callum pressed his fists against his temples. He had to get back to his fathers.

The door was wrenched open and hot sunlight washed over him.

'Trading time, boy,' said the Outstationer, unshackling Callum's chain from the wall and dragging him onto the road. Callum stumbled along in the man's wake, the soles of his bare feet scorched by the burning ground.

A man in a shiny leather vest and dusty black leather trousers stood waiting. Flanking him was a ragtag group of desert wanderers whose clothes were stained with red dust. The leather-clad man stared at Callum from beneath bushy eyebrows.

'He's a good 'un, Floss. You won't be sorry,' said the Outstationer, pushing Callum forward. 'Been raised by a pair of proper fathers. He's a real boy. Speaks nice. Keeps his nose clean. Guaranteed. This sort are worth training. You know I wouldn't sell you a dud. Pig-boys only last until they're fifteen but you'll get years out of this one.'

Floss opened Callum's mouth and looked inside. He parted Callum's hair and checked his scalp, looked into his eyes, and then twisted his arms behind his back.

'Ouch!' said Callum.

'Bit of a precious petal, in't he?'

'Nah, he's got enough grit. Cries a little, but that's what you expect from the fathered ones. That's what makes 'em worth having.'

Floss pushed back Callum's head, drew one finger along his jaw and smiled. Callum wanted to bite him.

Floss handed a bag of a sticky black substance to the Outstationer and took hold of Callum's chain. He led him through a ghetto of battered roadtrains and caravans to where a clutter of cages was assembled. Then he pushed him into a long, narrow enclosure on wheels and shackled his chain to the bars. Callum sank to his knees and smashed his chain against the metal floor in despair. The sound drew a cry of alarm from the occupants of the other cages. Most of the animals in the freak show looked like a cross between frogs and cats. Their back legs were smooth and amphibious but their forelegs were thick with fur. When Callum was small, he'd secretly longed to have a chimera as a pet, even though his fathers had told him they were illegal freaks. And now he was part of the freak show too. It made him feel queasy. If this outfit was trading in chimeras and boys, they were the lowest type of criminals.

'Oi, dreamboy,' said Floss, returning. He pushed the handle of a bullwhip into the cage and poked Callum in the ribs. 'Get out of those rags and put this lot on.' He threw a handful of clothes through the bars.

Despite his misery, Callum was glad to take off his old shirt and jeans that were caked in dirt and blood. The new outfit was a pair of silky, black leather-feel pants and a black vest. He tried to rake his hand through his hair but it was so stiff with dust that it stood straight up in matted clumps.

The cage was too small to stand in so Callum had to lie flat and wriggle into the close-fitting costume. With his eyes fixed on the roof of the cage, he could ignore the fact that Floss was watching him. When he was dressed, Floss opened the cage

and tugged on his chain. 'C'mon. Training time.'

Inside a silver-and-purple tent, three bikes were circling the 'cage of death' and another was looping giddily inside the rim of a giant wheel. The tent reverberated with the roar of engines. Callum groaned. Of all the businesses to wind up with, he had been sold into the meanest motorcycle outfit in the western desert. Ruff and Rusty had told him about the nomad performers that drifted from outstation to mining camp, causing trouble wherever they went, trading in drugs and children and remnant technologies. Despite their dark reputation, they could always find an audience. The Colony wanted to stamp them out but they never stayed long enough in one place for the Colony's squadrones to catch them.

Floss suddenly jerked the chain, hard.

'Leave off,' Callum snapped, holding the torque to stop it biting into his skin. 'You're hurting me.'

'Ooo, a cranky dog,' said Floss, laughing. 'Okay, poodle-boy, time for you to jump through a few hoops.'

Floss undid the chain and dragged Callum by the wrist to where another bearded giant sat astride an old-tech Harley Davidson motorbike. The two men could have been twins.

'Here's our new pup,' said Floss.

