

WORMWOOD

JOHN I COBY

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WORMWOOD

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And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and the name of the star was Wormwood.

Revelation 8:10-11

Chapter One
CAPRICORN DANCER

1

From Andromeda the galaxy looked like just another fuzzy point of light dotting the infinite void of the cosmos. As he approached close enough, he noticed its spiral shape with its arms of higher concentrations of stars. Located about two thirds out from the centre, in one of the spiral arms, was the small solar system that was his destination. Its young star had spawned ten planets and faithfully held them in perfect balance as it gave them its gravity, heat and light. In its life sphere, that is the sphere of space around itself where water existed as liquid, solid and gas, the young star had formed its life planet. Through it, he believed, the star expressed its consciousness and its spirit. How exquisitely beautiful the life planet appeared to him floating out there with its dead moon for company. He thought that it looked almost like a carbon copy of his home planet, Rama.

What a contrast it was to what he had just rendezvoused with on the way there. The thirty-mile-long, boulder-encrusted iceblock he checked out on the way wasn't streaming a comet tail yet, but it still looked menacing as hell. He knew that the tail would appear when it approached close enough to the star, around about the orbit sphere of the sixth planet of the solar system he was visiting.

As he approached the life planet, he admired its most striking feature, water. He flew towards the warmer, southern hemisphere where he saw a very large island surrounded by expansive oceans. He slowly began his descent through the atmosphere. On the spur of the moment, he chose to aim his intergalactic cruiser towards the most easterly point on the east coast of the island, because he liked the way it jutted out into the great ocean.

2

A metallic-blue, 1963 Holden Premier turned right just after passing through the green tunnel formed by the two rows of giant Strangler Figs growing on either side of the Pacific Highway. The sign at the turnoff said, *Byron Bay, 6km*. On its roof racks the Premier carried the precious cargo that was meticulously created at the San Juan surfboard factory about twelve months before. In the boot was a two-man tent, a Lilo inflatable mattress, a sleeping bag, ground sheets, a box of cooking utensils, clothes and a box of

food. Behind the wheel, alone, was Adam, driving in his bare feet, wearing his favourite pair of faded Levi's and the San Juan T-shirt that his mates, the San Juan boys, gave him the last time he was up there.

It was *mid-November, 1968*. The Holden cruised down the north-country road towards Byron Bay. Adam wouldn't stay there though. He knew of a much better place, a place shown to him by the San Juan boys on a previous trip. It was called Broken Head, to him the place where the most perfect waves broke, and to this day he is unsure whether the surf sessions he had there, in his youth, were the very best he ever had in his whole life.

Back in '68, Broken Head was still a well-kept secret. Travelling surfers, in those days, headed straight for Byron to surf The Pass or Wategos. On a good day, with a solid eight-foot swell, there might have been fifty surfers out at The Pass. Just five miles to the south, in waves so hollow that their curl landed way out on the flat and peeled absolutely mechanically, there'd be nobody out except maybe for the few who happened to be privy to the secret.

In those days, all there was at Broken was a small camping area. It was nestled in a clearing, in a tiny valley, which was surrounded by green hills that were covered by lush subtropical vegetation. There was a small kiosk there, so one didn't have to drive to Byron for the basics, and there was a shower, toilet and laundry there as well, for the campers. And there, right there, not more than a few hundred yards away, were waves from heaven.

A narrow dirt road was the only access into Broken. It was about two kilometres long and there might have only been three or four small shacks hidden in the bush along the way. Otherwise, Broken Head was surrounded by a sea of natural wilderness.

Adam parked his car in town. After paying his friends at the surf shop a visit, he stopped at the post office where he phoned his parents and told them of his safe arrival. He also thanked them, again, for the use of the car and the money they gave him to live on.

Stepping out of the phone booth, he paused, took a deep breath of clean, north-coast air and focused his attention on the ambience of his immediate surroundings. He was back, back where his spirit soared, back where he actually became aware of the colours, the perfumes and the textures. He just felt it, this feeling, and this thing inside, which only came alive when he was there.

The day was stinking hot and glaringly sunny and everything was surreal tranquil in Byron Bay as the 1963 Holden Premier rolled out of town and turned south, headed for the little campsite which would be his home for at least the next month.

