

LAHN'S MISSION



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY EVA TRUST

Lahni's Mission written and illustrated by Eva Trust

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For our beautiful blue planet and all its inhabitants!

“There is no guarantee that people will care if they know, but it is certain they cannot care if they do not know.” Dr. Sylvia A. Earle

Lahni slowly opened her eyes. Slightly disoriented, she stood up and shook herself awake. Looking around, she realized she was in her family's choom, a tent made of wood and reindeer skins, traditional to the Samoyed tribe. Next to her, all her siblings and her people were still sleeping. Everything seemed a bit of a blur. Had she really been dreaming all this? Why this vision and why would she have received this message? She decided to find out if any of the things she had dreamt about were true and if they were, would she be able to do something about it? Lahni looked at her brothers and sisters and her beautiful humans; her heart felt heavy in an instant; she had to know for certain.

After breakfast instead of following her pack to look after the herd of reindeer as usual, Lahni snuck off to talk to some of her neighbors in the nearby village to find out if what she had seen during her sleep could possibly have any reality to it. She spoke to the other dogs, some of the kids too young to work and a snow fox she met on her way. One of the children told her that she had heard the older ones talking about this very subject and it had sounded a little scary to her to say the least. All agreed it was of the utmost importance to keep searching for answers.

Lahni's dream had been the most vivid and intense dream she'd ever had. It seemed so real, so visceral, so amazingly detailed and colorful that her waking state felt no more real to her that morning. She was used to the ice melting every year around this time but glaciers would remain intact, providing fresh water down stream for all the villages and tribal nomad camps for the entire year. In her nightmare however, glaciers grew smaller and smaller flooding the land with all the extra water from the melting ice, washing away villages and displacing people and animals alike. The water temperature in the oceans had gone up so drastically that the fish stocks that she, her family and many other animals relied on to get through the winter, were dwindling. The air was thick with pollution; the rivers too dirty to drink from and already endangered animals were disappearing faster than ever before. She felt shaken and uneasy from the experience.

Her life so far had been a fairly protected, happy and routine filled existence. So, waking up after such an intense nightmare was a bit of a shock to her system. What she found out from the children confirmed everything for her. Her and her friends' world was disappearing. If nothing were done, it would not last much longer. Right there and then Lahni made a decision to leave the safety of her tribe to see what she could do to save her world.

On her way back to the tribal camp she realized how late in the day it had become and she swiftly returned to her duties of looking after the reindeer with her siblings for now. After dinner that evening and a night's sleep filled with wild dreams about her impending journey, Lahni got up early the next morning trying not to disturb anyone.

“What are you doing?” asked one of the other dogs with one eye still closed. “It’s so early!” “Shsh! Don’t wake anyone else. Go back to sleep. Love you!” Lahni said kissing her sibling. Thinking nothing much of it he went back to sleep.



With a good breakfast in her belly and a brisk roll in the snow for her morning wash she said goodbye to her family in silence, since they were all still in a deep slumber.

Sad to leave her familiar home behind but excited by the prospects ahead, she set off into the tundra heading North East to get to the nearest harbor.

She knew she just had to go into the world and speak to other animals and people affected by these events.

After a few days of just walking, feeling tired and exhausted, she fell into the snow, rolled up into a ball and went to sleep. She was lonely and a little cold and hungry.

The next morning at twilight she awoke to a noisy chewing sound not too far from her. A little nervous about what she might find, but hungry and curious enough, she got up to investigate. Just a short distance away a polar bear was enjoying the last bites of his breakfast consisting of a seal he must have caught on the ice floes near the coast.

I must be close to the sea then, that’s good, Lahni thought. When the bear looked up and saw her through the dry bushes Lahni crouched down to try and avoid being seen but it was too late.

The polar bear had picked up her scent, stopped feeding and walked over in her direction. Since she wasn’t sure if he was friend or foe, she decided to stay low to the ground and not move a muscle, keeping her breath shallow, just in case he was territorial about his food. But instead, much to her surprise, he sniffed her all over and then invited her to join him for some breakfast.

“Come,” he said, “you look hungry. You must have come a long way to be here on your own. Where are you going?”

“The next seaport,” Lahni answered, in awe of her massive benefactor. She had seen polar bears before but never this close.

“Tiksi, then, it’s not too far now”, the bear said, “tuck in, don’t be shy! I’ve had enough. It mustn’t go to waste.” Surprised by the invitation but grateful for it, she obliged and ate what he had left. When her stomach was full she bid her friend goodbye and headed in the direction the bear had pointed out to her.

Only a few hours later she found herself sitting atop a plateau overlooking the seaport city of Tiksi, the gateway to the Arctic sea, also called the Laptev Sea. She knew that during winter it would have been impossible to get a passage out of the frozen harbor but since spring was here and the ice was melting already, she was hopeful to find passage on a ship that was going south.



Lahni had been here as a puppy, training on a sled with her brothers and sisters pulling all the reindeer skins her people traded for life's essentials like fishing gear, hunting equipment and other items. So, finding her way here from her home had been a fairly easy task for her keen eyes and sensitive nose and with the help of the polar bear it had been even easier than she'd expected. As sunset was approaching she lingered a few more minutes on the ledge looking at all the city lights coming on below; she then moved swiftly to find shelter for the night. On her way down the ravine she noticed a little cave off to the side and decided to see if it was suitable for safe sleeping. Since it seemed clear, she curled up in a corner and fell into a deep, well-deserved sleep. Her dreams took her back home to her family in the warm comfort of their choom, snuggling up to her siblings and the children.

Chapter 2 Tiksi

Lahni's ears were awake first; turning from side to side like the periscope on a submarine, listening to a faint sound of rustling next to her. Since it was really early in the morning and still dark, Lahni decided to open one eye to make sure she wasn't in any danger. A strange little furry creature was standing on its toes inspecting her close up but jumped back immediately as Lahni's eye spotted it. It was white with red eyes and very tiny. It had jumped back far enough to be out of harms way, just in case, but felt strangely courageous; enough so to stay and not run for its life. With two eyes open now, Lahni noticed that there were more of them, in fact a whole pack. She barely saw them but could smell and sense them nearby. The mouse raised herself up and started to say something to her friends while still keeping an eye on the intruder before her. Faint but audible to Lahni's sensitive ears the mouse addressed someone else in the space. "This is by far the biggest snow fox I have ever seen, don't you agree? I should be afraid but am strangely comfortable around this big, white, fluffy fox. What do you think we should do?" she whispered.



Fully awake by now, Lahni responded to set the record straight. “I am not a snow fox! I am Lahni the Samoyed, sled dog, reindeer herder and a keen hunter when I need to be! But please, don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you. I am on a mission to save my world and hopefully the world of others!”

“Oh”, said the mouse, “that sounds interesting, would you like to join us for a bite? I want to hear about your mission, will you tell us?”

The mice happily shared with their visitor, who was grateful for the invitation to eat, although the food was not the usual fare for a dog’s breakfast. Over a meal of old cheese, some strange roots, dried berries, nuts and a few bugs, they sat in a circle to listen to Lahni’s story about her dream and impending journey. She told them about tracking her way to this point and her desire to find passage on a ship to connect with the animals of the oceans and all the people who might be affected by what she’d seen in her dream. The mice listened keenly and as it turned out some of them had been sailing the seas and knew exactly where to find a ship for her.

“I know where to get you a ship...been on one and I know exactly where they are!” one of the mice proclaimed proudly. “I’ve been a sailor before... went all around the world!” he said now standing up and making grand gestures.

“We’ll take you there, so don’t worry, eat up!” said what looked like the leader of the mice. To make sure their friend got to the harbor safely and hopefully unseen, they plotted out a path through the city’s back streets, sewers and rooftops, although modified compared to their usual route due to Lahni’s size.

Being a snow-white dog it had always been easy to hide in the snow and ice filled plains of her tundra home. However, her light color would be way too conspicuous to get her through the town with its grey stone walls and dark buildings. Her little rodent friends made sure she was not to remain white much longer though, given they guided her through dirty, oily and filthy underground tunnels and large pipes to get to the harbor.

There was more than one reason to stay invisible because in Siberia a good sled dog was worth a lot to peoples’ survival, so if caught she would surely be sold off or used by her captors to work. On the other hand, the city’s police would not necessarily be kind to a stray dog, let alone allow her to continue on her mission. Getting to the ship’s mooring was no mean feat. Lahni had to follow her tiny guides quickly through some very tight spots.

The mice were incredibly agile and fast on their little feet. What a find, she thought to herself. Suddenly, it dawned on her that she’d never really been alone before and that there may be times ahead where she would feel lonely for sure. She wished they could all go together. Just as she finished that thought she realized that her head and half her body came through on the other side of what felt like one of those tight spots. She could smell the fresh air outside and see her friends in front but she somehow couldn’t follow them anymore. She couldn’t move. Her hind legs and rump were well and truly

stuck.

“Hey you guys, help me, I’m stuck, I can’t get out!” she exclaimed with a loud whisper to the closest mouse in front of her. All the mice turned around at once. After assessing the situation they all lined up and grabbed a hold of Lahni’s front paws and legs.

“Breathe out on one, two, three... pull hard everyone!” yelled the lead mouse.

Just about now, Lahni regretted the extra cheese she had had for breakfast. She took a deep breath and let it out as far as she possibly could while pushing from her end and being pulled by her friends. Bearing in mind that she was covered in oily sludge from all the pipes her body all of a sudden slid through the narrow opening with such force that all the mice tumbled backward into a row of barrels. They slowly got up and shook off the shock of the fall.

As they looked up their eyes widened with joy; a majestic ship sat in its mooring right before them. The barrels of goods that they had bumped into were waiting to be loaded onto the ship for trade and provisions for the crew and passengers. The dock was busy with people loading cargo up the gangway and onto the vessel. Some were carrying luggage and crates of food much to the delight of the mice.

Maybe they should come along on Lahni’s journey? But, then again, they had made a good home here and had to think about their families who would be left behind; at least that was the reasoning of one mouse contemplating the voyage. Another one just shook his head while licking his lips displaying his indecision. In the end they agreed that the prospect of a well-catered passage into the unknown wasn’t quite enough to leave everything they had worked so hard for. Lahni, on the other hand, felt her heart pounding in her chest— she was anxious and excited at the same time. What would it be like, who would she meet, would she be able to change things or at least bring awareness to her tribe’s and her animal friends’ plight?

Meanwhile, a small group of the mice had gone to look for a disguise for Lahni to get her up the ramp onto the ship unobserved. Two of them had spotted an old oil coat and a worn out hat in a crate nearby. They pulled and pushed and carried it with all their might almost all the way back to their canine friend. She saw them struggle with the find and decided to move towards them to help. She grabbed the front of the coat and pulled it the rest of the way behind the barrels so no one would see her. The coat had collected extra debris and dirt being dragged along the ground by the mice. Lahni shook it a few times from side to side to clean off any loose bits before putting it on.

The young ones giggled when she threw the coat over her back and then added the hat. It was quite a sight. She certainly had lost her good looks, or what remained of them, in an instant; then again her trip through the sewers, pipes and dirty alleyways had already contributed to her new disguise. She wasn’t sure how this was all going to work out but decided to

trust her instincts that she was on the right path.

Lahni's sheer size would prohibit her from sneaking into the ship's galley even at night to find food from bins and stores, which added to her concerns about surviving the trip.

Passengers started to arrive with big trunks of luggage that were stacked on carts before being rolled up the gangplank to the ship. Lahni saw an opportunity to sneak alongside the trunks and with a quick thank you and goodbye to her friends, was on her way up the ramp, keeping pace with the full cart that was being pushed up beside her.

Chapter 3 The Icebreaker

Nightfall had already begun. Since it was only early spring, days were still very short, which made stowing away a lot easier for Lahni. One of the former seagoing mice had told her to stay low and look for the lifeboats, which were always covered with tarps against the water coming from high waves, snow or rain, providing a perfect hide-out and a safe den for sleeping. Lahni wondered if she would meet anyone on the vessel sympathetic to her cause. Within minutes she found the boats tied up on the deck elevated on chains; she then heaved herself into the first one and wriggled under the tarp. Safe for now, she thought, and curled up to rest a bit while the ship was still being loaded. The voyage was to start soon. She had never left these shores before except for short trips to fish with her people in the summer. This would no doubt be a big adventure for her, she thought while drifting off.

A rocking and knocking sound awoke her suddenly. Lahni carefully lifted the tarp to see what all the commotion was. Through the slit she had made between the tarp and the edge of the boat she saw what looked like a small eye. She jerked back hiding under the cover in fear of having been discovered. Looking up towards the opening she saw a little hand come in and lift the canvas slightly. The hand came in trying to feel Lahni's coat and after touching her on her tail, pulled back out. A few seconds later the tarp lifted again and a fresh-faced little boy much like the humans in her tribe, looked right at her, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey there, who are you? What's your name? What're you doin' in there? Are you hidin'? Are you playin' hide and seek? Can I play?" he asked all at once.

"Shhhhhh!" said Lahni. "Not so loud! I mustn't be found...don't let anyone know I'm here. They won't let me stay. I need to stay hidden. I'm on an important mission to save the world!"

The young boy's eyes widened with excitement.

"Oh, okay. Sorry! Really? I won't tell. What mission? Can I come in 'n' help?"

Lahni quickly invited the boy to join her in the boat and told him everything that had happened to her so far. A little over half an hour later he looked at his wristwatch.

"Oh no! Sorry, I have to go now, my mother will be lookin' for me," the little boy said. "It's almost lunchtime. I'll be back and I'll bring you some food. And I want to hear a lot more too, so don't go anywhere!" he added.

"Where am I supposed to go?" Lahni said.

“Good point, see you soon. I’m Akiak, by the way; what’s your name?” he said on the climb out and disappeared around the ship’s side without waiting for the answer.

An hour or so later the little boy approached the lifeboat and after making sure the coast was clear he carefully lifted the tarp. He was carrying a package of leftover lunch; consisting of some meat, milk curds and vegetables.

Lahni gratefully ate all that was on offer and while chewing repeated her name to him just in case he’d missed it earlier. “Lahni, I’m Lahni. Thanks for the food... ‘s good... what is it?”

“Oh of course, vegetables and curds... I guess you’re not used to that, huh?” he answered.

“Not bad really”, she said, “I have certainly been eating new things lately.”

He climbed in and made himself comfortable; they talked quietly for a couple of hours about the troubles brewing for the world and what they could do. Lahni asked him many questions about his human world and if he had heard anything about the subject from his people. Akiak was from Anchorage in Alaska and had been visiting relatives in Tiksi over the winter. The stay had been very long due to the ice covering the ocean making voyages by ship impossible. It had been a particularly cold and icy winter. He was certainly ready for his friends to hear about his adventures and Lahni’s of course, even though hers had only just begun. He promised her he would keep bringing her food, as much as he could safely smuggle off his plate and the buffet in the dining room without getting caught and he would also investigate further about her concerns. Surely his parents would know something about all this.

The next morning Akiak turned up with breakfast stuffed in his pockets and some news. Apparently Lahni had been right and the world was warming up faster than ever before which meant her home would melt sooner or later, which Akiak thought strange since he’d just experienced the opposite. He had found out that polar bears would not have a place to hunt and many would suffer including other animals and her people.

“You know, it’s weird, we just had a really cold winter here and I don’t understand why people are sayin’ the world is getting warmer but that’s what everyone at lunch was talkin’ about,” Akiak said.

He told her about car emissions, plastic garbage and polluting industries. He continued talking about the plastic island that had formed in the ocean north of an island called Hawaii. She also learnt that things are being done to bring awareness to the situation but that he wasn’t sure if it was enough yet to make a difference.

“Better to do something than to watch it all go to waste,” she said.

“I will spread the word as far and wide as I can.”

Akiak gave his word that he would tell all his friends and they would tell their friends and so on. Lahni would do her bit

telling every animal and human she would encounter.

The ship they were on was on its way to the central Alaskan township of Bethel on the river Kuskokwim via the Chukchi and Bering Seas, approximately 340 miles west of Anchorage.