The other bikie looked at Callum appraisingly, then suddenly grabbed the front of his vest and lifted him off the ground. For a moment, Callum stared into his scarred face. Then the man threw him across to Floss, who caught him with one hand. 'Nice weight, see?' said Floss. 'Easy to toss around.'

'Okay, kid,' barked the bikie. 'Can you do a somersault?'

'A what?'

'Throw yourself in the dirt and roll, boy.'

Callum shrugged his shoulders and looked at the ground.

'Christ, Floss, I told you we wanted one that could bend.'

Floss seized Callum by one ankle, held him upside down then shook him. Hard. Callum had to pull himself up like a possum and grab his feet so that his teeth didn't rattle.

'See, Dental, he's got good reflexes. He'll train up quick.' Floss threw Callum down in the sawdust, knocking the wind from him. The pain in his ribs made him gasp. Then Floss pulled out an electric cattle prod. 'What do you want him to do now?'

Callum lay in the sawdust, curled into a ball. He would not give them the satisfaction of seeing him cry. But when Floss poked him with the cattle prod, a surge of electricity made him kick out in pain.

'Get up,' said Floss. 'Tell us your handle, boy.'

'My what?'

'Your name, or don't they give names to you cybrid jam-jars any more?'

'I'm not a cybrid. I have two fathers.'

'So what did they call you?'

'My name is Callum.'

The men rolled their eyes towards each other and snorted with amusement.

'We'll call you Dog. You'll need a name that bites, not a fancy-schmancy baby-name. We're a two-man show. Two men and a dog, that is. Youse our dog from now on.'

'What's that meant to mean?'

'You chase after the bikes,' said Dental. 'We've got a few tricks we're gonna teach you. First, we check your balance. You got no balance, we'll sell you to the next Outstationer looking

for dog-meat.' He put out his wide, square hand. 'Step up.'

Callum gritted his teeth as he put one foot on Dental's palm. He wobbled crazily as the big man hoisted him into the air.

'Steady up and step across to Floss' hand.'

For the next half hour Callum practised stepping back and forward between them. Then they made him stand on their shoulders while they held his ankles. Sweat trickled down his neck as he struggled to stay centred. By the end of the afternoon, he could stand without them holding him at all.

Dental lowered him to the ground and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a handful of tiny biscuits and threw them onto the ground in front of Callum.

'You done well. Like I said, this gig is about balance. Once you can balance, then you learn how to bend. Like a liquorice strap. The last bonehead wouldn't bend, wouldn't train up proper. We snapped him in two. If you bend, you won't break.'

Callum stared at the biscuits lying in the sawdust and knew, despite his humiliation, that he would eat them. As Floss came towards him with the chain, he also knew that he would learn to bend, he would learn to survive. He would never let them break him.

4

SHOOTING NIGHTBIRDS

Bo touched her gun and felt the coolness of it. She didn't want to go out tonight but Poppy had taught her routines that were important. She took down her catskin shawl from the hook and slung it around her shoulders.

Outside, the sky was awhirl with stars. Nightbirds soared above the sleeping desert, circling for prey. Bo spread the catskin on the ground and lay down. She looked through the viewfinder and rested her finger on the trigger. When the first wedge of black wing came into view, a dark shadow against the stars, she narrowed her gaze and fired. The nightbird plummeted to earth, landing with a dull *thwack* on the rocky desert plain. More black silhouettes flitted against the starry sky, trying to escape her bullets, but they were easy targets.

She had the fifth nightbird in her finder when something caught her eye. Far away, on the edge of the horizon, a light flickered and then died. Outstationers. Bo's skin prickled with unease. She remembered Poppy saying the landmines would keep the two of them safe, as long as they stayed inside their

territory. But Poppy had been wrong. She pushed away the memory of his face on the night they discovered how vulnerable they were.

As if to echo her thoughts, one of the mines blew. She felt it through the ground and heard the roar of the explosion roll across the stony desert. Someone was trying to cross the boundary of her hunting grounds.