3

The intergalactic visitor parked his silver ship under a cloud as he surveyed the scene below him. He could see a long peninsula, with a lighthouse on its point, surrounded by a small village. Then he spotted surfboards on top of some of the cars. The boards looked similar to the one he had strapped down in the back of his ship. He noticed the swell lines on the surface of the ocean and the way they wrapped around the long headland and then peeled off in the sandy bay on the lee side of the point. When he saw the riders shredding the wave faces, he smiled to himself contentedly, realising that he had come to the right place.

The space traveller was a twenty-one-year-old human being hailing from the planet Rama, from the Andromeda galaxy. He was six feet tall, lean and fit. He had a handsome face and wore his sun-bleached, russet-coloured hair shoulder length. His skin was olive and his eyes iridescent green. He was the three thousand, four hundred and seventy second generation of surfer born into a family of surfers whose ancient ancestor, Raman, brought the lifestyle back to their planet from one of his journeys of exploration to a distant star. He was biologically and anatomically identical to the humans living on Earth, except for one thing. He, like everyone else living on Rama, was a full telepath. As an extreme example of his mental ability, he could if he wished, with just a focussed thought, make any non-telepathic creature drop dead on the spot. Because of this ability, the Rama had no need of weapons.

4

The old man in the kiosk instinctively looked up from his morning newspaper as he heard the sound of car wheels over gravel. He noticed the blue Holden stop momentarily while its driver took a quick look at the surf. He then watched the car, with its surfboard strapped to its roof racks, slowly drive up to the kiosk and come to a stop. The old man had a quick glance at his bookings for that day. The page was empty.

'You can pitch your tent anywhere you like, son.'

Adam scanned the pretty valley looking for a good spot to make his camp. He noticed a small space off to one side and up the back a little. It was on a bit of a rise so if it rained it would be drier than the rest of the campground. It was also more private with

a shady tree nearby, as well as a handy picnic table and campfire. He set his tent so that when he lay in his bed he could see the moon rise out of the ocean at night and would be awakened by the rising sun in the mornings.

5

The silver disc hovered a few thousand feet above the long, deserted beach between Byron Bay and Broken Head. Its occupant, looking to set up camp, noticed a couple of kilometres of virgin coastal scrub paralleling the beach north of the pocket-sized, broken headland. He devised a plan. He needed to choreograph an elaborate deception. It was the protocol, but he loved to do it anyway. It was sport for him and it gave him a sense of excitement.

The stars shone bright that night and the moon cast its silvery reflection on the dark ocean as the young man secretly unloaded a variety of camping gear, cooking gear, clothes, one surfboard, a guitar, various foodstuffs and other nondescript items from his silver space ship. He set up his camp on the edge of the scrub, on top of a twenty-foot sand dune overlooking the beach, about one kilometre north of Broken Head. He sensed that there was not one living human soul within half a kilometre of him. He would know instantly if someone entered what he considered his personal space and he would know, as well, what that person was thinking and feeling. As a defence he could, if he felt that he needed to, use his telepathic ability to control the behaviour of the intruder, although that was, in general, not his style. He was at heart a gentle and peaceful person. He much preferred immersion in a foreign culture through deception and cunning, and an excellent story. Above all, he liked to get close to someone and make a good friend without giving up his cover. If for some reason he was discovered, his training was uncompromising. He would telepathically erase all memory of the experience from the mind of the bewildered individual.

The young surfer from the Andromeda galaxy had set up his camp and assumed his disguise as a hermetic, hippy surfer from California camping out in the bush. His last task before dawn was to remotely fly his ship about two miles out to sea and park it on the seabed. It would remain hidden there until his eventual departure.

6

As he lay in his tent that evening, Adam recalled something unusual that happened to him in town earlier that day. It was something a scruffy, barefoot old man said to him. The old guy was sitting under a tree, in the park, playing his guitar with his hat on the

ground next to him. Adam dropped a dollar in the hat as he stopped to listen to the music. The old guy smiled and said, 'Thank you friend'. He then looked Adam straight in the eye. The look pierced deep into Adam's brain and he thought he saw a flash of lightning in the old man's eyes.

'Capricorn dancer,' the man said.

'Yeah?' Adam replied.

'The main thing to understand ...' the man paused, looked up the street, looked back at Adam then carried on, 'the main thing to understand is that in this universe ...' another pause,

'Yeah?' Adam mumbled with a hint of befuddlement.

'In this universe ... there ain't no justice.'

The man retrieved the dollar from the hat. Adam thought that that was it, but all of a sudden the man spoke some more.

'And there ain't no injustice either.'