Lahni was familiar with this very small but important town, having heard many stories from some of her sled dog friends, who came to this place with their owners to take part in the famous annual dog sled race, the Bethel 300.



Every January, hundreds of dog teams descend on this tiny place for the race along the longest river in Alaska. Maybe she would meet some of her people and old friends there, although unlikely given the time of year. She would again have to be very careful about not being caught on her way through.

After hearing all the bits of news about the state of the planet from Akiak, she made a decision to continue her journey on to the islands of Hawaii, which was an obvious choice considering the story about the plastic floating off its shores. She just had to find a way to get passage south as soon as she got to Bethel. A plastic island, Lahni thought and wondered if one could walk on it and what it would look like. It was apparently growing bigger while other islands were getting smaller with the steady rise of the oceans. With the polar ice melting rapidly sea levels would keep going up and many islands would be affected in the near future; quite a few already were, so it seemed like a good place to start.

The ship was well equipped for ice breaking; it was a long and slow voyage since the ice was still thick in places and working its way through took precision and patience. Weeks into the trip Lahni became a little more adventurous during the middle of the night. Nights were still very long and staying in her hiding place for too long without walking or stretching regularly made her sore and stiff, apart from bored. She would sneak out of her den, walk around the ship a few times and then sit on the deck at the stern of the ship watching the stars and the moon shining brightly over the ocean. Most nights she was safe and remained unseen except for the occasional ducking behind a barrel to hide from the night watch crew.

One of those nights Lahni witnessed something unexpected. A couple of men approached the stern of the ship. From the

relative safety of the barrels she was hiding behind she saw them get closer to the railing with an enormous bag of something. She could feel her heart beat faster and her breathing speed up but she tried not to pant too loudly in case they could hear her. The stuff they carried looked heavy. She watched as they tipped the contents of the bag into the ocean and then disappeared back to the bow of the ship.

Lahni quickly leaned over the rail to see if she could make out what it was they had thrown overboard. There, below the ship in the water and on bits of floating ice were hundreds of pieces of garbage made up of plastic, glass, cartons and food scraps glistening in the moonlight like jewels. Now, she thought, the food scraps are surely useful to some animals resting on the ice during long ocean swims but the plastic and glass? All those unnatural things would certainly do harm.

“This is so wrong in so many ways. Maybe that’s why the ice is melting so fast. Maybe this is the problem,” she whispered to herself.

Lahni realized that her mission had already begun before she had even arrived anywhere. Right here, right now she would have to do something about this. She wandered back to her temporary home with a heavy heart, head hanging down but resolute to take action. Her sleep was restless and thin, full of dreams about her world, her journey and thoughts about being too late.

“Oh no,” she uttered in the middle of waking up. I must not get depressed about this! I must stay positive and do something, now!” she said to herself, while rubbing her eyes.

Just then Akiak appeared with a big smile on his face. “Almost in Bethel now... I can’t wait to get on land. We fly out to Anchorage the day after we arrive. How are you? You don’t look so good. What’s wrong?” he asked, while climbing into the lifeboat.

“You must help me with something Akiak, I saw something awful last night!” she went on giving him the details.

Akiak sprung to his feet hitting his head on the tarp above, making him fall right back down on his behind. “Oops, forgot about that. I must go and tell my parents and they have to tell all the other people on the ship and then they have to all go to the captain and make him stop or else.”

Lahni tugged on his trousers before he could jump. “Not a word about me, please!”

“Of course not, I’ll tell them I sneaked out and saw it all myself. I think a little white lie is ok in this case.” With that he disappeared. He was quite incensed by what he’d heard. As Akiak turned the corner, he bumped right into his parents who had just finished breakfast and were on their way to their cabin. He quickly told them all he had heard without giving Lahni’s secret away and asked them to please take this up with everyone else on the ship including the staff and captain. They promised to get on to it straight away and instead of turning into their room, they went back to the dining room to

speak to everyone. Naturally all were outraged that this had been going on under their noses and agreed it needed to end now. They all got up and marched to the bridge to speak to the captain. Akiak's father was leading the group of passengers and spoke first.

"Captain, Sir, it has come to all our attention that your crew has been dumping garbage into the ocean in the middle of the night. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The captain kept his eyes on the bow of the ship since he was still steering but looked up briefly. "Now Sir, that is what everyone else does. How do you think we can deal with tons of refuse out here in the middle of nowhere? We don't have enough space on the ship to keep it."

"Wait a minute, Sir," said Akiak's father, "if you can carry all the food that was in the containers and wrappers and glass jars and boxes then isn't it less to carry after we've all eaten the contents? And would that not mean you have more than enough space to carry the trash to the next port and dispose of it correctly, in an environmentally friendly manner?"

The rest of the passengers looked at each other and the captain, murmuring their agreement. The captain looked around at everyone with a serious but questioning look on his face.

"You know, Sir, I had never even considered that. I have always done what I was taught before I became captain and gone into lock step with everyone else." He cleared his throat. "I am very sorry! I will order my crew to stop immediately and instead clean all the containers and jars and cartons and keep all the non-biodegradable refuse until we get to the next port."

Akiak had been hiding behind the legs of all the adults listening in but didn't wait for his father's reply to the captain's promise; instead he bolted down the stairs to the lifeboats to tell Lahni the good news.

His friend had drifted off into a welcome nap after a sleepless night when he crashed into the lifeboat making it rock on its chains, rattling her awake.

"Lahni!" he whispered loudly trying to curb his enthusiasm. "We won, we won!"

"What do you mean?" she asked with a yawn.

"The captain agreed to keep all the garbage and not throw it away anymore. My dad's a hero."

"That's great news Akiak, thank you so much for helping but also remember that this is only one ship and only a little bit of garbage. What about the thousands of other ships at sea and then some? We have to keep going. This is bigger than us," she said with a sigh.

"You're right!" said Akiak and stopped celebrating. "But you must admit, it feels good to win this one." He smiled at

her and patted her soft coat.

“I’m happy too,” said Lahni. “But this is just the tip of the iceberg. I have much work to do.”

“Land!” they heard someone yell. “Land in sight!” Then the horn rang out twice.

“We’ll be there in the morning then,” said Akiak overjoyed. “I’ll miss you!”

“I will miss you too! You’ve been a great help. Thank you!” Lahni said with a sad face.

“It was so nice to have you here, I’m glad I met you. I promise I will keep up your work and spread the word, cross my heart!” Akiak said giving Lahni a big bear hug and a kiss on her head. “And I’m here for another day after we arrive as well, so I can help you to find your next ship south if you like.”

Lahni hugged him right back, grateful to have found such a good friend.

Chapter 4 Bethel

The ship was relatively small for an icebreaker, so getting up the Kuskokwim river delta to the port of Bethel was not much of a problem. They cruised along the riverbanks and many small islands within the Delta, which was home to many tribal people still subsisting on hunting and fishing. The port stretched out along the river for almost a mile. It was well in sight before one could see the township. Bethel was a quaint little place in the middle of nowhere with a rich history from the gold rush era to modern mining.

Getting past customs was a breeze. Akiak smuggled her in his big trunk that was half empty because he had left his really heavy winter clothing with his family and friends in Tiksi.

He didn't need it over the spring and summer in Anchorage, apart from the fact that he was growing fast and it wouldn't fit next winter.

"Customs in Bethel is pretty relaxed compared to the mainland and who is going to search a kid anyway", he said, "so hop in and be really quiet! I'll knock when we're through and it's safe to come out."

The trunk was made of leather; it was old and worn on the edges with small holes forming, which provided sufficient air for Lahni to breathe and even sneak a very small peek at the outside when the trunk was being moved. She lay very still so no one would find her.

Akiak was spending the night in a little hotel in town with his own room, which meant Lahni could stay with him as long as no one came in to check on him. His parents were very trusting people and most of the time left him to his own devices, which was just fine in this instance.

He would also have the chance to look around town and ask about any ships or barges that were leaving the harbor in a few days to get passage for Lahni's next leg of the journey.

The place was alive with people getting on and off boats and small ships; many barges were being loaded and unloaded. Bethel harbor brought all the goods, machinery and workers needed for the entire watershed area of the Kuskokwim, which meant a very busy port and a lot of work opportunities over the summer. Young men arrived for the seasonal work with smiles on their faces and much enthusiasm for whatever adventure lay ahead for them.

Akiak looked at all of this with excitement. There must be a way to get Lahni on one of those barges to connect with a cargo ship to take her to Vancouver in Canada and from there it would be easier to get a lift to Hawaii, he thought. The roads were still covered in snow but very thin and wet. Rooftops were dripping with snowmelt and the air was clear and

crisp with the cool moisture of spring. The sun was showing itself and lingered above the horizon just that little bit longer every day. On such a nice day Lahni couldn't possibly stay in and hide, so she decided to steal down the back stairs and meet Akiak on the street behind the hotel for a little reconnaissance mission.



Akiak would just pretend she was his dog. Lahni did look a little different to most of the sled dogs here; most were Husky and Malamute with a mix of brown, black and white fur and many of them had icy blue eyes; Lahni had big brown ones. Her journey so far had made her more of a mud color though, which made her blend in a little better.

They walked through the neighborhood streets checking out shop fronts and mingling about amongst all the people. There was much going on with the onset of spring.

Lahni stopped short all of a sudden in front of an entrance to what looked like a council chambers office. In the window was a poster with writing and a few indigenous symbols on it.

"Why are you stopping, Lahni?" he asked.

"I don't know, really, but I think there is something here. I can feel it. What's on this poster?"

Akiak looked at it closely and started to read slowly:

"The manifest mission statement of the Kuskokwim River Watershed:

The Kuskokwim River Watershed Council is dedicated to maintaining and promoting traditional subsistence life for the residents of the Kuskokwim River Watershed.

We will keep our land, water and air healthy for our people, animals and plants, to pass on to the next generations. In 10 years, all the villages will have 14 environmental programs implemented, with a strong self sufficient and effective communication network, thus becoming a worldwide reference for land and water stewardship."

"Wow", said Lahni, "that's what people were talking about when they mentioned that someone was already doing something about the environment and about the changes taking place all around us. I'm glad to know that."

Just at that moment an elder Yupik Indian tribesman came to the door and asked Akiak what he was doing there. Akiak quickly explained the situation to him, feeling quite comfortable to be really truthful about everything. He told him about meeting Lahni on her own on the ship from Tiksi and her mission and smuggling her through customs. Strange, he thought to himself, knowing full well that he was usually not so forthcoming with information, especially not to adults, let alone strangers. Wonder what's going on here, he thought, cringing a little.

The councilman invited them in, sat them down, made hot chocolate for Akiak and gave Lahni some water.

"So, you two want to know what we do here then? My name is Tootega but the locals call me 'Kuuk' which means 'river'. They say it's because I care so much about our great river," he laughed. "I will tell you all about our work here in a minute. Tootega means Fire Star for my fiery nature but that was earlier in my life; now the icy cold water of the river has put out some of that fire. But I am still passionate about what I do," he grinned.

In fact he smiled, laughed and grinned a lot, Akiak noticed. Kind of nice to see, given that so many people were unhappy in the world, he noted to himself. Lahni and Akiak were to learn that the local indigenous population was working hard to preserve this amazing river system, the longest free flowing stream in the USA. At 1130 miles long, fed by many other rivers it was the lifeline for 56 smaller towns and villages south of the Yukon. Salmon fishing had already been restricted due to low counts and low water flow, which apparently affected spawning. Rangers were always on the lookout for illegal fishing activities.

Mining, shipping, over fishing, erosion and pollution by humans had already taken its toll but the formation of the Council by the people stepped in to change things and preserve the river for future generations, much to Lahni's delight.

"We want to set a good example and leave a worthwhile world to our children and their children. People have taken our Earth for granted and it's time for a shift. We hope to influence others with our vision, locally and internationally," he paused looking Lahni's way, "do you want help to get to your next destination?"

Lahni stood up wagging her tail like an excited dog would; she was grateful that her mission had been successful so far because of the support of all the people and animal friends she had met.

"Of course", she said. "Thank you!" She knew then, that she was not alone in her quest; there were many on the same path. They heard the door downstairs and took it as a sign that it was time to leave. Tootega took them out the back way and told Lahni to meet him later in the afternoon by the wharf ready to go.

Akiak was so happy with himself that he skipped all the way back to the hotel. He entered via the front through the lobby in case his parents were there and told Lahni to wait by the back door on the landing.

When they got back to his room they fell into bed for a well-earned nap. Since it was only noon, they both could allow

themselves to relax and fell into a deep sleep. Akiak sprung to his feet first. “What time is it?” he asked loudly.

“Lahni, wake up; it’s late already, you musn’t be late for your trip.”

But Lahni was already up, had stretched and cleaned herself thoroughly and she was mostly white again and ready to go.

“Oh good, come on then, I’ll take you to the wharf and see you off, before I have to meet my parents for dinner. I’m sorry to see you leave, I wish I could come,” Akiak said with sad eyes. “Let’s go”

They ran down the backstairs and Akiak took the opportunity to slide down the railing, landing in the slushy snow with a thud.

“Shhh....quiet.” said Lahni, “just because one other person is willing to help doesn’t mean we don’t have to be careful. I’m not exactly legally here nor am I a guest in the hotel.”

“OK, OK, sorry” Akiak mumbled, “I am just excited for you.”

They turned the corner and headed towards the wharf where from afar they could already see Tootega waiting for them.

As soon as he saw them he smiled and waved them to follow him down towards the ships between the containers.

“I have a friend who works on the wharf and is loading a ship with containers. He told me that they need a guard dog for their journey to Vancouver. You’ll get food, shelter and passage and all you have to do is guard the ship. There are a few stops but it won’t be more than a couple of weeks. Are you in?” he asked her.

Tootega apologized for rushing her to make a decision but made it clear that the ship was leaving this afternoon, so there was no time to waste.



“Absolutely!” said Lahni. “It’s perfect, I don’t have to hide. Thank you so much. I don’t know how to repay you?”

“The mission you’re on is enough for me,” said Tootega, “I much appreciate your courage and determination.”

She kissed Akiak one more time and said her goodbyes to her two friends.

Chapter 5 To Hawaii

Tootega took her onto the ship to meet the crew and captain and before long she was sitting on deck above the containers outside her own doghouse, complete with insulation and padding for a good nights sleep.

Her job was to keep watch and alert someone if there was trouble. Easy she thought and started her job. She could see all the way to the front of the ship and from side to side.

The trip to Vancouver was relatively calm and peaceful except for the occasional spring storm and many whales passing by to head north for the summer to feed on krill and plankton.

Lahni was enjoying the luxury of regular meals and many cuddles from passing crew who loved giving her attention. She spent her days on deck keeping watch with the occasional snooze in between. At night there were other crewmembers with her to keep an eye on things. Whenever they came closer to land, seagulls would accompany them to feed on leftovers the crew threw over the railing for them. Lahni had already convinced everyone on board to follow her directions regarding garbage and with that had curbed the bad habits of a dozen or so sailors and crew including the captain to offload their refuse overboard. She wouldn't have had it any other way.

The gulls came close to Lahni and sat next to her without fear, somehow knowing she was no threat. They held conferences together on many such occasions. She would tell them about her mission and the adventures she already had behind her. Before they left every day she asked them to carry the word forward on their travels. The birds happily obliged Lahni's request, given that the issue at hand was having an effect on their livelihoods as well.

They would often just all sit on the edge of the platform admiring the nightly light show of the aurora borealis, also called the northern lights. The sky would literally light up in magnificent shapes and colors with stars twinkling above and below. It was a sight to remember. Lahni had seen this all the way from her home already but having friends to see it with and not having to sneak around at night to enjoy it, was extra sweet.

Two weeks at sea passed quickly this time and Lahni wasn't sure how all this would continue but thought that since she was on her way, why shouldn't it.

The final night on deck she again dreamt of home and her journey, meeting Akiak, whom she missed terribly, and her good friend Tootega, who helped her along so much. As she woke up from a brief nap to resume her duties she saw a shooting star and made a wish to see them again some day and for her mission to be a success. On arrival in Vancouver the ship sat

in the harbor for a day or so waiting to berth. It was a busy place with hundreds of container ships coming in and out to unload or pick up cargo.