One step at a time, sweeping away her tracks, she backed into the opal cave. A telltale sliver of light seeped out under the doorway and she hurried to switch off every lumina in the burrow.

Now she knew why she hadn't wanted to go outside. A part of her had sensed trouble was near. Sometimes she knew things before they happened. A change in the weather days before it came across the desert. Where water lay, as if her skin scented it. Even if she couldn't name the thing, she felt its impending arrival.

'Woman's 'twitian,' Poppy had said. ''Twitian ain't rational.' He didn't believe in it, but the night he was murdered Bo had sensed they were both in danger and she had been right. She knew she should always respect her instincts. Right now, her 'twitian was telling her to go deep, to get away from the surface where some form of sensor might pick up the warmth of her skin, and bury every sign of life in the deepest ground. She pointed the beam from her laser through a small window that overlooked the Wombator's den. If she set him to work tonight, he would have a new, deeper burrow carved out for her by morning – but would his vibrations alert the Outstationers to her presence?

She lay on her belly and then wriggled through a portal

into the lowest room of the burrow, pulling a rock in place to jam the entrance. Against the back wall, her roboraptors were stationed in standby mode. She spread the catskin shawl on the ground and settled herself beneath the roboraptors, their bowed heads above her. It felt safer being here with Mr Pinkwhistle so close. She wrapped one hand around his foreleg, just to remind herself of the strength in the beast-machine.

She tried not to think about the night the Outstationers killed Poppy. Remembering was like opening a wound, as if all the blood was running out of her into the desert stones. The hunting grounds had grown barren but Poppy wouldn't hunt outside them. He thought they were safe inside the ring of landmines. Then that night, when they were on the very edge of their lands, the Outstationers crossed the boundary. What was the last thing Poppy had said before the murderers were upon them? 'Scuttle.'

'Scuttle,' she whispered to herself. Poppy had taught her how to scuttle – how to disappear from view, how to move between rocks and hard places like water, like the silveriest skink. Bo knew how to scuttle. But she didn't know how to stop the cavernous hurt opening up in her chest at the thought of Poppy. There was only one thing that would push it away.

'*Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom . . .*' she whispered into the blackness. She wanted to hear the susurration of the words, like a prayer, like an ancient telling that would make her feel safe. The words hung in the air of the opal cave. A moment later, another landmine exploded.

5

GAMBLING WITH FATE

Callum ran one finger over the line of notches in the corner of his cage. Three months. Every single day that he had worked for Floss and Dental was marked by a tiny notch made with his front teeth. Now there were ninety-two toothy indentations.

Callum had grown lean and wiry since his capture but he still hadn't grown accustomed to the confines of his cage. As much as he hated being made to bend and spin in the circus ring, it was better than the long hours trapped in the freak show.

They'd been driving all day, criss-crossing the red-brown desert, searching for the next cluster of Outstations. The trucks rolled through silent country while Callum lay in his cage, bathed in sweat. Finally, they came to a stop on a gibber plain. Tango, the striped tiger-monkey, picked at his fleas and snarled at the small willy-willies that swirled past their encampment. The other chimeras shifted restlessly, making weird mewling sounds that sent shivers up Callum's spine.

As darkness fell, the chimeras began to pace in their enclosures. Tango rattled the bars of his cage. They were desperate to stretch their limbs in the ring but there would be no show tonight. The desert lay still and empty on every side of the encampment.

Callum drew a deep breath and stretched his arms through the bars. If he could only find some way to forget how uncomfortable he was, a night alone could almost be a treat. He was tired of being thrown between Dental and Floss, flipped and tossed through the air from one speeding motorbike to another while an audience of drunken Outstationers hooted and roared, hoping to see him fall. He began to hum quietly – a ballad about sunshine, rain and wide blue skies – shutting his eyes against his prison and the company of the agitated chimeras. In his mind's eye he could see Rusty sitting on the end of a bed with his guitar and Ruff in the doorway, nodding his head in time to the music and then joining in, his deep voice adding a rich harmony. Fighting down his emotions, he began to sing the song, trying to hold the vision of his fathers. His voice rang out across the stony desert.