The man let that hang for a while, then, finally, when he thought he had Adam's full attention, he slowly and deliberately delivered his treasure.

'There's only Karma.'

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Chapter Two

LUCKY BOY

1

Somewhere in the Vietnam jungle, two young Aussie diggers found themselves at the crossroads.

'Here it is, here it is, Bob. It's their tunnel.'

'Oh yeah mate ... shhh, be real quiet, Frank!'

'Think there's anyone down there?'

'Don't know an I don't give a shit. Let's just do what they sent us here to do an fuck off. Giz the can.'

'Here you go, Bob. I'll get the light ready. ... Pour it down, quick mate, before somebody shows up ... that's it ... OK ... stand back.'

Bob poured twenty litres of petrol into the tunnel entrance.

'Burn, ya bastards,' Frank whispered as he dropped a lighted wick down the hole in the earth. He was peaking with excitement.

A jet of flame burst out of the hole.

Almost instantly the two soldiers heard the sound of screaming. Frank was first to notice.

'Jesus, Bob, it sounds like kids screamin, fuckin kids!'

And before Frank could say anything else, one by one, small Vietnamese children, none older than about nine or ten, came scrambling out of the hole, their bodies completely ablaze.

The diggers' first reaction was shock. This was closely followed by a profound panic. Bob was first to react.

'Fuck, Frank, what do we do?'

'Jesus, Bob, I dunno!'

'Shoot em, we should shoot em! To stop em screamin!'

'Get fucked, Bob! Get fucked!'

Frank then completely freaked out and urinated in his trousers as more burning, screaming kids crawled out of the fiery tunnel entrance. He screamed, 'Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck' at the top of his voice, turned and ran away into the jungle. Bob threw down the petrol can, emptied his guts in a bloodcurdling shriek, spun around and

sprinted away after Frank. They both wept uncontrollably as they scrambled through the thick undergrowth, away from the hellish scene, tripping and crawling on all fours as they desperately tried to put distance between themselves and the agonising screams of the burning children.

And as they escaped from the horror, with their hearts exploding within their breasts, they realized that they were really still just kids. They were just kids who'd been conned and sucked into a world not made for kids. And as time rolled on, they became aware of the fact that there were some sounds they could never stop themselves from hearing, no matter how far away from them they ran.

2

He was running as fast as he could. He tried so hard to make his legs go faster but it felt like something was holding him back. The more he tried to speed up, the more he slowed down. This wasn't the first time that he experienced this problem. He could remember it happening before, but he couldn't remember when. He was running down a slight slope towards a sheer cliff and all he could see beyond the edge of the cliff was ocean. Instinctively he spread his arms wide, as if they were wings, and as he reached the edge he leapt, in slow motion, into wide-open space. His arms became his wings. He was flying, free, high above the Earth. He felt as light as a feather, just gliding through the air as if he were made of air himself. Then, just as he began to feel a freedom that he had only ever dreamt about, a blindingly-bright point of white light, like a laser, pierced his skull right between the eyes and began pulling him upward, ever upward, not just out of the sky, but out of the whole reality. He tried to hang onto it, but it was too strong. The cliff below, the ocean, the sky, all began to dissolve and all that remained in the end was a bright, white light.

He opened his eyes. He looked around. He was in a tent. He was in his tent and it was dawn. The morning sun was streaming in, shining on his face, playfully coaxing his eyes to open. It was all just a dream.

Adam lay there, for a while, still enchanted by his dream of flight. He wondered how it was possible that dreams could be so real and whether it was possible that part of him actually went there, flying, while his body lay asleep.

3

Heaven hid itself at the end of a cul-de-sac, at the end of a side road, just past an old, black stump, halfway along a snaking, back road.

A pint of chocolate milk, bought at the kiosk, made a good start to the day. It was drunk on top of a grassy knoll overlooking the deserted beach. Adam always sat in the same spot because it was shaped like a comfortable lounge chair and it gave him a perfect overview of the long crescent of sand. As it was not much more than an hour after sunrise, the Sun was still low in the sky, its crystalline reflection giving the water the exquisite appearance of an ocean of liquid fire.