Lahni didn't have any trouble getting off the ship into Canada, since some of the sailors had citizenship and one such young man claimed her as his, for the moment only, of course.

She had thought of staying here for a while to see what would come her way but felt more drawn to go south straight away. Somehow she knew her work was there for now. Following her instincts and her nose came to her naturally; this situation was no different. Listen to the nudges and her inner voice, she thought, and things will work out.

After organizing some important travel papers for Lahni, the sailor took her to the wharf where cruise passengers disembarked and many lined up to board a cruise south to the Pacific Islands, the Pacific North West and California. He said his goodbyes to Lahni, wished her good luck and left her sitting near a bench overlooking the boarding proceedings for the ship. She watched people go about their business for a while, wondering how she would make it onto this very ship, when a little girl came skipping towards her smiling and laughing playing with a ball. When the ball bounced off the bench and came to stay next to her, Lahni rolled it right back to the child with her nose. Her parents must be waiting to go onto the ship, Lahni thought. The little girl caught the ball and then sat down on the bench next to her and started stroking her head. Lahni looked at her and gently licked her hand.

"Hey", Lahni whispered, "what's your name? I am Lahni, explorer, sled dog and I am on an important mission."

The little girl looked at her in wonder. "My other dog at home just barks but you can talk, that's cool. What kind of mission are you on? Sounds interesting. I'm going to Hawaii with my parents on this big ship over here, on a holiday. Do you want to come? We can keep each other company and play. It's so boring on my own."

"How?" said Lahni, wagging her tail excitedly.

The little girl jumped up. "Wait here," she said, "I'll be back." She ran towards the stairs of the ship where her parents were waiting in the first class line, which wasn't very long, so time was of the essence. Tugging on her mother's coat, Lahni saw her whispering something to her.

Her mother was talking to someone and didn't really listen to what her daughter had said. The little girl kept tugging all the while but her mother kept talking to the person next to her ignoring her child, when she suddenly looked down and said: "Whatever you like, honey!" With that she ran back to the bench to fetch Lahni. She tied a long, colorful silk scarf around Lahni's neck as a leash, so it looked like she was her dog. Naturally with first class passengers no one would even blink an eye. Many wealthy travelers would bring their animals on board.

Some ladies had birds in cages, some carried little dogs on their arms and some had kittens in carriers, so no one would

think twice about a lovely dog like Lahni coming on the cruise.

She was amazed. It had taken less than 30 minutes to get a free pass onto the ship to her chosen destination. Miracles do happen when you relax, she thought to herself. Katya introduced herself to her newfound travelling companion and invited her to stay in her cabin, which was situated on the upper deck with a balcony of course and right next to that of her parents. “Just maybe don’t talk when mom shows up. I’ll say I found you and wanted you so bad, she’ll let me keep you for sure. I always get what I want,” said Katya to Lahni, who was sitting by the window in disbelief about what she had just manifested.

“Believe it!” she said to herself. “Stranger things have happened.”

Looking back at all the help that had miraculously come her way when she needed it most, she instantly felt enormous gratitude—the polar bear who had shared his food with her and shown her the way to the shore; the mice in Tiksi who had gladly invited her and taken her to the first ship; then Akiak, who was literally a lifesaver, providing her with food and company on a long and cold journey and Tootega, who she only knew for a day, yet he proved to be a most valuable and trustworthy ally. She was in awe of all this. It seemed to get better and better as the trip continued.

“So what should we order from Room Service?” asked Katya. “Meat, I assume, or fish for you. I will order some of everything and then we can pick and choose what we want to eat.”

“A little meat or fish would be nice but you don’t have to order everything. I only need one serving, Katya!”

“But that wouldn’t be any fun, would it now, we can just throw away what we don’t want. I always do it that way. It gives me choice and I always get what I want,” she giggled.

Lahni had a concerned look on her face. “Katya, don’t you think that’s very wasteful? There are many people and animals struggling to find food and it will only get worse, so throwing away anything you don’t want after ordering too much is not very nice,” she said with a stern voice.

It hadn’t occurred to Katya that her habits were in any way having an effect on anyone else around her, let alone on the planet and its inhabitants. She looked a little confused for the moment, since she had never heard anyone say anything like this to her. She was used to being waited on, hand and foot, and she was used to getting anything she wanted when she wanted it. This made her question things for the first time in her life. She was only ten and a half years old but had already been around the world twice with her parents; in luxury of course, so she hadn’t really seen the world the way it is, just her little world.

“Hmm”, said Katya, “so you are saying I should actually look at the menu and make up my mind now about what I want to eat and order just one thing? Really? ... O.K. I guess I can try it and see how it works. I suppose it is a waste when I really

consider it,” she said, looking at the menu for the first time ever, then proceeded to pick up the cabin phone to order a couple of meals for them. The food arrived swiftly. They sat and ate and talked about Lahni’s mission for a while, then took a nap.

Katya’s mother came into the room soon after, asking Katya to come to the dining room with her when she saw Lahni curled up in a corner. She walked up to her and looked at her, then looked at her daughter.

“So that’s what you were asking me about before boarding the ship, darling. I didn’t listen but it’s fine, you can keep her. She is lovely! What’s her name?” she enquired.

“Lahni, I’m calling her Lahni,” she said. “She doesn’t have a collar on. Can we get one?”

“Sure Darling,” her mother replied, “whatever you like! Now come with me to dinner! We’ll bring something back for your puppy.”

Lahni was a little concerned at the idea of a collar around her neck. Maybe Katya had thought about really keeping her, which was, of course, not an option. Surely Katya knew that after the conversation they had just had, she pondered.

“I guess I’ll know soon enough,” she whispered to herself and went back to sleep grateful she had met her.

The journey so far had been exhausting and a little repose with a pampered little girl on a luxury liner was a welcome break for Lahni, given the massive task ahead.

When Katya returned, Lahni decided it was time for a little chat regarding the collar idea. So they sat and talked for a while. She asked Katya if she understood that this was just a temporary situation and that she would have to leave her once they got to Hawaii.

Katya told her that she knew all along but just in case her mother questioned any of it she asked for the collar to make it sound legitimate.

“I will just lose you in Hawaii. Simple! I’ll cry a little and then mom will buy me a puppy to keep”, she grinned from ear to ear. “It’s the master plan!”

Lahni sighed with relief. “I’m glad,” she said, “we understand each other.”

“I’m not sure if it’ll talk though, the puppy I mean, pity really; it’s so cool to talk to a dog,” Katya said.

“All dogs can talk and other animals too, Katya, you just have to learn their language and listen more!” Lahni responded.

“You see, this has been the whole problem with humans and animals. No communication. We keep trying to tell them to listen but they don’t. My humans are a little more connected to nature and animals and I met a man in Alaska who is most certainly into listening to nature but most of the world isn’t. It’s you children who have to lead the way to change things.

The grown ups are messing with your future and ours,” Lahni continued with a concerned voice.

“But what exactly can a little girl like me do about such a big thing like that?” Katya asked.

“Well,” Lahni said, “you are helping me on my mission, that’s something and then you can continue to only order one serving of food for yourself and not be so wasteful. You can recycle plastic things and give your old toys to children in need; so many things really.”

Katya yawned. “O.K. promise I’ll try, let’s sleep now, I’m tired...talk more tomorrow. “G’Night!”

“Good Night, Katya!” Lahni said with a yawn.

They dozed off next to each other.

Chapter 6 Plastic

“Come to the window, quickly!” Katya said. “What’s happening?” Lahni asked, stretching her limbs. “Whales, Dolphins, what?”

“Plastic,” said Katya.

“Plastic? Oh, Plastic Island, it must be. I heard about this earlier on my journey. It’s a massive floating so called ‘island’ made of plastic in the North Pacific current, it just keeps on turning in on itself like a whirlpool and it’s getting bigger all the time. It really isn’t an island though,” she said on the way to the balcony. “Wow, I had no idea how this would look.” They now stood on the little upper deck balcony of Katya’s cabin overlooking the ocean and as far as the eye could see was nothing but plastic.

“This is awful!” said Katya. “Why don’t people clean this up?”

“I don’t know,” answered Lahni. “But I’d sure like to find out. This can’t be good for all the animals living in there... and the fish, people eat the fish that swim in there, yuck.”

“It’s yuck alright,” said Katya. “Let’s go see my parents and ask about this. I want answers. I had no idea this existed. I will never throw anything away again, I promise.”

As they went along the outside deck they noticed a little catamaran approaching from the middle of the plastic patch. It looked strange— different —something they had never seen before. It was all white with a bit of blue and big shiny panels on the back. It had its sails up and was moving fast but slowed down when it got closer. The crew was on deck was waving to them. Katya waved back with the little scarf she’d been wearing and yelled out a big “Ahoy”!

The cruise liners horns rang twice to acknowledge the presence of another ship. It is kind of nice how they say hello to each other at sea, Lahni thought.

She was wagging her tail while standing up on her hind legs with front paws on the railing.

Then Katya noticed it first; it looked like the entire bottom of the boat was made up of plastic bottles. Could it be true?

“Lahni” she said, “look at it, it’s all made from plastic bottles, what a great idea. They used garbage to make this boat. We must have a closer look when we get into Honolulu. Surely that’s where they are headed as well. It’s too close now.” She took out her phone and called her mother. “Mom,” she said, “there is a sailing ship close to us and I want to know where they are going. Can you please find out from the captain for me? Thanks, Mommy! I love you.”



A few minutes or so later her phone rang; it was her mother calling back with the information she had wanted. Katya told Lahni that the sailing ship was indeed going to Honolulu but that they would get there just a little bit after the cruise ship.

Lahni was jumping for joy. She somehow knew that she would meet the crew of this curious vessel and maybe even have a chance to go on a journey with them. We shall see, she thought.

The plastic filled ocean went on for days. Plastic everywhere, pieces as big as bathtubs and as small as plankton. It was ghastly, as Katya called it!

“See,” Lahni said with a sad look in her eyes, “this is what the grown ups are leaving you. Every little bottle, every little plastic thing you throw away, counts. You have to talk to your parents, friends, classmates and neighbors, really everyone! We may be too late but I think at least we can stop it from getting worse from here on. We must!”

Katya nodded. “I will, I will!” Lahni continued the lecture with stories Tootega, her Yupik friend from Bethel had told her. He had elaborated with much detail about polar bears with PCBs in their blood stream and mercury in the fish stocks and he went on to say that even the most remote wilderness had not been left untouched by human activity with wind and rain carrying pollution over the land and spreading it everywhere.”

“What are PCBs?” asked Katya.

“They are a nasty chemical compounds used in electronics, plastic and motors to name just a few. It has a really bad effect on the nervous system of all that’s alive! They have found high levels of this stuff in polar bear babies who had never even seen any technology or been near it! It’s serious. We are probably contaminated too!” Lahni proclaimed. “Plastic is full of hazardous material and when it breaks down into tiny pieces, birds mistake them for food and feed them to their young ones and they die. You probably hadn’t heard about this because no one wants to know and no one wants to tell their children how bad things really have become, which is understandable but it’s not useful! Every man, woman, child and animal needs to know about this.”

“I’m sure the animals in this plastic soup already know that something is terribly wrong,” Katya added. “I wonder why they stay in it?”

“I guess it’s their home and they don’t know where else to go,” Lahni responded. “Apart from the fact that this is not the only garbage area in the ocean or the world. Tootega said that there is so much plastic on this earth you could cover every square inch of land with it. Over a million seabirds die from eating this every year. The plastic fills their stomachs and then they starve slowly. They feed it to their young as well. It’s awful but it needs to be said. Sea turtles think that plastic bags floating around are jellyfish, they eat them and then die as well,” she sighed.

“Whales who feed on plankton just open their big mouths to let it in and here they just swallow all the plastic with it.”

Katya was sitting down now, with her legs over the side of the ship. The plastic sea stretched out below. Lahni was sitting next to her talking about everything she had learned from Tootega and Akiak. She hadn’t ever seen a plastic bag until she started on this journey, whereas Katya had been using them for years going shopping with her mother and father. It had never occurred to her that there was anything wrong with plastic and what kind of damage it could do to the environment.

“I didn’t know any of this, I wish my parents had told me about this; I wouldn’t have bought all these plastic toys. Never again!” Katya promised. “I can’t believe no one talked about this to us at school either. I never heard it anywhere before. People seem to not want to talk about this even though it’s happening right under their noses. Unbelievable!” Katya sighed a big sigh and looked at Lahni with a sorry look on her face. “This must have been going on for a long time given how big this mess is,” she said.

Lahni nodded at her but remained quiet. They sat in silence for some time, looking out to sea.

The port of Honolulu looked very imposing to both of them. The ship cruised in early in the morning with a tugboat in front to lead the way. Hawaii’s biggest port in the city of Waikiki was busy with so many ships that they stopped counting by the time they were half way in.

Cargo ships from California and the Pacific North-West were on their way to unload as well as ships from the East Coast of the US, which frequently travel through the Panama Canal to stop in Honolulu. The biggest industry in Hawaii was tourism, which meant cruise ships were commonplace, with many luxury liners like the one Lahni and Katya were on. They disembarked without a hitch.

Lovely Hawaiian girls placed leis around their necks on arrival. Some were dancing the Hula, a Hawaiian traditional dance. Aloha was said a lot. Wonder what it means, thought Lahni.

Katya suggested that Lahni come with her to the hotel they had a booking in, since it would only be natural for her to bring 'her' dog on vacation and it being a first class place, it wouldn't be a problem.

"Also," added Katya, "the plastic ship won't be here for at least another day. We can scout around a bit and have a look at the harbor to see where they may be mooring. How about it? Besides I like you and wouldn't mind having you around a little longer anyway."

Lahni accepted the invitation, gladly. It's good to have a safe place to sleep and food in your belly when in a foreign country, she thought. "Thank you Katya, I will stay with you a little more. I much appreciate your help."



The hotel was right on Waikiki Beach, it was one of those old colonial looking ones with antique furniture, ornate rugs, mirrors with gold trimmings on the walls and ceiling fans in the tearoom. The building had verandas with columns and cane chairs on the patio. Waiters in perfectly pressed white linen jackets, looking like something out of an old movie, served breakfast on trolleys. The bathrooms were adorned with big mirrors, marble floors and wood paneling as well as big, fluffy towels and little fragrant soaps.

The food looked delicious on porcelain plates covered with silver domes to keep it warm and free from insects. Everyone was very courteous, friendly and inviting. So calm and elegant was the atmosphere here that the plastic island seemed far, far away, if not totally unreal, as if merely a bad dream.

"Welcome to my world," Katya said.

“The plastic soup we just saw seems very far away right now. Most of the people here probably don’t even know it exists,” Lahni sighed.

“Well, I’m sure they know all about it but they choose to ignore it and that’s why I hadn’t heard about it either. It seems too inconvenient for them to really admit it’s happening because then they would have to take action, don’t you agree?”

Katya said looking for approval for her insight.

Lahni gave it gladly. “You have woken up a lot since I met you. Maybe you can educate your people since you are no longer in the dark,” she said.



Chapter 7 Oahu and the Kahuna

The two sat on the steps behind the hotel between the pool and the patio eating a little cake and enjoying firm ground beneath their feet. They talked about Lahni's adventure so far and theorized about what might happen next. A young man in staff uniform came past them down the steps to take towels to someone by the pool. He looked at them and nodded his head slightly as if to acknowledge something they'd said.

"That's odd," said Katya, "I wonder if he heard us talking?"

Lahni kept an eye on him for a while as he delivered the towels. He kept looking back at them a few times during his delivery and then came towards them on his way back.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't eaves-dropping or anything like that but I happened to overhear what you two were talking about," the man said and didn't seem the slightest bit surprised to meet a talking dog.

"My name is Kalei. I feel like we need to talk, can we meet here this afternoon when I finish my shift? There is something I want you to see. About sunset?"