For a moment, he opened his eyes and looked out through the bars of his cage. The chimeras had fallen silent. Tango's yellow eyes flashed and the monkey stretched out his arms, palms turned up to the sky. Callum understood. When he came to the end of the song, he started another and the chimeras sat quietly, their restless misery stilled by the music.

It was only when he got to the end of his last song that he saw Dental's beady black eyes staring at him from across the compound. Callum turned away and curled into a ball in the far corner of his cage. He had given too much away. He had let

Dental see into his heart. Nothing good would come of it.

The next morning, Dental opened the cage, undid Callum's chain and whistled. 'Hup, ya bloody mongrel.' He knew it annoyed Callum but it was the same taunt every morning.

As he was led into the Big Top to practise, he muttered his own name over and over. No one called him Callum any more. 'Dog', 'Mutt', 'Mongrel' was all they ever shouted at him. He was afraid that if he didn't repeat his true name to himself, he would forget who he used to be and become the thing they called him.

Dental whistled the tune that Callum had sung the night before and yanked Callum's chain. 'C'mon, howler,' he sneered. 'Sling us a tune.' Suddenly he yanked the chain so hard that Callum was forced to the ground.

Callum tried to stifle a whimper of pain. He knew that Dental took sadistic pleasure in watching him gasp for breath.

'How many times have I told you not to treat the kid like that?' shouted Floss, snatching the chain from Dental. He unshackled Callum and checked the marks on his neck. 'We can't afford to replace him. You break his neck like you did the last one and I swear I'll have your kneecaps.'

'You will, will you?' sneered Dental, puffing his chest out like an angry rooster.

Floss pushed Callum to one side and turned on Dental. 'Listen, I bought him with my stash. You pay me, and you can do what you like to him.'

While they argued, Callum slipped through the flaps of the tent, and ran out into the wide, empty desert. There was nowhere to hide on the flat plains but he ran anyway, leaping over the pebbly ground, kicking up flurries of red dust, running

full pelt into the harsh morning sunlight.

He hadn't gone far when he heard shouting and the roar of bikes approaching. But he didn't stop running. He dived to one side as grit and dirt flew into his face. The sheer act of defiance made him feel alive even as the bikies circled him in a wide arc, letting him run himself ragged. They might punish him but he knew they wouldn't mow him down. If they did, they'd have to buy another dog-boy.

Wet with sweat and breathless with exhaustion, Callum fell to his knees. He covered his face with his hands and waited for the moment when one of the men would reach out and drag him back to the Big Top. He prayed it would be Floss but it was Dental's heavy hand that fell upon his neck. With one swift movement Dental wrenched Callum from the ground and onto the tank of his bike. Then he leaned forward and a spray of spittle covered Callum's neck as he hissed, 'Floss plays the big man but never forget I'm top dog around here.'

Callum shrank away from Dental, clinging to the motorcycle's tank. He knew that if Dental wanted to have his way, no one could stop him, not even Floss.

Callum woke with a start as a hand groped his leg. He scrambled to a corner of the cage. In the darkness he couldn't make out who was his attacker. All the circus lights were out, the canvas of the tents flapping lazily in the night breeze.

'We got business, you and me,' said Dental, shining a torch into Callum's face and flashing his jagged teeth in a shark-like smile.

He dragged Callum by his torque to one of the long, shining

trucks that carried the motorbikes. He pushed a button and the side of the truck unfolded. Moonlight washed over the pearly-white tank and silver spokes of the biggest motorbike Callum had ever seen. Embossed on the centre of the tank was a blue heart edged with gold.

'Beautiful, in't she?' said Dental, wheeling her down the ramp.