A few months had passed since Adam turned twenty. He was two years too old to be waiting for his high school, final exam results, but that wasn't because he was a slacker. It was the big migration from Slovenia with his parents, and his total inability to speak English when they arrived in Australia, that slowed his scholastics back a couple of years. His family settled amongst a community of their fellow countrymen in the western suburbs of Sydney. He was an only child and he learnt at an early age that he possessed the personality of a loner. He could just sit in his room and allow his thoughts to take him away and he would begin to feel gladness within himself and a sense of total contentment. He made a few mates, he loved and endured his parents, he studied, and thanks to his dad who used to take the family to the beach on weekends, he surfed. As a result of all these circumstances, mentally speaking, he remained a few years younger than his chronological age, still enveloped in a cocoon of innocence. Some might have called it naivety. So, was it grace, chance, luck, or destiny that found him sitting alone in heaven, hidden away from the rest of the world? Who knows? But if one were telepathic, and looked at him, one would probably have seen straight through him as if looking through crystal-clear water.

4

Adam was thinking about breakfast as he made his way back to his tent. As he paused at a rubbish bin, to discard the empty milk container, he scanned the valley and noticed a tall, dark, longhaired hippy walking barefoot down the dirt track towards the kiosk. Walking playfully by his side was a golden retriever. Suddenly, being gone almost before it arrived, Adam hallucinated a trancelike vision. For a brief moment he was looking at a Van Gogh. He saw the brush strokes, the richness of the colours in the morning sun and the natural freedom of the hippy and his dog walking down the ochre track. This image resonated with something dwelling deep within his soul as it permanently etched itself into his memory.

Adam, the hippy and the retriever all ended up at the kiosk with the old man sitting behind the counter.

'Top little day, boys. Surf any good for you boys today?'

'Not today, sir,' replied the hippy. 'It's a bit flat.'

The old man noticed the accent. 'You a bloody yank, mate?'

'Californian.'

'Stayin long?'

'Couldn't really say.'

'Nice dog,' commented Adam.

'Oh, that's Flynn,' said the old man, 'but that's not his real name, that's just what all the locals call him. His real name's Charlie, but he'll answer to Flynn as well.'

'How come he's got two names?' asked Adam patting the friendly dog on the head.

The old man smiled. 'Well, he's got a bit of a reputation with the bitches around here. He's a real rootin legend. There's not one bitch in this valley that hasn't had at least one litter of pups by him.'

All three men grinned broadly and chuckled. The Californian then asked Adam, 'You from around here?'

'Er, not exactly. I'm up from Sydney. I'm camped just over there.' Adam pointed towards his tent. 'I'm here for the waves.'

'Me too,' replied the hippy. 'Check out your camp?'

'Sure, come on over.'

They walked towards Adam's tent accompanied by Flynn.

'Where you stayin?' Adam asked. The hippy paused until they were out of the old man's earshot then told Adam that he was camped in the scrub, up the road a bit. 'There's a foot track that goes from the road into my camp, but it's hard to find.'

'What part of California you from?'

'Malibu.'

'Malibu! That's Mickey Dora country.'

'Oh yeah. Da Cat's a bona fide legend where I come from all right. You stayin here long?'

'About a month. I'm waiting for exam results.'

'So, we'll see each other around.' He held his hand out to Adam. 'I'm Scott.'

Their eyes locked together as Adam shook his hand and introduced himself. Scott looked over Adam's shoulder at his surfboard. 'Check out your board?'

'Sure.'

As Scott handled Adam's surfboard, felt its balance and eyed down its fine lines, he saw a latent glow of soft, white light emanating from it.

'This is a fine surfboard, Adam. It looks like a board that only a friend could make. Someone's heart went into this.'

'Really? Well, I'm pretty good mates with the San Juan boys and they said that they made it for me special.'

'Yeah, I can see that,' Scott replied. 'Hey, ah, you ought to drop into my camp sometime. Come for a feed if you like. It'd be nice to have some company.'

As they continued to speak to each other, the two young men sensed an easy friendship developing. There seemed to be a common thread there, running between them, a connection that could best be described as the type of bond that only exists between two brothers.

Later on, as Adam watched Scott walking back up the dirt road, with Flynn playfully dancing around him, he experienced another one of those Van Gogh hallucinations that seemed to be gone before it came.

5

The next day the surf was still off with the northeast wind blowing everything out. Adam cruised into town to look around and call his parents. His mother answered the phone. She was blabbering with excitement. Apparently, the newspaper had reported on the most recent conscription lottery, the one that included Adam's birth date. She cried with joy as she told her only son that he missed the cull. Adam wasn't as excited as he should have been, because he wasn't paying attention. He just never devoted much time to thinking about conscription and 'all that crap'. *She* paid attention though. She knew what war was all about. She was Serbian and she lived in Belgrade when the Nazis blitzkrieged through. She had lived through the worst of war. She had seen humans behave worse than animals. She had seen what the survival instinct could do to a person.