"Sure," said Lahni, "sounds intriguing enough to me. See you then!" She paused for a moment and then asked: "Are you coming too, Katya?"

"Hmmm, I'm not sure if I should, maybe you go on your own this time. I have a feeling that this one is just for you. Besides I have to be here for dinner with my parents and they wouldn't want me to go off with a stranger."

"Good point," Lahni said, "but at least come with me to meet him, so you know what he has to say and where I'll be if I choose to go with him, OK?"

"It's a deal, but lets get some rest then before this afternoon. I for one am exhausted from all this excitement," Katya said. They went to Katya's room.

The concierge rang the room to wake them up at 4.30 p.m. as Katya had requested. They ran down the stairs to make their appointment with the mysterious staff member, who had asked them to meet near the back entrance to the pool. When they got there he was already waiting for them. He smiled at them.

"Glad you came! I want to take you to Kamilo Beach on the Big Island to see what's been happening here in regards to your mission. You have to see this with your own eyes; there is really no describing it in words. Katya, you are welcome to join us as well of course but I do understand why you might decide against it. I have tomorrow off, so I will pick you up at 9 a.m. sharp, be at the side door to the left of the lobby, it's a staff entrance. I'll be waiting in the white Jeep. After the

beach I will take you to see a very special friend of mine as well.”

Intrigued by and happy for the invitation they walked away.

“Can’t wait,” Lahni said.

“I know, I wish I could come but I’m not sure what to do,” Katya added.

“You’ll know in the morning when you wake up, for sure.”

The next day Katya dropped Lahni off at the side entry to join Kalei in the Jeep.

“So you’re not joining us then?” he said.

“Nope, can’t ...parents...!” she said shrugging her shoulders and pulling a disappointed face.

“Katya, I’ll have Lahni back tomorrow, she can tell you all about it.”

Tomorrow, Lahni wondered and got in.

After a 30minute drive the Jeep stopped at a small airport; a helicopter was waiting to take them across to Hawaii, also called the Big Island, the largest of the group. Kamilo Beach was situated at the southern-most tip. They had to cross over many of the smaller islands like Malakai, Maui and Lanai to get there. Lahni was so excited to be up in the air for the first time in her entire life. The flight was only an hour long but well worth it. The views were breathtaking. Lahni had never seen such lush and green land before. The islands looked liked emerald jewels surrounded by white curves of sand, floating in a sea of the most exquisite turquoise and aqua blues. Hawaii’s biggest and still active volcano was steaming below with small lava pockets visible from the chopper. They hovered a minute or so to gaze at it and take in the energy of the goddess that dwelled here, according to legend, for many millennia. The helicopter was very low now and slowing down, which gave Lahni a bird’s eye view of the beach below.

They landed in a clearing just a few hundred meters away from the shore. Lahni got out following her guide down a small sandy path to a wide, open ocean beach. The sight before them was unbelievable. Lahni had thought of these islands as a kind of paradise before now. She was clearly overwhelmed by what she saw. The entire beach was covered in bits of plastic and other trash as far as the eye could see.

“Welcome to the world’s dirtiest beach, Lahni!” Kalei said. “Wow,” Lahni said, “I had no idea how bad this really was.”

“Unfortunately the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, as it’s often described, goes around in a big circle with the Northern Pacific current, hitting this beach as it turns the corner and this is the result,” Kalei continued.

Lahni started running back and forth picking up pieces and placing them in a pile in an attempt to clean it all up but Kalei came over and stopped her.



“There’s no use Lahni, it goes so deep and so wide and keeps coming in that it is virtually impossible to clean up. The ocean is even worse; it’s too big and too deep to even try. At this point in time there is an estimate of four hundred million tons of garbage mostly made up of plastic bits; 70 percent of them not even visible, since it sinks to the ocean floor or sits in the water column well below the surface and is really small like plankton. It’s probably a lot more.

The only way to change any of this is for people to stop using plastic in the way it’s being used right now and in the way it’s being disposed off,” he explained. “Come with me,” he said turning back in the direction of the Jeep, “I want you to meet someone who can help us. Hop in, it’s not too far from here.”

Lahni followed and got into the car. Kalei turned down a long gravel driveway; at the end was a small shack of a house on stilts, a little old but well looked after.



The front had a wide porch with a wooden staircase of about 5 steps leading up to it. A young boy sat on the top step with a book in his hand; he had a round friendly face and a shaved head like a little Buddha.

He acknowledged the visitors in silence with a nod. As they approached the front door, the fly screen opened with a screech and an elderly but fit and healthy looking woman appeared.

She had a broad smile on her face and arms open wide, ready to embrace her old friend. Hugs were exchanged and tea offered.

“Aloha,” she said as she ushered her guests to the cushion-covered bench around the side of the veranda. “Aloha, Lahni!”

“A...loha,” Lahni responded, not really sure what exactly it meant.

“My name is Melika! Welcome to Hawaii!” she smiled, “I get that you’re a little shaken by what you’ve just witnessed. I can maybe offer some help. Let me start from the beginning though. Kalei already told me about what you’ve been up to and it’s admirable to say the least but I think you need to consider the gravity and size of the problem and realize that you cannot fix this on your own. You can, however bring some of your beautiful healing energies to the issue and that I can help with.”

Lahni sat up a little straighter now and listened with both ears.

“Everything begins with Aloha in Hawaii, it is the ultimate way of being. It contains many aspects of our culture and how we relate to each other and to our mother earth. It begins with an attitude of always seeing the light in everything, the truth and the oneness. It aims to always gear our behavior and our actions towards the light, towards being fully ourselves, which is the only truth. Without being fully yourself and allowing others to be fully themselves there can be no harmony. People on this earth have lost their way, some only a little and some a lot. What we as Kahuna healers try to do is bring everything back to harmony, to its center.”

Lahni looked a little confused but tried to keep listening.

“You will understand as I go on,” she said with that ever-present smile on her face. “Kahuna is a title these days, whereas traditionally it was only bestowed on those who became experts in a chosen field, be it healing, shamanism, medicine or even surfing in modern times. Kahuna has its origins from the word Kahu, which means care-giving amongst other things,” Melika explained. “Kahuna is also a way of dealing with your environment, it’s about right time and right place, being there to be of service; a bit like you being here right now and meeting Katya who in turn took you in at the hotel so you could meet Kalei who introduced you to me; you see my point?” she continued.

Lahni nodded.

“Your entire trip so far has been right time and right place, has it not?”

Lahni nodded again. “It’s true,” she said. “It has been magical how it’s all worked out. I was always in the right place at the right and met the right people to get me here.”

“That’s right,” Melika said, “you are obviously on the right path.” She paused to pour some tea for Kalei and water for Lahni; then continued. “In an hour or so after we finished our talk and a little rest we will go and do a healing ceremony on Kamilo beach, since cleaning her up doesn’t seem to work anymore. Believe me, we’ve tried to; the entire community chipped in their time to try and clear it but it kept on coming back, more and more every year. So, it seems the only way to effectively change anything is to place blessings in the right way and the right direction.”

Lahni looked up from the reclining position she had taken to rest her limbs. “Katya and I were wondering if it was possible to clean up the mess in the ocean when we first saw the big garbage soup out at sea on the cruise ship but now I understand how big this really is and why it would be an impossible task. I am definitely coming to your ceremony. I wish Katya had come along as well; I will have to tell her all about it.”

“Don’t get me wrong Lahni, the Hawaiian Government has been doing a lot, even on a global level. We just had the Fifth International Marine Debris Conference here in Honolulu in March. 440 people from 38 countries participated in 5 days of talks and events. They came up with a strategy to stop marine debris over the coming decade but are still obviously at the effect of everyone else’s behavior. It’s a slow process it seems. They also came up with a commitment statement that is now being implemented in Hawaii and hopefully elsewhere as well. For instance the NOAA or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has been attempting to clean all the little atolls and islands and reefs from debris for years now. I think they began in 1996. As they found out, it seems to be never ending but what they also found is that half of all the debris found on the reefs close to shore is discarded fishing gear, like netting. They pull out hundreds of tons every year, which then gets cleaned of anything that doesn’t burn and used to create energy. It’s called the ‘Hawaiian Nets to Energy’ program, which creates electricity from steam that is generated from the combustion burning of the nets. Such programs are very useful for small communities and are growing here. You see, we can all do our part. We can recycle, we can use less, be vigilant and of course we can be of service spiritually, which is what this afternoon is all about.”

They sat quietly for a while and drank their tea.

Then Melika began to speak again. “Ho’oponopono is an ancient Polynesian ritual of forgiveness and restitution. It’s not about finding fault or blaming anyone. We all carry some responsibility for what’s out there because of ignoring our inner lives.”

“What do you mean?” Lahni asked.

“What I mean by that is that everything we deny on the inside, say, our feelings, our emotions, our needs and wants will somehow express themselves on the outside. And since those are mostly the things we judge, such as being negative, angry and frustrated or things like hate and envy; all have a negative effect on the environment. You don’t get garbage patches from spreading love,” she said, jokingly, “but whatever we don’t take responsibility for in us will inevitably show up somewhere in the world out there. So you could say that the world’s garbage patches are our collective denial of our true selves. We have disconnected from our true nature and so from the natural world around us. You and I are waking up and many others are too but the majority of people are still in a slumber of sorts.”

“But I have already met so many lovely people who are awake like us, so how can it be that there are so many who are not?” Lahni asked.

“I’m not sure if you know but there are 7 billion people on this earth, and growing, all needing to be housed in some way and fed and using goods and services, so you can imagine how much stuff is being produced.”

“My people don’t use all that much. And what they use gets re-used. We are hunters and herders; nomads in fact, so we never leave anything behind other than a little bit of burned wood from making fires,” Lahni said.

“I will go and prepare a few things for our trip to Kamilo Beach. Also you can stay the night; the pilot will take you back to the hotel and Katya in the morning,” Melika said and got up to go into the house.

Kalei had been sitting on the bench, drinking his cup of tea without saying a word until now. “See, I told you I knew someone who could help,” he smiled at Lahni with a big smile and patted her on the head. I’m glad I ran into you at the hotel. Right time, right place, huh!” he laughed. “You have to keep laughing; I guess, joy and laughter and prayer seem to be the real healers here.”

Melika came back out of the house with basket of leis and a few other little things Lahni didn’t recognize. “Come on,” she said, “it’s time to get on our way to Kamilo before the sun disappears.”

They got into an old beach buggy that belonged to Melika and drove the short distance to the beach. To prepare Lahni for the up-coming ceremony she continued her lecture.

“As I said, the ritual we are going to use today is called Ho’oponopono, which is all about forgiveness. It’s about taking back the parts of ourselves out of the collective soup that are ours in all garbage patches out there, be it real garbage or hungry children or war or any other indiscretion we commit against nature and each other. What it means is that the karmic or energetic ties we have to it are pulled out and by doing so we help to heal it for ourselves and everyone else as well. And just maybe one day someone will come up with a really clever idea that will actually clean it up physically as

well. Until then we can take care of the emotional and spiritual part.” Taking a deep breath while driving, she kept talking. “I know it’s a lot to take in but you have been called to this for some reason and I think it’s because you are so pure of spirit and so innocent. Even your name means ‘heavenly’ or ‘messenger from heaven’ in Hawaiian. It’s no mistake.”

On the beach they unpacked and took all they needed to the shoreline standing on the millions of bits of plastic that had taken over the beach in place of sand.

Melika began the prayer by lighting some candles that were inside paper bags to protect them from the wind, and then placed them along the waters edge. The tide was low and the sea calm, so there were no big waves coming in to disturb proceedings.

Next she ran up and down the beach as if trying to take off like a bird, apparently to raise the energy for the pending ceremony as Lahni found out from Kalei and joined in.

The next step was a breathing exercise to become fully present to one’s inner child, which meant sitting still and breathing in on a count of seven, holding on a count of seven and letting the breath go on a count of seven. It also had to be done seven times.

“Why the breathing and what has this to do with what you call the inner child?” Lahni asked.

“OK, let me explain. Imagine an iceberg floating in the sea. You can only see a very small part of it since most of it is underneath the water, right.”

“I have seen that, yes,” Lahni said.

“So imagine the same thing for your conscious mind versus your unconscious mind. Most of what we think and what we experience is processed and created by the unconscious or also called the sub conscious mind. Our inner child is the gatekeeper in a way. Most of what we experience is filtered through the experiences we had as children. We must honor our inner child and by breathing in this way we can connect to it. For this prayer ceremony to fully work we must connect to our full selves,” Melika explained.

“I understand now,” said Lahni, “I’ll give it a go.”

After the breathing exercise Melika got up first and stated in a loud but loving voice. “I am sorry! Please forgive me! Thank you! I love you!” She then threw a handful of flowers into the water in front of her.

“Lahni, you next,” she said. Lahni sat down next to her and began to say the same; then Kalei followed.

At the end Melika placed a handmade lei made of frangipanis around everyone's neck to mark the completion of the ritual and the release of their energy that was connected to the ocean pollution.

She then began singing a Hawaiian song for the ocean with Kalei accompanying her on a ukulele.

Kai Hawanawana by Alfred U. Alohikea

Auhea wale ho' i 'oe
E ke kai hawanawana nei i ke
He one ho'oheno 'ia
E ka ipo e nohenhea nei i ka poli
He poli pumehana i ka hana a ka mana'o
Me he ala e i mai ana
'Auhea wale ho'i'oe
E ke kai hawanawana nei i ke
This is for you
Oh sea that whispers upon the sand
Sands that are cherished by
My loved sweetheart, held in my embrace
Thoughts come to mind, that warms the heart
And seem to say
This is for you
Oh sea that whispers upon the sand

Afterwards they hugged and then spent a bit more time looking at the sun setting in the west.

"That was amazing but what exactly will it do for the ocean?" Lahni asked innocently.

"It will bring healing energies to the situation and it will also change people's behavior towards the ocean and the environment in general." Melika answered. "If you make changes in yourself, even small changes and they trickle down

to just one other person, who in turn makes changes in their life and so it continues to affect anyone you touch with your life. So you see Lahni, you can save the world, one person at a time.”

“Then I have already begun to save it with Akiak and the ships crew and Katya?” Lahni smiled with a very satisfied look on her face.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,” Melika added.

“Let’s go, it’s almost dark. Time for supper and a good night’s sleep,” Kalei suggested and then turned to lead the way back to the car.

At Melika’s house they spent the rest of the evening eating and talking about Lahni’s adventure.

The helicopter ride back to Honolulu the next morning was uneventful and seemed quicker this time. Back at the hotel, Lahni bounded up the stairs to see Katya. She couldn’t wait to tell her all about what she had learnt but found no one in the room except house keeping staff. Katya’s room was in the process of being cleaned by one of the maids and all her things had disappeared. The maid looked at her shrugging her shoulders. Since the maid was no help she remembered Kalei was on duty. Lahni went to find him to help her with her inquiry as to Katya’s whereabouts. He was in the dining room setting tables for the next service when Lahni showed up at the door and signaled him to follow her. They met up on the backstairs outside where they had first connected. He went to the reception for her and found out that Katya’s parents had decided to take a trip to one of the smaller islands, called Kawaii, for a few days but had given up their rooms due to the hotel being busy this time of year and that they would be back in Honolulu later that week.

Katya had also left a note to Lahni saying ‘goodbye and good luck’ amongst other terms of endearments and friendship declarations, just in case Lahni had to move on quickly.

Lahni was disappointed that she may not see her friend again but knew it was OK. Her work with Katya was obviously done. Kalei provided a last meal and water for her and then said goodbye as well, sending her in the direction of the small boat harbor where the Plastiki would be moored.

“Sorry I can’t take you but I really can’t leave work and I think it’s going to be bad timing if you wait,” he said with a last hug.

Lahni agreed, thanked him for the excursion and taking her to see Melika and took off immediately for the harbor.

Chapter 8 The Plastiki

Lahni made her way through the busy city as fast as she could given the heat, mass of people and cars to avoid. She turned many heads on her way due to her looking very out of place on a tropical island but most just gazed at her in admiration of her snow-white coat and pretty face.