Callum nodded. He knew it had to be a rare machine. None of the other bikes was called 'she'.

'We don't use Daisy-May much. Too precious. She gets hurt and no one's got the art to fix her no more. But she is one beautiful getaway machine.' Dental ran his hand over the tank and smiled as he swung his leg over her. 'Get on, woofer.'

Callum shifted from foot to foot. 'Where's Floss?' he asked 'Why isn't he coming too?'

With one quick jerk, Dental yanked Callum into the air and then threw him down like a rag doll onto the front of the bike. He leaned forward, his long arms trapping Callum between the tank and his body.

'Where are you taking me?'

'To round up sheep, Dog.'

Dental kick-started the engine and the Daisy-May started with a soft whirr. Callum gripped the seat with his knees. As the bike picked up speed, he lay down across the tank, hanging onto the warm, smooth metal with both hands. They were travelling fast, skimming over the stony ground. The wind felt like needles against Callum's bare skin. Dental hit a button and a transparent blue hood rose up from the front of the bike and settled over them so they were enclosed inside a bubble.

The desert whipped past. Callum remembered peyote bikes

like the Daisy-May roaring along the highway outside the Refuge, and Rusty whistling, 'He's doing a Doppler!' Maybe that strange tension in the air meant they were approaching the speed of sound. Dental leaned down hard, pressing against Callum. The speedometer nudged 1200 kilometres an hour.

Beneath the blue hood, the air was rank with Dental's body odour. When Dental stopped the Daisy-May at the gates of a silvery-grey outstation and raised the hood, Callum gulped down the sharp night air.

Two guards stepped forward to run a weapons detector over both Dental and Callum and then waved the Daisy-May through the gates. They rode slowly until they came to an open square where hundreds of men sat around in groups, gambling at long tables. The air was thick with smoke from hookahs, pipes and cigarettes.

'Does Floss know we're here?' asked Callum. It felt safer to bait Dental when there were other men around.

'Will you shut up about Floss!'

'You guys, you're sworn brothers, aren't you? Won't he worry about where we've gone?' he asked, watching as Dental's face contorted with rage.

The big man lunged forward and sank his jagged teeth into the top of Callum's ear. Callum squealed with pain. Then Dental lifted him up so they were face to face.

'Listen, poodle-boy. I'm not one of your dads. I don't do sworn brotherhood. That's for Colony mugs like your old men. I'm not out to save the bleeding civilisation. I'm out for me, Dental. Got it?'

Holding his bloody ear, Callum nodded. Dental found a seat at the end of a bench and pulled Callum onto his knee,

securing him firmly in place with one hand as he gathered up his playing chips. On the table were ingots of gold, silver and platinum, small clear bags full of pills and sticky substances, and small boxes of remnant technologies – microchips and computer hardware. Callum couldn't follow what the rules of the game were but there were a lot of small white squares with black markings moving around the table. As the night wore on, little beads of sweat began to gather on Dental's brow and drip down into his beard. He kept smiling his shark-tooth grin but it was clear he was losing. Callum felt a small rush of pleasure.

Late in the night, one of the gamblers pushed a bulging green leather wallet into the centre of the table.

'You can't cover a bet like that, can you? I reckon you're out of this round, stranger.'

The other gamblers began pushing forward bags of pills and ingots of metal. The dealer checked each bid carefully before accepting them.

'I'm not out yet,' said Dental. He reached into his jacket, pulled out a clear bag filled with a sticky black substance and tossed it at the dealer.

For a long, silent moment the wizened man sniffed through the contents. Then he threw Dental's stake back to him, shaking his head. 'Too piss-weak.'

'Not so fast. I got a sweetener here that'll round the bid.' He grabbed Callum by his torque and lifted him onto the table. 'Heard you say how you like howlers around here. Heard your last one met with an accident. This one's a treat. He can bend too. Put him to any use you want. He's worth a lot to me. Good little performer. Take him as my stake.'