She harboured a deep secret from Adam and his father. She married very young, before the war, and bore two beautiful children. When the Nazis came, they butchered her husband and kids. She escaped into the forests and joined the partisans and spent the rest of the war killing as many of those 'Nazi vermin' as she could. Dozens of German boys

took their last breath through the sights of her StG 44. Many times, she had stared death right in the face and kept her defiance. She had endured every horror that hell could unleash on a human, and despite it all, she kept her sanity and her courage. And the reason she survived with her mind and spirit intact was, she believed, the reason underlying the whole war experience. It was all about honour, keeping it or losing it. 'Lose your honour and you lose your mind and soul,' she used to say. Life didn't matter.

She met, fell in love with and married Adam's father a few years after the war ended, while he was still a dental student in Ljubljana.

'Your father always said you were a lucky boy. You always seemed to scrape through. Every year, when you passed your exams, your father said you were so lucky because they obviously made a mistake with the marking. I know what he will say tonight, Adam. He will say what a lucky boy you are and that he just doesn't know where all this luck comes from. But he will be very happy for you, my darling, very, very happy.'

Adam wouldn't realise fully, for many years to come, just how lucky he really was.

6

There was a small clearing on the side of the dirt road. A foot track wound its way from the clearing through the scrub to Scott's camp. It was early evening as Adam negotiated the '63 Holden into the tight parking space. As he walked along the track, he began to hear the sound of a melodic guitar. The music was unusual. It reminded him of Indian music, kind of like a sitar, but sounding like an acoustic guitar. He was walking towards it and just as he approached close enough to see the soft flickering light of a campfire, Flynn ran up and greeted him, happy and friendly as before, and escorted him into the camp.

The setting of Scott's camp was truly magical. It was completely hidden from the world, yet it was set up so as to give him a nearly 180-degree view of the deserted beach. Scott put down his guitar and warmly welcomed his guest. They sat down around the campfire on some logs that Scott dragged into position, while Flynn made himself comfortable on an intricately-woven rug. Scott didn't have a tent. His shelter was made up of a number of thin, olive-coloured tarpaulins. They were tied to the branches of the low Melaleuca trees that surrounded the camp. The whole set-up was simple but effective. Adam could see that in the event of rain or wind, Scott would remain sufficiently comfortable. His bed was a hammock suspended from two branches under the shelter.

The other noticeable thing about the Californian's camp, Adam thought, was how neat and clean it was.

Scott poured out a cup of tea for them both. There were three pots on the fire.

'What's cooking?' Adam asked.

'Aha, you smell my cookin,' Scott said as he lifted the lids off the pots. 'Rice and vegetables for us and some meat for Flynn here.'

As he mentioned Flynn's name, the retriever lifted his head and gave a restrained, joyful bark.

'I've never smelt rice and vegetables like these. They smell delicious. In fact, I don't think that I can stop my mouth watering.'

'I think it's the herbs that I brought with me. They are an ancient, native blend. They are said to be very healthy and legend has it that these herbs will make you live longer.'

As they began their dinner they watched in wonder as a tangerine moon slowly rose above the oceanic horizon. All three of them ate to their hearts' content and there was much talk and laughter that night as the risen moon cast its silvery reflection on the dark, glassy ocean beyond the beach and a million stars filled the spacious sky above. The warm glow of the campfire seemed like an outward reflection of the warm, inner glow that the three of them were feeling that night and they somehow knew that this feeling was less about each of them individually, but was more about something much greater, much more related to a grander scheme, way beyond anyone's understanding. When one is where one is meant to be, one just feels it. It is like experiencing the snug shelter of home when there is a wild storm raging outside.

7

Earlier that day, and about seven hundred kilometres to the south, a magnificent, white-breasted sea eagle, *haliaeetus leucogaster*, soared high above the virgin Illawarra escarpment, at the southern end of The Royal National Park, just south of Sydney. Its wingspan measured a full two metres. His species has dominated the airspace above the majestic coastal cliffs for longer than even the ancient black man could remember. Nature had shaped its body through countless generations, using the tools of random mutation and natural selection of design most adapted for survival. She occasionally accelerated the evolutionary process through famines or natural disasters and purposely caused nine tenths of the species to die off in order to select out the strongest and best survivors. Thus, she brought into existence the next, more highly-evolved version of one of her

favourite creations. She rewarded strength, intelligence, wisdom, efficiency, courage, as well as a high level of sensitivity of the senses, particularly the eyesight, for hunting. The white-breasted sea eagle, of south-eastern Australia, possessed these qualities in abundance. It could spot a fish near the surface of the ocean from a thousand feet, swoop down and surgically pick it out of the water with its long talons without even getting one feather wet.