As she entered the harbor gates she saw a huge group of people assembled in front of one of the mooring jetties, a large white mast visible behind. “This must be it!” she said to herself quietly while winding her way through the legs of journalists and onlookers. She came to a stop in front of the ship. It was much bigger than she had anticipated since it was quite a long way away when she saw it last out at sea. It was all white, broad and flat with big shiny solar panels covering the back of the catamaran.

The crew was busy talking to reporters and some city officials, which gave Lahni a chance to hop on the back of the boat to have a closer look. The entire bottom of it was made up of plastic bottles; in fact the entire vessel was made of plastic. The front of the ship had a curious cover for the cabin below. It looked a bit like a spaceship with portholes. Lahni had never seen anything like it. She hadn’t really seen any spaceships either but knew about them from Katya’s book collection she’d seen on the voyage from Vancouver. With her white fur she blended in beautifully, no one had even noticed her sitting on the back of the Plastiki in all the hustle and bustle.

After all the talking and interviewing and photographing were complete, a few of the journalists were invited to inspect the vessel from the inside. Lahni decided it was too risky to get caught and jumped back onto the jetty to wait until this was all over. She sat behind one of the pilons observing the scene, patiently waiting when she heard someone close to her whispering.

“Hey doggie, want some?” And with that a piece of freshly caught fish landed at her paws.

She looked up in surprise to find a fisherman on a small motorboat standing up looking in her direction. He lifted his hand to say hi. His boat was tied up right behind the Plastiki with full view of the deck and all the action. Lahni decided to stay silent for the moment but looked at the young man with gratitude and happily ate the offering.

The fish was fresh and sweet, momentarily transporting Lahni back to her home in East Siberia. She chewed her snack while staring into the distance thinking about her family, her siblings and all that she’d left behind what seemed years ago now, even though it had only been a few months. She wondered how they all were when the fisherman interrupted her.

“Hey you, come sit with me, I could use some company! Jump on!” he said pointing at his humble boat. Lahni obeyed and jumped onto the small, rocking vessel and settled down next to her benefactor. He was of medium height, strong and dark with curly hair and a day old beard, wearing old denim shorts and a dirty, formerly white singlet. His face was friendly and open.

“So”, he began, “you don’t look like a local dog. Where did you come from?” not expecting an answer. “East Siberia,” Lahni answered.

The fisherman looked at her with big eyes wondering if he’d heard right. “Did you just say something?” he whispered in fear of looking crazy.

“Yes, I did, I said I’m from East Siberia, my name is Lahni, I am from the Samoyed tribe. I was a sled and herding dog until a few months ago when I decided to go and investigate climate change and what it’s doing to my land, the animals and my people; so here I am!”

“Wow, I must have had too many beers last night,” he replied rubbing his ears and eyes. “Is this for real?”

“Uh-huh,” Lahni replied, “I’m here to talk to the people on this ship in front of us; I just have to wait until all the reporters are gone.”

“OK! Maybe I can help. I met them all yesterday when they arrived; we had a chat and they invited me onboard for a beer later this afternoon when they’re done with all the talks. I’ll see what I can do then,” he said, shaking his head at the fact that he was really talking to a dog.

“That would be amazing, thank you, maybe I could join you? So, what about you, tell me something about you. What’s your name?” Lahni asked.

“Oh, sorry, how rude of me, my name is Mano. I am a fisherman, but only as a hobby now. I only catch what I need for the day for my family. I used to work with my father and brothers on our fishing trawler catching big fish, even sharks, for sale on the market and to restaurants but the last big storm took our boat and almost cost my father his life. So, after that experience we all decided it was time to do something different. In the last few years we weren’t getting much of a catch anymore anyway because of overfishing. There just isn’t anything left in there. I think it was a message from the goddess to change. We got the message. I still work with boats though; I build them and maintain them now.”

“I heard about overfishing in Alaska from a Yupik Indian man. It seems it’s happening everywhere,” Lahni said. Mano nodded. “It was the storm of the century but they seem to be getting bigger every time now. My father retired after almost losing his life he’d had enough and my brothers got regular jobs in the city. It’s sad but that’s what’s happened.”

As promised in the afternoon Mano boarded the Plastiki to join the crew for a drink on deck. Lahni was still curled up on the small fishing boat tied up behind.

Mano said hello to everyone and sat down with a drink in his hand. He then asked Dave, the captain, if it was OK that a friend of his joined them.

After Dave agreed, Mano let out a huge, loud whistle to signal Lahni to come aboard. She jumped right up from the boat to the back deck weaving her way through the solar panels on the back of the Plastiki and sat down next to him.

“Oh, your friend’s a dog,” Dave said, “OK, works for me.”

“Me too,” Lahni replied with a smile on her face. Everyone looked at her with surprise; Mano introduced her.

“Meet Lahni, talking sled and herding dog from East Siberia.”

Lahni nodded at everyone saying hello. “I’m on a mission to save my world. I found out it is melting and fast, so I decided to go and do something about it. I saw your beautiful ship in the plastic soup off Hawaii from a cruise ship I hitched a ride on and really wanted to meet you. My friend Mano here helped me out.”

“So, that was you with the little girl waving at us and looking through the binoculars. I remember! We also had a call that day from the cruise ship’s captain to ask us where we were headed. Did you guys have something to do with that?” Dave asked.

“Yes, Katya, the girl who was with me had asked her mother to find out where you were going next, so that I could meet you.”

“I guess it was meant to be then,” said Dave, “we’ll be here until tomorrow when we set off for Sydney, Australia. What’s your next move?”

“Well, I was thinking about asking you if I could come along for the ride and talk to you about what you do and what I can do to help save our planet,” Lahni asked.

“I’ll have to ask my crew and take a vote on it. I don’t mind really but I’ll let you know what our decision is in the morning,” answered Dave.

Lahni made a point to talk to every crewmember individually that night so that she could really get to know them just in case they decided in her favor.

So far on her journey she’d never had to ask to come along; somehow it always fell into place for her and having to wait for a vote, for or against her, was making her a little bit nervous.

Dave asked Lahni to come back the next morning to find out the result. Mano had noticed Lahni’s disappointment at the

prospect of having to wait and invited her to stay with him and his family overnight. The house wasn't far from where they had spent the afternoon in the boat harbor. It wasn't fancy, just a small weatherboard house on stilts with a large veranda around it. Lush green rainforest surrounded it with a little clear lawn right around the house. Flowers and herbs flanked the verandas edge. It looked pretty and comfortable. Mano's 3 kids, 2 boys and a girl between 6 and 11 years of age played on the narrowly paved garden path on bikes and skateboards. When Lahni got out of the car, they dropped everything to greet her and then invite her for a game of catch. She had missed playing with her children at home and was all too happy to join in the fun for a while before bed. Since it was late already, Mano interrupted their play after a few minutes and ushered his brood towards the dinner table and then right after dinner to their bedrooms.

Lahni was tired and decided to sleep under the stars that night, just like during summers back home and with a little shelter from the porch roof and a soft mat to recline on, she was fast asleep in no time.



Only a short but heavy sleep later Lahni stood at the front porch all ready to go bright and way too early.

She was wearing a canine life vest Mano had given her, which was a left over from his late dog Eddy who had spent many years on his fishing trawler by his side.

The vest was sitting on her a little bit crooked, since it wasn't done up properly. Mano was already awake, sitting on the back steps sorting his fishing tackle for the morning run before work.

“Lahni, don’t you think it’s a little too early to wake up the crew? And what if they say No?”

“They won’t say no and I’ll just wait at the pier until they wake up!” she replied.

“OK, if you insist,” he said while fastening her vest.

“Let’s go then. I’m ready for a bit of morning fishing. You do seem very sure of yourself about this. I hope you are right.” Mano waved at Lahni to follow him to the truck. They parked close to the pier where they said their good byes and hugged.

“You can always come back to our place if it doesn’t work out, Lahni. You know where I live now and in case you keep on traveling, I wish you well and hope to see you again, some day! Farewell my friend.”

“Thank you very much, Mano. I much appreciate all you’ve done. I will always remember you and your family.” And with that she trotted off to sit in front of the Plastiki as he got into his boat for a little fishing.

An hour or so later Dave appeared on deck stretching out and yawning when he saw Lahni sitting there, all dressed and ready. He smiled and said: “Oh good, you’re here already, just in time for breakfast,” he paused, raising his eyebrows, “but hey, wait a minute. How’d you know what we decided on?”

“I just knew when I woke up this morning. Call it instinct,” she grinned.

“Works for me,” he answered, shrugging his shoulders, “come aboard. What have you got there?”

“Oh, it’s some provisions Mano got for me, so you don’t have to pay for my food. Some dog food and some frozen fish. And my pack with travel papers, I hope you have room. Could you please help get them on board for me?”

“Sure,” he replied, then jumped onto the pier and carried everything onto the deck of the Plastiki.

Slowly, one by one the rest of the crew woke up and sat down for breakfast. They were going to leave soon.

Lahni was excited to be at sea again after almost a week in Hawaii. But before sailing she decided it was important to properly introduce herself to every crew member one on one. She had met them all during afternoon drinks the day before but she felt she needed to connect a little more with each of them. They were, after all, going to spend weeks on a small boat together, she thought.

So, while they sat and enjoyed their morning coffee and breakfast she walked up to each one of them and got to know them a little better.

First Dave, who was the expedition leader and the creative mind behind the Plastiki; a tall, bearded, friendly faced young man with a lot of passion and conviction for what he believed in, as Lahni would find out. He spoke to her about their upcoming voyage and some of the rules on the boat, which she would have to adhere to just like the rest of the crew. Of course she would contribute in which ever way she could. She told him about the security job she'd had on the trip from

Bethel to Vancouver on the cargo ship and how she could keep watch on the Plastiki the same way.

“Great,” said Dave, “it’s a good idea; you’ve got the job. I’ll put you on the roster for keeping watch straight away.”

After getting the first set of instructions from him, she moved on to Jo, the only female crew onboard except of course herself now. Jo was the skipper of the Plastiki. She was an experienced sailor from way back having learnt the craft in her childhood in California.

Then there was another David, the co-skipper, an experienced sailor and animal lover. Lahni thought that was a definite plus and spent a little extra time with him. But surely they all must like animals Lahni pondered, since they all said yes to have me on board.

She then moved on to Olav, the expedition diver from Norway, who wasn’t a sailor but loved the ocean with all his body and soul. Next was Vern, a tall guy with a big mustache who was making a film about the Plastiki’s journey. He was admittedly not used to sailing either.

Finally she got around to Max who was making a documentary about the Plastiki for National Geographic. Lahni thought it curious that he liked hyenas and sharks and even more curious was that he was going to be out on the big ocean without being able to swim.

She remembered falling into the cold water through the ice when she was a little younger. She couldn’t swim very well either because her coat was so long and thick; she sank really fast but was rescued by the kids around her. So there was something they had in common. Lahni was always going to wear the life vest her friend Mano had given her.

After breakfast the crew cleaned up the deck, loaded all fresh supplies into storage below and got the sails ready to go. When all was ready they set sail and cruised out of Honolulu harbor.

Lahni sat on the bow of the boat looking ahead with a huge smile on her face. She was on duty doing her first shift keeping watch. She was content that yet again things had worked out perfectly for her.

In the distance a man on a little fishing boat waved at her as they passed him. It was Mano on the way back from his fishing trip; he was holding up his catch of two rather big, beautiful fish. “Look, Lahni, today’s dinner! Have a great trip my friend!”

Lahni stood up and wagged her tail smiling in his direction and lifting her paw. “Goodbye, Mano, be well!” Then he disappeared behind them towards the harbor.

Lahni settled in for the first leg of the trip. Seas were a little rough, so David insisted on a harness, tethering her to the

Plastiki, since he didn't want to lose her so soon, he joked. Lahni gladly obliged.

“We have to sit down for a long talk soon, Dave. I want to know everything about what you've been doing for the environment. I want to know about the Plastiki and your mission and what you think about climate change,” Lahni said before getting back to her post.

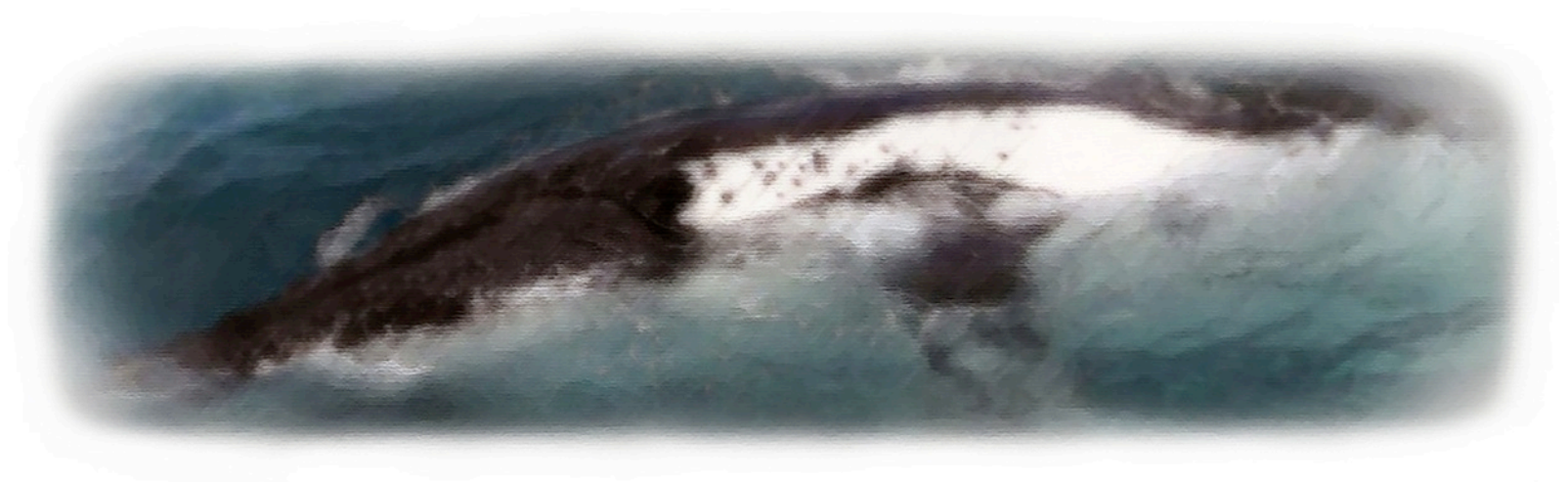
“OK, it's a deal, when we're in a calm spot somewhere and there isn't much to do, we can talk,” he promised.

Chapter 9 Kohola

After days and days of sailing into the open, seemingly endless ocean, with a regular routine of keeping watch, meals and sleep, Lahni found boredom starting to set in and she began to doze a little on her shifts.

One day she had drifted into a light sleep when a big, deep but gentle voice woke her up saying: “Should you be sleeping on your watch?”

Startled, she jumped up to see who was speaking to her, since the voice she had heard seemed very unfamiliar. As she turned her head, she saw a huge whale along side the boat looking right at her. His head was out of the water.



“Hello,” she said tentatively, never having had a conversation with a whale before. “Thanks for waking me up. I should be alert and keeping watch. But it gets a bit boring after a while. What are you doing all the way out here? Are you following us?” she added.

“Just cruising,” answered the whale, “heading in the same general direction. It gets lonely sometimes; it’s nice to stop for a chat. I already met a few sea turtles and another whale. I am Kohola, that’s what my Hawaiian friends call me. Our names are not in words but only sound, I could show you but you would have to come diving with me. Later maybe? People give us more personal names sometimes but they are not ours. I never met one of your kind before; what exactly are you?”

“Oh, I can’t go diving; or at least I haven’t tried before. I think I might drown since my coat is so thick but thanks for the offer,” Lahni said smiling. “I’m a dog and my name is Lahni. I normally live in East Siberia, working with my siblings pulling sleds and herding reindeer. I’m on a mission to save my world. My land is melting and floods are coming from

glaciers. Surely you've noticed the changes that have occurred with the weather, fish stocks and everything else?" she asked.