'He's a bleedin' runt,' scoffed one of the men.

'No, he's a little beauty. Still got his baby-boy voice – sweet, like.' Dental shoved Callum into the centre of the table. 'Go on, Dog, howl,' he commanded.

Callum looked into the faces of the Outstationers and felt his throat constrict. For an instant, he thought of doing as he was told. But he had a creeping feeling that life would be even worse at this outstation than with the circus. He stayed mute.

'Sing, you pig-child,' said Dental, jumping up onto the bench and shaking Callum by his neck. Suddenly, in a flash of inspiration, Callum knew exactly what he should do. It was a trick that had always scared his fathers. He contracted his stomach muscles and forced himself to belch so loudly that saliva and vomit filled his mouth. Then he let it drool over his lips. At the same time he furrowed his brow and rolled his eyes back in his head until he knew only the whites were showing.

By the time Callum had finished the trick, the gamblers were backing away from him, as if he was diseased.

'Damn you,' said Dental. Quick as a ferret, he pulled a small blowpipe out from behind his ear and shot three darts, one into the face of each of the nearest gamblers. As panic ensued, Dental swept all the bids from the table into the folds of his black leather jacket. Grabbing Callum with his free hand and kicking chairs and benches from their path, he jumped back onto the Daisy-May. He slammed Callum down on the tank, shoved the stolen winnings into a saddlebag and gunned the accelerator.

Men were shouting and sirens wailing as the Daisy-May tore through the streets of the outstation, ploughing past the guards at the gates. They opened fire as the Daisy-May shot out into the desert. The bike shuddered and lost speed. Callum

turned to see Dental's face contorted in pain as he fumbled for the switch that would bring the protective blue hood over them.

Callum knew this was his moment. All the months of learning to bend, of making his muscles stretch and flex in the ring, could finally serve him. Before he could feel afraid, he turned onto his back and lay flat against the tank, his legs curled against his chest. Grasping the handlebars of the motorbike with both hands, he employed a version of a stunt where he would put his feet against Floss's chest and then spring into a handstand. Now he put both feet squarely against Dental's chest and kicked out with all his strength. The Daisy-May careered to one side. Quickly, Callum struck again, this time bringing his heels sharply into Dental's chin. He saw a little spurt of blood as Dental's lip was pierced by his own front tooth. Then Dental was gone and the bike was fishtailing along the desert road with Callum hanging on wildly.

The sirens of the outstation grew louder as Callum flipped himself over. He could hear the roar of vehicles in pursuit. He gripped the handles tightly with both hands and let the throttle out. As the bike picked up speed, he lowered his body until he was lying flat along the seat, until he felt he was melding to the machine. To the west lay the circus, to the east, the Outstationers. He gunned the accelerator and turned the Daisy-May southwards.

6

LOST AND FOUND

Bo watched a silvery-grey dawn creep over the eastern horizon. Keeping the roboraptors clear of the minefield, she paced the boundary until she came across the exploded landmine. The remains of an Outstationer and his broken vehicle lay scattered across the ground. She hung her head in a moment of silent respect, as Poppy had taught her. Then she scraped a shallow grave for his remains and set about laying a replacement mine further afield, marking out the distances between the old mines and the new, ensuring that nothing could cross the boundaries of Tjukurpa Piti without warning.

When she had finished, she looked back towards the hunting ground and sighed. She had taken every precaution before setting out in the dawn light. She had checked the sensors for any signs of human activity, and set the Wombator to work, programming it to dig another layer of tunnels beneath the upper burrow with emergency escape routes fanning out in two new directions. She knew she should turn back and

hunt within the boundary of mines but the thought of bagging only another stringy feral cat again made her heart sink. There were no trees left inside her hunting ground, no desert fruits or roots to forage. Even though she knew Poppy would have disapproved, she herded the roboraptors through the minefield and into the wider desert. The morning was still and cool. It was the best time for hunting. The roboraptors were excited by the rising sun and gambolled along at her ankles making low purring sounds. The desert was her own.