The noble bird flew close to the cliff's edge. Although it always preferred to soar without flapping its wings, it could not enjoy that luxury in this flight. The wind, so typical for that time of year, was from the northeast. It blew along the faces of the tall cliffs and as a result did not generate any significant ridge lift. For the eagle it meant more judicious flying. It had to fly lower, closer to the rocks, and pick off small bands of updraft above parts of the ridge that faced slightly more into the northerly breeze. There it turned into the wind and slowed its flight to near stall, gaining some precious altitude. It turned downwind periodically and gracefully executed a circle in the sky in order to maintain its position in the narrow lift funnel. It continued to circle and gain altitude until it sensed that it had reached the top of the lift. Having climbed a satisfying one or two hundred feet, it banked off the northeaster and flew at its most efficient downwind gliding speed, headed south towards a small, deep, coastal valley. The valley represented the southern extremity of its dominion. To cross the valley to the big mountain on the other side meant risking an encounter with another dominant bird.

The coastal valley was surrounded by steep escarpment to the south, the west and northwest. The upper one to two hundred feet of the one-thousand-foot-high ridge was vertical rock face. The escarpment dramatically dropped in altitude on the north side of the valley, finishing up as a perfectly-rounded, six-hundred-foot hill that was completely devoid of trees. The eagle knew it as, '*no tree hill*'. Two fresh-water creeks, one on the northern and one on the southern side of the valley, meandered their way down to one of the most picturesque beaches on the whole coast. When it rained heavily, the water drained off the high plain and over the edge of the vertical cliffs, creating dozens of spectacular waterfalls, transforming the valley into something one would only expect to experience in a mystical dream.

The sea eagle was on a search. It was searching for something that about seven days before had shaken it to the very core of its being. The memory remained crystal-clear in its mind. It happened on no tree hill and nothing like it had ever happened before in all

the history of its species. The eagle instinctively sensed that its dominance of the airspace was about to be challenged. Its only reaction was unyielding defence. This bird knew no fear. Its tactic was to search and continue to search for the elusive new threat.

One week earlier, it could remember soaring high above no tree hill, half asleep in the silky-smooth air, when its attention suddenly focussed onto something bright and colourful appearing on the ground on the point of the hill. It looked like a pair of wings the like of which it had never seen before. They were huge, spanning at least five of its own wingspans. The eagle interpreted them as belonging to an enormous bird. The giant wings were incredibly colourful, deep blue with a yellow stripe running across them. The eagle thought that a bird that large obviously had no need for camouflage. The big bird seemed to be resting on the point of the hill holding its wings open for a very long time. The eagle thought to itself, *'What kind of bird stands on the ground with its wings open?'*

Technically, the big bird hadn't yet violated the eagle's domain. That offence would occur if it took to flight.

The eagle instinctively began planning its attack. It would focus on the wingtips, diving upon them from above and behind, preferably out of the sun. It would surprise the intruder with its explosive attack and would tear into its wingtip flesh with its powerful talons. It repositioned itself high above, and slightly behind, the big bird. It hovered there for a long time, when finally, the big bird began to move towards the edge of the hill. The eagle tensed the muscles in its clawed feet and intensified its piercing stare. Suddenly the big bird was flying. The eagle pulled in its wings and began to dive, but half way through its dive, it hesitated. The big bird was going straight down. It wasn't soaring, it was only gliding, and poorly at that. The eagle soared above as the big bird completed a semi-plummeting, forty-five-degree glide, landing quite hard in a small clearing at the base of the hill.

The flight was over in a moment. The eagle felt the sense of victory rush through its heart. It was certain that it had frightened the big intruder into submission and forced it down out of its airspace. It circled above and observed the big bird fold up its wings, one at a time, and finally completely disappear. The eagle, although victorious, was nonetheless flustered by the experience. It decided that it would continue to patrol its airspace more diligently in the future.

The white-breasted sea eagle of south-eastern Australia had completed its reconnaissance. Today there were no intruders. It had flown the length of its territory in

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