"Of course, everyone is talking about it. It's pretty bad. Before, we only had to worry about sharks, orcas and people trying to kill us but now we can't find much food and the oceans are dirty and polluted with things we don't recognize. We have to keep moving further and further to find a meal these days. So, what are you trying to do to make a difference?" he asked.

"Well, I already changed the mind of two ship's captains and their crew as well as a little girl on a cruise and a few other people I met along the way; you see I'm trying to do this one person or animal at a time, which would change things very quickly if everyone did the same," Lahni added.

"I sure hope so, between people hunting us in our home and all the pollution, it's getting harder and harder to survive. I hear so many stories of my fellow whales losing their lives in bad ways that I fear my own fate if this continues. I'm glad you are trying to do something. I will spread the word. I must be off now to find some food. Good luck my friend and maybe I'll meet you again somewhere," he said, before he took a deep breath and disappeared with a big splash from his massive tail flukes as he went under water.

Lahni was now leaning over the side to see where he had gone. She was half wet from the splash but happy that she had met such a fine creature. I must do something about people killing whales, it's not very nice, she thought to herself, maybe I'll talk to Dave about this; he might be able to help...I must be getting back to work.

She made sure to stay awake now, since she definitely didn't want to miss any more interesting encounters like this one. "How exciting," she said out loud.

"What's exciting?" asked Dave, who had come up from below deck to give Lahni a break. "Did something happen?"

"I just met Kohola, a big whale with a hump on his back, he was swimming alongside us for while and wanted to chat. He told me about the pollution out there and his friends and family members being killed by people hunting them. Is that true? If that is true, you have to do something Dave, you can't let this continue," Lahni sighed.

"Unfortunately, yes, it's true. For example, thousands of Minke and Humpback whales are killed every year by Japanese whalers; they travel all the way to the southern oceans, which is the home of whales during the southern hemisphere summer, to hunt them and also take them on the way there. Many other nations used to do the same but stopped the slaughter a long time ago because whales became almost extinct. The Japanese are still doing it and so are a few other countries like Denmark, Iceland and Norway; it seems they won't listen to everyone else. It is an illegal activity now but somehow no one is willing to fight them on this, at least not on a governmental level."

“Maybe I have to go to Japan on my way north after Australia and see what I can do,” Lahni said.



“Well, there is no fault in trying but they are stubborn people.

Greenpeace and the Sea Shepard have been trying for decades to stop them, often interrupting and slowing down the hunt. So there is someone already working on it. Maybe you can join them. They can always use the help. Now go and have a break, eat something and sleep a bit! We’ll talk more later,” Dave said.

Lahni slipped out of her harness and climbed down the ladder into the cabin below for a nap.

A few hours later Dave was due for a break and was relieved of his duties by one of the other crewmembers. He joined everyone else below for a nap and a snack. When he got to the cabin, Lahni was sitting on his bunk enjoying a cookie. He frowned a little. “Hey you, I don’t like crumbs on my bed. Could you please eat at the table or on the floor?”

“Thorry,” said Lahni with a mouth full of cookie and jumped off the bunk to finish chewing.

Everyone laughed. It was apparently common knowledge amongst the crew that Dave was particular about crumbs on his bed but no one had taken the time to explain this to Lahni.

Hmmm, thought Lahni, maybe it was their way of creating some entertainment for themselves. It does get a bit boring out here. She finished her dinner and went back on deck to see if she would meet any more interesting sea creatures. She was looking forward to seeing more whales and dolphins; she had seen lots of them on the cruise ship with Katya. However she never got close enough to have a conversation with them because of the size of the ship.

The Plastiki was perfect, sitting fairly low on the water, so Lahni could see what was going on in the ocean. Soon after, her wish came true and a big group of dolphins swam alongside and in the wake of the catamaran. A few ventured very close to see who was being entertained by their presence. One of them saw Lahni smiling at them. She was crouching

down as low as possible to lean over the side without falling overboard. She did wear the vest but wasn't harnessed in, so caution was always on her mind. The dolphin looked at her with much curiosity.

He was grey, almost silvery and quite large and long. Lahni began the conversation this time. "Hello", she said, "nice of you to visit me out here."

"Welcome to our home," said the dolphin, "you must be a long way from yours. I have met other dogs before but none like you. Where are you from?"

"I am from the arctic circle, East Siberia to be exact. I have gone on a journey to help the earth. I had a dream about my world melting and decided to do something about it. It has become my mission in life," Lahni answered.

"Surely you have heard of earth changes and global climate change. Yes?"

"Oh, yes, we have. The birds tell us much from their travels and the whales too. Everyone is concerned about what will happen to our beautiful home. We keep moving onto better, cleaner areas but there are fewer and fewer options."

"That's what Kohola, my whale friend said also. And he and his whale companions were having trouble finding food. Is that the same for you?"

"It sure is. All our favorite fish are disappearing fast and we don't really know why," the dolphin answered.

"Well," said Lahni, "I can explain that to you and maybe you can tell every one of your friends. The fish are disappearing because of over-fishing by humans. They take too much and don't give any breaks to the fish to replenish. Then they can't keep up with breeding."

"Thanks for letting us know. I'm not sure what we will do but we have to keep moving to find food for our babies. Many are dying before they are grown. I hope humans will come to their senses and stop what they are doing to our home," he added.



“I hope so too, but I also feel that there are many who are waking up. I have met quite a few of them already. This ship I’m on right now for example is making this voyage to raise awareness about the plastic and garbage in the ocean and to teach people about recycling and reusing.”

“Thanks,” said the dolphin, “you have been a great help giving me this information. We must move on now. Might see you again!” He lead the way for his group who did a last jump in front of the boat as if to say, we are alive still and then dove under.

Lahni was a little sad about the dolphins’ plight and sat there contemplating about what she could do for them. Talk to every human I meet, she thought, that I can do.

She dozed off right on the spot where she had seen and spoken to the dolphin.

A big splash woke Lahni up. She was disoriented and wet. During her little nap the seas had gotten bigger and a storm was moving in.



She had slipped off the side of the boat and landed in the water. I'm not sinking, she thought, that's good. She started to yell out for help but no one seemed to be around. The Plastiki kept moving further and further away from her now. Then she could hear a voice calling out for her from the boat in front. It was Jo, the skipper who noticed her missing first. She was attempting to throw a lifeline to Lahni but was too far away already to reach her. A couple of other crewmembers had lowered the sails to slow down and attempted to turn around. By the time the Plastiki came to a stop Lahni had faded into the distance, merely a little white dot in the huge sea of waves steadily increasing in size.

Lahni stopped struggling against the sea, letting herself drift along. The Plastiki had now turned back in her direction but was fighting against a strong wind.

This seemed to be a dire situation, yet Lahni didn't seem in the least bit scared. She just floated there thinking about the last months of her life, Akiak, Tootega, Katya, Melika and all the others she'd met and who had helped her.

Then Kohola came to mind and she instinctively let out a huge wolf howl as loud as she could. Some time passed; the Plastiki was still trying to get to her but was too far away to rescue her yet. The waves were so high now that she kept disappearing behind a wall of water and reappearing on the next swell. Then all of a sudden Lahni felt herself being lifted out of the water with a big spray landing on her face and back as she found herself on top of a huge humpback whale.

"Kohola", she cried out, "you came. Thank you."

"I heard you, had to come," he answered, "I wasn't far away. I found some food close by and stayed in the area."

"Lucky me...thanks again...don't know what would have happened if you hadn't turned up," Lahni said, out of breath from paddling.



"It's a good thing it's quiet around here, so I heard you. Most populated spots, where there is a lot of shipping are too noisy to hear other whales let alone sounds that are unfamiliar. We sometimes get lost with all this mayhem, our sonar doesn't always work because of it!" Kohola added.

“Oh, really, I hadn’t heard that before but will definitely look into it for you, promise,” she said.

At this point the Plastiki came close enough to see what had happened to her. The entire crew was on deck busy keeping the boat afloat. David looked at her in amazement, shaking his head while he threw her a line with a ring on it. They had to stay at a safe distance due to the size of the whale and the rough seas but Lahni caught it on first try, stepped into it and was pulled back onto the Plastiki in one big haul. She clambered up the last bit and shook herself a few times before thanking the crew. She then turned around one more time to say goodbye and another thank you to Kohola, who was now a little further away putting on a show for everyone, breaching and jumping. She waved at him with her paw and said: “Thanks my friend! Love you!”

Jo threw a big towel and a blanket around her and carried her below deck to get her dry and out of the storm.

David was right behind with a lecture about always wearing the harness when on deck. “I know you don’t have opposable thumbs, so next time ask one of us before you decide to go for a swim, hey! Glad you got some help out there, you have some powerful friends it seems,” he laughed, turning his stern look into a friendly one. “Better stay below deck for the rest of the night. It’s going to be a rough ride. I need the rest of the crew upstairs. Good night, Lahni, get some sleep!”

“Sorry,” she whispered almost falling asleep while still sitting. She was exhausted and gladly obeyed. She didn’t even notice the rest of the storm and slept soundly through the night.

Chapter 10 Samoa

Apparently the catamaran had gotten off course during the storm and was now headed straight to Samoa, which was not a scheduled stop. Dave decided that the vessel had made up its own mind and for that reason they would go with its ‘decision’ to stop off in Samoa before continuing to Sydney. He still hadn’t really had time to sit down with Lahni to discuss things properly but this little side trip would give them the space to do so, since there was much to talk about. Lahni was on Plastiki for more than a lift to Sydney after all. She wanted to know everything about what she and her fellow citizens of the world; be it animal or human could do to change things for the better. Since Dave had already written a book on the subject of surviving climate change, he was obviously the right man to talk to.

So one morning in calm seas Dave was sitting on deck dangling his feet in the water doing absolutely nothing. Lahni spotted him and took the opportunity to join him and start the conversation.

She sat down next to him leaning into him a little as if to say, I like you, as dogs do and began to speak.

“So David, are you going to tell me all about your work and what you think about climate change and warming, depleted fish stocks and not to forget— plastic?”

“Sure, what do you want to know?” he answered, leaning right back into her.

“Everything,” she said.

“This might be more than one conversation but lets start with plastic, since that’s what this trip is all about,” he said.

Lahni was all ears now, since this was what she came on this voyage for.

“I think that the most important thing is not to make plastic the enemy, but to really reassess how we use, dispose of, and reuse it. It comes down to the old cliché of stopping to think before you buy. Can you reuse the bottle that contained the water or soda you drank? The small things can make a big difference. We can all minimize our impact if we fundamentally change the way in which we consume,” he explained.

“That’s exactly what I tried to tell my friend Katya, the little girl I met on the cruise ship to Hawaii. She was consuming as much as five people and had never given it a thought. I changed her mind and I hope she will keep it up,” Lahni said.

“Certain absurdities, like wrapping perishable vegetables in something that can last five hundred years in the ground, just don’t make any sense. We need to go full cycle, and go back to targeting packaging, either minimizing it or getting rid of it entirely, where it is just not necessary. The biggest change we can make is to rethink our buying habits and create more demand for positive change,” Dave continued.

“What do you mean by wrapping perishable vegetables?” Lahni asked.

“Oh, of course you wouldn’t have set foot in a super market yet,” Dave replied, “it’s plastic wrapping and polystyrene foam, which does not break down for centuries.”

“Right, I haven’t seen that yet,” she admitted.

“Take the Plastiki for example, which will be 100 percent recyclable. The boat’s framework, made of self-reinforced polyethylene terephthalate, PET in short, demonstrates how unconventional thinking can yield more ecologically sensitive alternatives. No one thought it could be done, yet here we are,” David explained.

“But how do you get people to really change their habits? I know, one person at a time works, but very slowly and I’m not sure if slow changes are going to help anymore right now,” Lahni asked.

“Every little bit helps and you can’t underestimate small changes. Over time they turn into big changes, it all counts. It’s important not to give up and think yourself too small and insignificant. But that’s also why I’m making this trip, Lahni. If we can make it across the Pacific in this, it could revolutionize the way people build boats,” he said, “and it could influence the whole industry. That outcome, regardless of whether we make it, would be the success of the expedition.”

“I guess if everyone just sat there doing nothing because they think they can’t help the situation, nothing would ever change,” Lahni said.

“Right! The fact is, that we already have a lot of technology to solve a lot of our environmental problems, from solar power to wind turbines and recycling at the basic level to all kinds of new inventions to remove spilled crude oil from the ocean; produce clean energy and grow food in safe, healthy and sustainable ways. The problem is getting people to put their money behind new technologies, so the public gets a chance to embrace them. Most new, really amazing innovations never see the light of day; they get swallowed up by big corporations and then buried never to be heard of again,” he continued.

“Why is that?” asked Lahni. “It seems strange to find a solution to a problem and then not use it.”

“Well, the big reason is money. It costs a lot to start something new and untried and it takes time to redeem costs, so for a lot of big companies it’s just easier and cheaper to keep doing what they’re doing. No matter the long term consequences!” Dave said.

“That’s really silly of them,” Lahni answered, “I’m sure there is lots of money to be made with new innovations. There must be someone who is doing it?”

“Sure, Lahni; for instance, we are sitting on brand new technology. And there are a lot of industries that are switching over to being more green but it’s a slow process and time on this planet seems to be running out.”

“I hope not, I fear for my people,” she stopped to think for a moment, “I miss them lots. I’m wondering how they are.”

“Maybe we can write them a postcard from Sydney,” Dave smiled, “but I guess they are nomads and don’t stay in the same area, so that wouldn’t work very well.”

“Yes, that’s right, no fixed address. Which will be a bit of a problem when I get back there. How will I find them?” she sighed.

“It’s probably best not to think about that right now, it’ll just distract you from your mission, right?” He pulled her close for a hug. “You’ll be OK, you’ve done well so far. But enough for now, let’s get back to work.”

Samoa is roughly situated between Hawaii and New Zealand about 1300 km from Fiji, where the Plastiki was originally meant to stop over. The Samoan capital Apai sits on Upolu, the larger of the two main islands with most of the population residing there. Other than Savai’i, the second largest, there are 8 smaller volcanic islets in the group.

Dave and his crew were excited to get onto land again, to see green hills and they were looking forward to meeting the locals. Dave was curious as to what Samoans were doing for their environment. He had already found out that they were using plastic bottles as rugby balls.

“So, Lahni, how are we getting you on land through customs,” David asked, “you don’t have a passport, right?” he said with a look of concern on his face.

“Well, you wouldn’t believe it but I have papers to travel with; I got them from a sailor in Vancouver who took me to get international vet certificate papers before taking me to the cruise ship from which I spotted you. He thought they would come in handy during my travels. It apparently has everything covered that I need.”

“That’s good then, we shouldn’t have any issues here. In Australia however I’m not sure if they’ll let you in without going through quarantine. It’s a four week stay at a kennel, locked up with a bunch of other dogs,” David added.

“But I’m healthy,” said Lahni, “and I haven’t been around any other dogs for some time now; being on this ship with you guys for weeks is like a kind of quarantine, isn’t it?” she said looking for reassurance. “Somehow it’ll all work out, Lahni, it always does!” he said trying to ease her concerns.

“That’s true, it has so far. I know I’m supposed to go to Australia, so I assume it will be OK,” Lahni agreed.

“We’ll leave it at that, then!” Dave said and walked away to ready the ship for docking.

As soon as the Plastiki docked and all the official stuff was done, Lahni took her things in the little backpack Katya had given her and took off on her own to explore the island. Before she jumped off the boat, Dave told her to be back at a certain time to get on the Plastiki for the voyage to Sydney. Lahni promised she’d be there, since she had every intention

to make it to Australia next. “Thanks, Dave! I have really appreciated the trip with you so far and all the talks as well. See you soon.”

“OK,” she heard Dave say in the distance as she was already at the other end of the pier. She briefly looked back, lifting her paw, feeling a little strange. She decided to shake off the feeling and kept on going.

It was lush and green, much like Hawaii and the people looked a little similar as well. There were rows and rows of palm trees lining white sandy beaches, children playing at the waters edge, women carrying babies, people carrying fruit and coconuts to market.