She whistled two short commands and the roboraptors scurried ahead, fanning out into the low scrub, sending up little spurts of red earth from beneath their clawed feet. She hitched her string bag higher on her shoulder and picked up speed. She would have to walk for kilometres before she reached the old creekbed. It had been dry for decades but Bo knew that along its banks were the best places for digging out soft roots. An artesian well buried deep in the soil fed the long, stringy vegetables that she loved. She clipped some handfuls of greybeard grass and lined the string bag with it. It would be useful later for straining the sludgy black water that pooled in crevices along the creekbed. As she descended the rise above the creek, she pulled up a naked woollybutt tussock and added it to the string bag. It was small and dried-out but there was still enough seed on the long stems to make it worth taking home.

Reaching the dry creekbed at last, she squatted down on its banks and began to dig at the base of a withered tree. It took her twenty minutes to reach the root network that housed dead grubs and she was cross and sweaty by the time she found a finger-thick root and hacked it out. Her pleasure turned to

disappointment when she peeled off the outer layer and found the grubs inside had turned powdery. She licked her fingers and dipped them into the chalky remains. At least the grub-dust was still sweet and nutty to taste.

She sat back on her heels and listened for the sound of the roboraptors. Last time they had ventured outside the hunting grounds, Mr Pinkwhistle had come back with a human hand in his jaws. Bo had scraped a hole in the nearest sandy patch of desert and buried it deep so the raptors wouldn't find it again. No matter how hungry she was, there were some taboos she would never break.

Bo noticed a flurry of dust on the rise above the opposite bank and the tips of the roboraptors' tails, erect and quivering. It seemed an odd place to catch something. Only a very stupid or sick animal would be caught on high ground where it was in clear view of approaching predators. Usually the roboraptors cornered their prey in outcrops of rock or chased them to ground on the flat plains.

Bo heard an unearthly cry. Seconds later, a boy stumbled over the crest of the rise and rolled down the sandy bank of the creek. Bo cried out in surprise. The roboraptors let out a group ululation of triumph and sped down the embankment to where the boy now lay motionless in the dry creekbed. Bo jumped to her feet and ran. By the time she got there Mr Pinkwhistle was standing on the boy's head while the rest of the raptor pack perched on other parts of him, sending out the whine that signalled for Bo to help them carry home heavy prey.

Bo swatted the roboraptors away and knelt down. The boy was scrawny and his black hair stood up in ratty spikes. Bruises mottled his bare arms and the backs of his legs where his

trousers were torn. He was out cold. Bo rolled him over and he flopped onto his back. The roboraptors danced on the spot with excitement.

'Dumb,' she said irritably, tapping each one between the eyes so they knew they had made a mistake. 'Bad food.'

She leant in close to the boy's body and sniffed his skin. He smelt of sweat and dust, something sweet and something sour. Resting her head against his chest, she listened to the sound of his heartbeat, felt the gentle rise and fall of his breath. She was relieved he was still alive.

The sky began to turn a smoky orange. Soon the morning cool would give way to scorching heat. If she left the boy unconscious in the dry creekbed, he'd be dead by midday. Maybe that would be a good thing. Then again, if he was an Outstationer's boy they might come looking for him, and if they found him before he died he would tell them about the herd of roboraptors. They would suspect that a techno-hunter was nearby, that Poppy hadn't been solo. She'd never be able to venture out of the hunting grounds again.

Taking her sharpest blade, she cut a section of bark big enough for a sled from a nearby tree. Using a coil of wire that was attached to her belt, she fashioned a series of harnesses for the roboraptors. She hauled the boy onto her shoulder, then laid him on the bark and snapped her fingers at Mr Pinkwhistle. As the roboraptors dragged the makeshift bark sled and its cargo up the embankment and back to Tjukurpa Piti, Bo swept their tracks with a bundle of twigs, scattering rocks in their wake to hide the trail.