The native dress was colorful and simple, but lovely. People sat in groups making things out of palm leaves and coconut shells. The predominant feeling of this island was definitely happiness and togetherness. People smiled a lot just like Hawaiians. Must be the Polynesian culture; I’m going to like it here, Lahni thought. She walked around the town and the parks and ocean shores to take in everything possible but decided that for the moment she would not talk to anyone, at least until she had a good look first.



Two hours or so into her exploration she started to yawn, her legs tired and a little wobbly from the weeks at sea. I don’t have my land legs back yet and I feel a bit dizzy, she thought, spotting a nice big palm tree and opting for an afternoon siesta by a little beach. Soon she was fast asleep.

She didn’t know how much time had passed when she was rudely awakened by a heavy, dull thump next to her and the earth shaking beneath her. She reared up still feeling a little dizzy. A huge green coconut was sitting beside her in its own little crater.

“Wow, that was close,” Lahni whispered to herself.

“Sure was,” a young man standing nearby answered. “You shouldn’t sleep or sit under coconut palms, it’s very dangerous. Those things weigh a ton,” he exaggerated, “they’ll kill you if you’re not careful. Come away from there. Sit here, it’s safer,” he said patting the ground beside him to indicate what he wanted her to do.

“So, what’s a hairy thing like you doing on a tropical island and all on your own?” he laughed.

Lahni, now sitting beside him, put her paw on his hand and said: “I have wool as a coat, not hair but besides that, I didn’t come on my own. I sailed here from Hawaii with a crew of 6 on a plastic catamaran called Plastiki. She is moored in the harbor and I have to be back in the morning to join them for the leg to Sydney.”

“Oh, I heard about that ship on the radio the other day, something about the garbage patch out there? A sailing dog, huh, that’s cool,” the young man said.

“What about you?” Lahni asked.

“I’m from right here. I was climbing palms to collect coconuts when I saw you almost getting hit. I should get back to work. Will you stick around a bit so we can talk more after I’m done? I can show you around if you like? Oh, and I’m Mika!”

“Lahni, I am Lahni,” she answered, “and I would love it if you’d be my guide. Thanks.”

“OK, watch this,” he said and was already half way up the tree Lahni had slept under. He used a little cloth wrapped around his hands and bare feet to connect to the tree. When he reached the top, he took the machete out of his belt and cut the coconuts off with one big swing. Lahni flinched when they hit the ground a few meters away, still a little nervous about the near hit earlier. Mika climbed back down and opened one of the nuts with his machete, offering the sweet drink inside to his new friend. He placed the rest of the nuts in the cart he had with him which was already close to full.

“Come on then,” he said pulling the cart behind him, “I just have to take these home and then I have time to show you my town.”

Lahni trotted next to him through a few streets and paths alongside the oceanfront. They turned down a sandy path to a little clearing by the beach where a wonderful but simple structure stood, high up on a stone platform ringed with pillars but open all around. It had blinds woven out of palm leaves and a thatched, rounded, high roof constructed out of wood and rope. It was a traditionally built house called fale. A wide stone staircase came down off the front of the building touching the sand at the bottom end. The waters edge was only about 50 meters away. A few women sat on the ground weaving things out of palm leaves with kids playing nearby in the sand. An older man sat at the top of the stairs smoking a cigarette.



“This is it, we’re home,” Mika said, loading the coconuts off onto a crate. “I’ll just tell mum where I’m going. Wait here.”

“OK” Lahni said, nodding at everyone looking at her with big smiles.

Mika bounded down the stairs a few minutes later, taking the last few steps in one. He had quickly changed clothes, now looking a very fine young man, wearing a long sleeve shirt and board shorts. He smiled wide and waved at Lahni to come with him.

“Meet my parents before we go, quickly. You’ll stay with us tonight and eat with us, yes!”

After Lahni greeted his parents and siblings, they took off to see the rest of Mika’s island. It was mid afternoon and only a few hours to sunset. Mika wanted Lahni to meet one of his friends nearby. They walked back up the sandy path and turned into the main road following it for about a mile then turned back towards the beach.

“I want to show you something since you’re concerned about the environment and climate change. Here you will see first hand what’s happening to our island.” Mika said, leading the way to the shorefront.

As they approached Lahni saw what he was talking about. In front of her was a big drop down to the sand. It looked like someone had come along and cut right into the side of the land and shaved it off.

“Erosion,” Lahni said, “I heard about this; the ocean is rising and you are losing your land.”

“That’s right, at a very fast rate as well; it’s now at 46cm per year. Add it all up and the island is shrinking fast. People won’t be able to live right on the beach much longer, including us. Many have left the island already, settling in New Zealand or Australia.”

“Where will you go?” Lahni asked.

“Not sure yet, I guess I’ll go study in Australia or New Zealand. But it’s my parents and grandparents I’m worried about. I don’t know what they will do.”

“I guess we’ll all have to start thinking about that soon,” Lahni added.

“But let’s keep moving, I want you to meet my friend Phil, he’s half English, half Samoan. He was born here, his father was an English scientist who worked here for many years but sadly died in the last earthquake and tsunami. He lived in Lalomanu, a village that was hard hit. A lot of people lost their homes and hundreds lost their lives. His mum still lives here. Anyway, I’m getting a little off subject. Phil’s a diver and wants to study marine biology to help the marine environment. I hope he gets the chance; he would be great. He’s a smart guy,” Mika said while jumping down the ravine cut by the ocean.

“We have to walk along the waters edge to get to his place. He’s 17 and already lives on his own in a little shack right on the beach. It’s dangerous but he wants to be close to his love,” he paused smiling at Lahni, “his words!”

“The ocean and everything in it?” Lahni asked.

“Yep!” Mika said.

As they came around the bend they saw the little beach pad with Phil sitting in front of it staring at the sea. Phil spotted them lifting his hand to say hi. “Hey, man, great you’re here. I was going to come over to your place to get you tomorrow. I’m going diving and snorkeling in Aleipata. I’m doing some research on the sea turtle population. It’s a new project for my university application. You’re coming, right?” he said with a slightly English accent.

“Phil, meet my friend Lahni, she’s traveling the world to fight environmental changes and is here on the Plastiki. You know, the plastic ship bringing awareness to the plastic garbage in the ocean!”

“Nice to meet you. You can come too, if you like, I mean snorkeling and such. How long are you here for? It’d be great if you could see the turtles,” Phil said.

“I have to be back in the morning to join the crew on the leg to Sydney but I guess I could.... I’ll have to go and get my stuff. I have some food and a life vest on board still,” she said wondering about what she’d just said. Yet she was too curious and excited to meet sea turtles not to accept the invitation.

“Well maybe I should go tonight to get my things,” she suggested.

“Don’t worry we’ll feed you and your vest can be replaced too,” Phil offered.

“Oh no, I need the vest, it’s a lucky vest. I got it from my friend Mano in Hawaii; it belonged to his dog Eddy, so it’s dear to me. I would really like to have it,” she explained.

“We’ll go in the morning early then, OK!” Mika assured Lahni; then turned to his mate.

“Phil, we have to get back to have dinner with my parents and my dad wants to put on a show for Lahni. Do you want to join us? You could stay there over night and then we can leave early to Aleipata after we swing by the Plastiki to get her

things,” he suggested.

“Sounds good. I’ll pack my stuff and I’ll take dad’s old beach buggy. It has a small motor like a motorcycle, so am allowed to drive it,” he said while getting up to fetch his diving gear.

The drive back was short and bumpy. As they got out of the buggy they saw a large group of people outside the family home. A fire was burning in a pit with a roast on a spit. Mika noticed many relatives had been invited and some of the young men were preparing for a fire knife dance.

Lahni was the guest of honor. She was a little overwhelmed by all the attention but took it all in her stride. She was grateful for the hospitality of these people and being able to experience so many different cultures on her journey. The food was delicious and the fire dance fascinating. Mika had joined his cousins in the traditional dance where young men were dressed in grass skirts twirling fire.

The dance’s original purpose was to prepare men for battle and to intimidate the enemy. Nowadays it was just for show, mostly for tourists. Mika’s cousins and uncles had formed a dance troupe to perform at events and hotels, since living purely on the land harvesting coconuts, fruits and fishing wasn’t enough to live well anymore. This was also a way to keep the tradition alive for generations of boys to come.



Lahni fell asleep in the sand by the fire pit. The boys left her there and went up to the fale for the night.

She woke up early with the sun tickling her eyes.

She ran up the stairs to wake up Mika and Phil who were still fast asleep. “Wake up,” she whispered in Mika’s ear, “come

on guys, wake up, the ship is leaving soon, I must get my vest,” she tried a little louder.

Phil and Mika jumped up a little dazed from staying up too late. “What’s going on.... oh damn, are we late? Let’s go then, we’ll wash later on the beach.”

They jumped in the buggy and took off towards the marina. As they approached they saw the Plastiki taking off from the jetty, ready to sail. Lahni jumped out of the car and ran as fast as she could to the end of the jetty to see if she could catch her, barely able to stop within an inch off the end. She had missed them. Why did they not wait for her, she wondered. The boys came running after her. Phil pointed to a long boat that was tied up on the side of the jetty. “Let’s take this one, if we all paddle, we can catch them.” They hopped in, untied the boat and started towards the Plastiki.

Lahni was barking as loud as possible to attract the attention of the crew, when she noticed Dave on deck in the distance waving at her.

“Where were you, we waited as long as possible? We had bad weather warnings for later, so we had to get going,” Lahni heard him yell. He pulled in the main sail to slow down the ship to wait for her to catch up. A few hundred feet later they caught up with the Plastiki.

All the crew was on deck. “So, I see you made some friends, are you coming with us?” Dave asked. “Actually, I’m not coming. I’ve been invited to go see the turtles down south. Phil is doing some research on conservation in the area and asked me to come along. I just want to pick up my things. Sorry I’m late but I had to wait for these guys to get me here,” Lahni explained.

“What do you need? I’ll give you a hand so we can get going,” Jo said and went below deck to help. “Don’t worry about the food, they take care of that but my life vest is what I came for. I already have my papers, thanks Jo!” Lahni called after her from the stairs.

“OK. Got it!” Jo answered.

Lahni said a big thank you to Dave and Jo and Olav and everyone else for taking her this far.

“How will you get to Sydney then, Lahni?”

“We’ll see, I know I’ll get there,” she smiled at Dave and gave him a hug.

“See you again some day! Have a good sail!” Lahni said jumping back into the longboat. “Bye and thank you!”

The crew waved one last time, then turned and got back to work. Lahni watched them sail out of Apia harbor.

Aleipata, at the South Eastern tip of Upolo is made up of 4 uninhabited islands. The area had recently been declared a protected marine environment. Phil was keen to get there as fast as possible since seasonal storms were forecast for the

afternoon and he wanted Lahni and Mika to experience the turtle sanctuary in calm conditions. The trip south along the coast was very picturesque with the Razorback Mountains to the right and wild, white sand beaches framing the scenery. The water was clear and a brilliant turquoise hue, very inviting for a midday snorkel.

Lahni told Phil that she couldn't swim but he suggested for her to use the vest so she could snorkel with them and see everything from the top at least. The sea was very shallow around Namu'a Island where they were headed to see the turtles. Phil thought they should stay a few days to get the full experience and had already booked a fale usually used for tourist stays.

Mika and Lahni agreed that it was good idea. This region of the island held a particular energy for Phil since his father had lived and worked here and had recently died there, doing his life's work. So in a way it compelled him even more to follow in his father's footsteps.

They had to leave the buggy in the small town of Mutiatele Lepu'e to take a boat to the little island, since driving was prohibited there.

A short ferry ride, a free service with fale rentals, took them to Namu'a.

Lahni jumped off the ferry and ran straight to the water standing in it up to her belly to cool off. Her coat had already thinned out with all the tropical destinations but the heat and humidity did affect her more than she cared for. A snorkel would be welcome at this point, she thought. The guys packed their things and headed off to the little beach pad they'd reserved for a few nights.

As usual it was open all around with sleeping mats and mosquito nets over the beds, simple but comfortable. Bath facilities were shared with only cold water on hand, which turned out to be a refreshing option for Lahni's overheating issues.

A lovely basket of local fruits was sitting on the large floor mat used for meeting and eating. The ocean was glistening in the midday sun.

"Snorkeling anyone?" Phil said, pulling out his gear with extra flippers and a mask for Mika.

"Sure, lets go then!" Mika was keen to go.

"Help me with my vest first and I don't think I need a mask. I can see under water without it, thanks Mika," Lahni said while being assisted putting on her life vest.

The water was crystal clear much like the glacial melt Lahni was used to, except of course it was warm and salty. She could see all the way to the bottom of pure white sand. The sun was shining right through it, creating shapes like diamonds moving and dancing with the ocean currents. Lahni jumped right in not noticing the creature that had come up close to

inspect her. After the initial splash she was floating with the orange vest holding her head and shoulders above water much like the animal next her.

The turtle spoke first. “Who are you? Haven’t seen anything like you before?” she said.

Lahni hadn’t seen her yet and was surprised by the fine, calm voice beside her. She paddled around to see who was speaking to her, coming to a stop right in front of the turtle’s head causing her to temporarily pull her head in.

“You must be a sea turtle, yes? I’m a dog, I’m not usually in the water and am not accustomed to swimming but I was invited to snorkel to see your kind! Thanks for coming up to talk to me, I have many questions for you!” she said.



“Oh, what might I know that you don’t?” said the turtle curiously.

“I want to know how your life is and how your species is surviving and how you manage with climate change and the environment getting polluted.. ..and....”

“Slow down, I can’t answer everything at once. You do seem very keen to know, so I will tell you. We had much trouble here before with pollution and too many boats killing my friends. But we are safe now, I think. We haven’t

seen too many people or boats or garbage. Looks like someone is looking out for us,” the turtle said.

“That is true, your home has been declared a sanctuary by the local government, so you are safe but what of your friends who were killed?” Lahni asked.

“Well, when motor boats hit us, our shells get broken and it kills us. So too many boats mean too many hits. Also the garbage is a problem because we can’t always differentiate between real food and bits of non-edible stuff, so we swallow it and get sick.”

“Plastic bags and plastic bits,” Lahni nodded.

“Is that what they call it? It’s bigger pieces of this plastic that we get tangled up in and can’t get it off,” she said, lifting

her left back leg a little for Lahni to see. Her leg had a large bottle top plastic ring on it. It looked fairly recent but had started to cut into her flesh a little, since she was young and still growing.

“It hurts now and I can’t get it off,” she added with a worried look on her face, “what will happen to my leg?”

Lahni’s friends had been snorkeling close by, so Lahni yelled out for them to join her and her turtle friend to help. Phil swam right over, looked at the turtle’s leg surrounded by a tight piece of plastic, took out his diving knife and started cutting into it.

“Ouch”, yelled the turtle.

“Sorry, had to do it quickly, it’s gone now. See! You’ll be OK!” Phil said looking at the plastic bit. “These seemingly simple little things are causing so much pain. Never ceases to amaze me!” he said, shaking his head.

Mika had joined the group by now. “I really need to talk to my brothers and sisters about not throwing their plastic bottles away,” he added.

“Or better not to use any of it,” Lahni interjected.

“Sure, even better,” Mika agreed.

The turtle invited them to meet some of her friends. She took off leading the way in front of them to a small little atoll where many of her family were hanging out for the day. It wasn’t far and no problem for Lahni with the vest. She thought about Mano for a minute but kept up with everyone. The tiny little atoll was really just a ring of coral with a safe swimming spot inside. No really big fish or sharks could get in; the turtles climbed over the top of the coral then popped into the water in the middle. It was a perfect little turtle swimming pool in the middle of their sanctuary.

It had about 12 turtles of various sizes in it; all lifted their heads when the visitors came in.

Lahni sat on top of the coral for a minute to take a break from paddling which was a bit strenuous even with the extra help of a vest.

“Watch out for the sharp edges, Lahni!” Mika called out to her, “you can cut yourself pretty badly on them.”