When they had navigated their way across the minefield, Bo carried the boy, like a sack of bones, into the burrow. She

took him down to a dark cave beyond the kitchen and laid him on a pile of rugs. He made a murmuring noise and curled into a ball, like a dead bilby.

For a while, Bo squatted beside him, studying his sleeping face. It had been so long since she'd seen a living human being up close that every aspect of his features fascinated her. His eyes were set wide apart and framed by high, arching brows. His long black eyelashes lay like butterfly wings against his cheeks. She traced her finger along his cheekbone. His skin was smooth and silky. His lips were dark pink and he had a small dimple in his chin. He was like a boy out of a fairy story. Before leaving him, she gently rested her cheek against his, savouring his sleepy warmth.

It was almost night when Bo heard the boy screaming. She slid down the connecting passage from the main living area. The sounds of his cries bounced off the stone and opal and echoed through the tunnel.

'Shush!' she said, as she held up a lumina and light filled the cave. Still the boy screamed, eyes scrunched up, mouth open wide.

Bo stared at him, perplexed. She'd forgotten how people talked to each other. It was easy with the raptors. One word was enough. She frowned and tried again. 'Shush!'

The boy opened his eyes long enough to actually see her and he caught his breath. For a split second, he fell silent. Bo reached out a hand to him in a gesture of friendship and he started up again. His screams made her head hurt. She tried to remember what Poppy had done when she was very small and upset.

Gently but firmly, she grabbed the boy by both shoulders

and leant in close to him. He was so surprised he didn't struggle. Drawing a deep breath, she blew a soft stream of air onto the side of his neck. He tried to pull away but she drew him closer, wrapping her arms around him so he was pinned against her body. She cradled his head in one hand and blew a puff of air onto each of his scrunched-up eyelids. Startled, he stopped screaming and began to sob instead, his body growing limp in her arms. Bo continued to blow little puffs of air onto different parts of his face. His expression grew very still, as if he was frozen. He opened his dark eyes and looked at her just as she was blowing a long, steady stream of breath onto his forehead.

'I'm not dead, am I?' he asked.

'Dead?' she echoed.

'Maybe you're some spook from the underworld? But I didn't think hell would be like this.'

Bo suddenly felt aware of his body pressed against her own and the vibrations of his voice in her chest. She let go of him and backed away.

The boy shuddered and looked about him for the first time.

'What is this place? Where am I? How did I get here? Who are you? Why did you do that to me?'

Bo knew she was meant to form whole sentences in answer to his questions but it had been too long. There were too many 'who', 'what', 'where', 'how' and 'why's. She had to concentrate to retrieve the words from the back of her brain.

'Tjukurpa Piti.'

'You don't speak English,' he said, disappointed.

'I speak. I understand,' she replied. She could feel sounds bubbling up from somewhere deep inside her, her own words, not storybook ones. She could feel her mouth struggling to

form her thoughts into sounds, feel the warmth of them against her throat. It wasn't like storytelling. She had to make words from nowhere.

'Me Callum,' said the boy, pointing to himself. 'You . . . ?'

Bo rolled her eyes. The pretty boy was smiling at her as if she was a simpleton.

'I am Boadicea,' she said, trying to make the words sound sharp and resonant. 'I found you.'

'Are you one of those ferals, then?' he asked, leaning in closer and studying her as if she was a curiosity. 'You don't look like an Outstationer, so what are you? Cybrid? Hybrid? Where did you come from?'

The questions ricocheted around the small chamber like bullets. Bo's head began to ache. She picked up the lumina and started down the tunnel, crawling quickly back to the main room.

'Hey!' called Callum, as he dropped down onto his belly and started to wriggle along behind her. 'Hey, Boo-ditchy, wait up. Don't leave me. Don't leave me in the dark.'

But Bo simply moved faster, wishing fervently that she had never brought the boy home.