Lahni lifted her paw to show him she was wearing ocean diving socks that Phil had given her, much too big of course since they were his but he had tied them up with string to hold them on her paws.

Mika laughed out loud. It looked pretty silly.

“Better silly than sorry,” Lahni said with a smile. “It does make it harder to paddle though.”

“Meet my new friends and foot savers”, the turtle said to her fellow turtles, lifting her back leg, which looked almost normal again. “They saved my leg. The stuff we get stuck on us is called Plastic and they can cut it off without too much pain,” she said looking at Phil.

“Sorry!” Phil said looking back at her.

Not all the animals needed assistance. There were three more with plastic rings and one with a tangled fishing line on his foot. Phil took his knife to free all of them. He then sat down on a clear bit of rock between the corals and took notes of what he’d just witnessed.

The turtles swam around excitedly inspecting each others freed limbs.

Over the next few days Phil, Mika and Lahni helped another dozen or so turtles become free from tangled plastic and fishing line.

Phil was more determined than ever to get to university to study marine biology, become a research scientist like his father and save as many ocean species as humanly possible. Mika made a resolution to do some work with the younger community locally to help the cause and Lahni would naturally spread the word and continue to bring awareness to all these issues.

The next few days were filled with more swimming, snorkeling and rest during stormy afternoons. On the last morning of their stay, they decided to go for another swim before taking the ferry back to the main island. Phil was just getting ready when he saw a research ship float into the protected bay very slowly. It stopped; dropped anchor and three people took to the water in diving gear to start their work. Phil recognized one of the people on board—a well weathered, bearded, friendly faced Englishman wearing cut off corduroys, an old beat-up Panama hat and a deep tan. He was an old friend of his father’s, Prof. Derek Morton, a marine researcher who had worked with Phil’s father for many years.

He waved to him and started running into the water to swim towards the boat. When he reached the boat, Prof. Morton helped him up onto the vessel.

“Hey, I thought I recognized you. You’ve grown a lot since I saw you guys last but you look like your father. I heard about your dad, I am so very sorry. He was a fine researcher and an amazing human being. I enjoyed working with him

very much.”

“Thanks,” Phil answered, his head down a little feeling sad now that he was reminded of his father’s passing again, “I miss him. He was a great dad as well.”

“So, what are you guys up to then? Snorkeling, having some fun?” the prof asked while squeezing Phil’s shoulder.

“Sure, that’s part of it. But I’m also doing research on the turtle population. We rescued over a dozen of them in the last 3 days. They all had some kind of entanglement with plastic and fishing line,” Phil said proudly.

“That’s what we’re here to look at, so you’ve done our work for us, huh. Did you take notes? I wouldn’t mind knowing how many exactly, their sizes, location etc. I’ll put your name into the research papers as well if you’re happy to share your information,” Prof. Morton added.

“Absolutely, I’ll have to go back to get it before we leave,” Phil said, about to jump back into the water when the scientist stopped him.

“Phil, why don’t you guys stay another day, you can come on board and bring your friends too; you can help with what’s left to do here. Then we’ll take you back to land. How about it?”

“I’ll have to check with the others of course but I’d love to. Be back soon,” he said and jumped back in the water with much enthusiasm.

In the meantime Mika and Lahni had gone into the water for a last swim when Phil caught up to them, telling them the good news. He was so happy about the invitation that he could hardly get the words out.

So after their swim, they checked out of their beach pad and went back to the waters edge where a young man in a dinghy was waiting to take them to the research vessel. On board, after all the introductions and the initial astonishment and disbelief over a talking dog were settled, Lahni sat next to Dr. Morton to ask him what was next for them.

“Oh, we are off to New Zealand; we are conducting research on ocean noise which affects whales and their sonar. It’s a project paid for by the Oceanic Research Institute,” he explained.

Lahni nearly jumped out of her skin with excitement. “Really? I can’t believe I’m hearing this...that is amazing. I just met a whale a recently while on the Plastiki from Hawaii. Kohola is his name and he told me about the noise problems they were having hearing each other.”

“You met a whale and had a chat with him?” the prof asked surprised.

“Yep, I was on watch on the catamaran, you know the plastic one, Dave is sailing from San Francisco to Sydney, when the whale swam up beside me to talk. Later he even rescued me when I fell overboard,” Lahni added. “He is my dear friend, I hope to see him again some day. He also told me about the Japanese and other nations still killing his friends. He was

worried for his species. It made me sad to hear that.”

“You don’t say, wow that opens up our research much wider than originally planned. Hey, I have an idea. What are your plans here? What’s your next thing?” the Professor asked.

“Well, I was looking for passage to Australia and then New Zealand to continue my mission and I had planned to go with the Plastiki but things changed after I met Mika and Phil. What are you suggesting?” Lahni answered wagging her tail in anticipation.

“How would you like to come with us on our research and help us with our work, since you can communicate with whales better than we can. You understand their language which is an amazing thing and very useful to us. Will you come?” he asked.

Lahni didn’t really have to think about it at all, she hugged the professor and said: “Yes, yes, yes of course I’ll come.”

She ran over to Phil and Mika to tell them about the miracle that had just happened. Lahni was so excited that she jumped up on the entire crew including the 3 divers that had just come back onto the boat still in their masks and flippers.

“What’s going on?” one of them asked. The professor filled all of them in with a briefing over lunch. Afterwards Phil joined the divers who continued their research throughout the afternoon. Mika took it easy sunning himself on deck and Lahni spent more time with the professor who asked her more detailed questions about her encounter with Kohola.

The next morning after they had completed turtle counts and added Phil’s notes to their research, they said their goodbyes and took the boys back to the main island. Lahni stayed behind on the ship to continue her journey south.

“Good-bye Lahni, sorry to see you go; I’ve enjoyed having you here. You are one special dog,” Mika said with tears in his eyes.

“Please don’t cry my friend, I love you too and maybe we’ll see each other again some day. I know where you live,” she smiled, “at least for now. And thanks for the tour and the feast.”

Then it was Phil’s turn to give Lahni a big hug. “Nice to have met you, Lahni. You are special and don’t you forget it. It’s great what you’re doing and very brave. I have a feeling I’ll hear about you again.” He kept hugging her while he spoke.

“Thanks Phil. Likewise, I know you are destined for great things. Go and have some faith in your ability!” Lahni said, with the Professor right behind nodding vehemently.

“She’s right, you know, if you are only half as good as your dad you’ll be amazing, I can’t wait to work with you again. I’ll let you know how our research goes. And, please keep me posted on your findings and studies!” the Prof added.

The boys climbed into the dingy to be taken back to the beach where their buggy was waiting. As they got in, they

looked back one more time; then drove off into the distance. Lahni waved at them again; then turned to attend to her new crew members. She, of course, had to meet everyone.

Chapter 11 Ocean Noise and the way to New Zealand

Kohola had spoken to the fact that his kind was being affected by the ever-increasing noise pollution in the oceans. So getting to be on a real research vessel to possibly help the situation was exactly the kind of thing Lahni had been thinking about. She was overjoyed to be asked to come along and all her plans for what she thought her next move would be, fell into the background for now.

Aboard the Aurora, which was the name of the research ship, life was a little different. Lahni had her own little cabin and she didn't have to keep watch. The ship was high tech with antenna, radar, sonar equipment, oceanic recording devices and a helipad on top of the bridge; she also had plenty of crew to do all the onboard jobs, so Lahni was treated like a special guest by the professor. He was so curious as to how she would communicate with any whales they would encounter that he wanted her close by all the time. It's funny, Lahni thought, I don't really know what they mean by understanding whale. I just spoke to him the way I speak to people. And he did the same. The prof saw she was deep in thought and inquired as to what she was thinking about.

“What's going on between your ears, Lahni?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about Kohola, my whale friend and how we just talked. It's not like I know all these different languages or anything; I just seem to understand everyone, no matter where I am. I mean I'm talking to you and I understand everything and you can understand me, so there must something universal about our communication. And maybe that's just it. If you really connect with someone you can understand them,” she pondered, still a little lost in her thoughts.

“I guess that's true. But I'd never talked to a dog before in this way. I mean I've talked to a dog but most of them just wag their tails and pant in reply. They don't come back with an intelligent argument. You are different that way,” he said looking at her.

“Maybe I'm just the beginning of something new. And if I can talk to whales and turtles and dolphins and humans, you can probably do the same.”

“We'll see. I'm sure we'll get the chance very soon on our way to the land of the long white cloud. The whale pods are on their way south at the moment, so there should be plenty to test your theory on. But now I have some research papers to attend to. Just chill out for while! You've had a busy time if all your stories are anything to go by. You deserve some rest. I will call on your services as soon as we encounter our ocean friends,” he added and walked away.

Lahni settled in on a good spot with a view and looked out to sea. She once again fell into a deep sleep but this time without the guilt about not keeping watch. She dreamt about her time with Mika and Phil and all her turtle friends in Samoa, almost missing the Plastiki that morning and Kohola. Where would he be by now and was he OK? She could've so used his expertise right now with the ocean noise, she thought waking up in a daze.



“Where are you, Kohola? I hope you are well,” she said out loud while shaking off the sleepiness in her head. “I must think about him and send him thoughts. Maybe he’ll get the message,” she continued to mumble to herself when she saw a tail fluke rising from the ocean, still a mile or so away. “It couldn’t be, could it?” she almost sang.

She turned around on her heels standing up on her hind legs with her front paws in the air as if to dance for joy a little. Then she looked out to sea again... nothing. Where did he go, she thought. She walked around the deck to stretch her legs one more time and then took another look out in the same direction but again...nothing. She shrugged off the thought and kept walking around for some exercise, since her limbs were getting a little stiff from just laying around.

About twenty minutes later, still walking around the deck area, she was hit with a huge spray of water from the side of the boat. Startled, she shook herself dry and looked down beside her to see where all this water had come from, assuming a big wave had hit the side and crashed over the edge.

“Sorry!” a deep familiar voice said. “Didn’t mean to get you, my friend. Did you call me?” Kohola asked, a bit apologetic, yet smiling at her.

“You got it then, you heard me! Wow, so glad to see you” she said, “and also good because you can help us with our research about the noise that’s bothering you, yes? Hey, what are you doing down here anyway?” Lahni asked, not knowing where to start, she was so surprised to see her friend again having just thought of him.

“I’m on my way home to the southern ocean, it’s time; I am a little late already! Was thinking about you all of a sudden, then I heard this ship and was wondering if you might be on it,” he continued. “So what do you want to know?”

“Wait here, don’t go anywhere, I’ll have to fetch the professor. He’ll ask you all the right questions. Not sure if he’ll be able to understand you, being human and all but we’ll try. If not I’ll translate?” she said while swiftly running to the office below deck where the prof was reading through his papers.

“Professor, come quick!” Lahni called out while still on the stairs. “Hurry! He hasn’t much time but wants to help!” Dr. Morton stuck his head around the corner to see about the kerfuffle, when she came down the corridor nearly crashing into him from behind. She just stopped short of hitting him.

“Come quick, no time to explain,” she while pulling on his sweater for him to get up promptly. He obeyed and climbed up the stairs to the deck following her as fast as he could, thinking the boat was on fire, given Lahni’s urgency. When he got to the side of the ship he saw Kohola still swimming along side, waiting patiently. Lahni was already back at the spot looking in the direction of the prof; her tongue hanging sideways out of her mouth and panting from all the hurry.

“Lohooook”, she said with lots of air in her words,” he ca...hame.”

“Who came?” The prof asked, looking in the whale’s direction. “Oh, the whale, well yes, that was to be expected sooner or later being whale migration time and since that’s who we came here for, it’s high time anyway,” he said.

“No, no, you don’t understand,” Lahni said, “this isn’t just any whale, it’s my whale, it’s Kohola, the one I met while I was on the Plastiki off Hawaii, remember I mentioned him before when we came on board. I owe him my life.”

“Really? No! Extraordinary, what are the odds?” the prof uttered in astonishment. “Well then, let’s get to work!”

“Nice to meet you professor,” Kohola said looking straight at the prof, “what would you like to know?” The professor almost fell overboard; he was so surprised about having understood perfectly well what the whale had just said.

“I can’t believe it, I have been working around whales and other sea creatures my entire adult life and have never been spoken to by a whale in my language before, am I hearing right or am I going crazy?” he asked looking at Lahni and then Kohola. “Or maybe it’s you, the wonder dog who is making all this possible,” he added.

Lahni shrugged her shoulders. “Does it matter, really? Maybe it’s just meant to be this way, you don’t need me to translate. Ask away.”

“OK. Here we go. We have been baffled by all the whales getting lost and beaching themselves in recent years? We think it has something to do with sonar and war games from the Navy and also from oil and gas exploration and other shipping noise. So, am I right in the assumption that you can’t hear each other anymore and you can’t navigate anymore with all the noise around you because it is interfering with your sonar?” the Prof asked, addressing Kohola.

Kohola thought for a minute and began to answer the prof’s very long question. “Well, the regular ships don’t bother us so much with noise; with them it’s more the garbage that’s been thrown overboard and also the propellers that can hurt us, especially at night. The noises that really bother us are longer, unusual sounds. They sound wrong! I assume it’s what you call sonar and also drilling noises, very shrill ones,” Kohola explained.

“Ah, seismic testing for oil and gas exploration, no doubt!” the prof interjected.

“We communicate over very long distances to guide our families to safe waters and have done so for eons but the increase in human activity in the last few years have made things harder and harder,” Kohola continued.

“Wow!” said the professor. “Oh, sorry, please continue, I’m making notes.”

“Many have gotten lost and died in the process. I’ve been hearing stories from our dolphin friends around the world as well. I’ve been lucky. I haven’t been as affected by it but I’ve stayed clear of shipping lanes and Naval ships as much as possible. I keep telling everyone but not all are in reach of my messages due to all the commotion in the ocean,” Kohola continued.

“What of the dolphins? Sorry to interrupt, I am just curious as to what their stories are?”

“Oh, there are many but the latest I’ve heard are from the south of your land. New oil drilling exploration is interfering with the sonar of dolphins and with their hearing. Some of them become deaf from the sound waves the explorers use to look for oil and gas on the ocean floor. It’s very loud and very foreign. Thousands of dolphins have died already, getting stranded. How many more of us need to suffer before humans understand what they are doing to us? It even kills fish and sea plants. The gulls are bringing these stories to us on the winds.”

“It’s called acoustic sensing, I mean the method used by oil and gas companies to look for viable spots to drill. And it is controversial to say the least,” the prof interrupted.

“The noise and garbage aren’t the only problem though, my species is being hunted and killed and we don’t understand why. My ancestors almost died out. We still hear the stories from the very old ones, those that got away. We have always loved your species and have visited you and have been wanting contact but when we did we got badly treated,” he took a breath, “it’s a tiny bit better now than when I was born but thousands of my kind still lose their lives every year for no good reason at all at the hands of violent people. Then there are the times when you people fight with each other, unfortunately in our home. We are afraid of war and its consequences. Many of us have died during your wars at sea. War is also incredibly noisy. Why do you do this to each other?” Kohola continued.

The prof was sitting down now absolutely astonished at the detailed answers he was getting.

“That, Kohola, is a very good question. And the answer is...I do not know. No one seems to know why we can’t get along and most of the time we don’t seem to want to try either, so we start shooting at each other. It’s never really done anyone any good”, he paused briefly, lost in his thoughts, “I must say, I’m a little embarrassed right now sitting here, looking at you, asking me this. Don’t get me wrong, I’m very grateful I met Lahni and you now and that you’re giving me the time to talk. I’m so sorry that my species is treating you in this way. I am really sorry!” he said with a few tears in his eyes.

By now the rest of the crew that wasn't otherwise busy with steering or cooking or maintenance had turned up surrounding Lahni and Dr.Morton, looking on in amazement. They all nodded their heads in agreement with what the Prof had said.

"I appreciate and accept your apology, however people like you are not the problem. You are actually trying to help us and maybe our talk will speed up much needed change," Kohola said.

Everyone was so engrossed in the conversation with Kohola that no one had noticed all the movement in the ocean around them. Lahni spotted the other whales first. In fact the entire ship was surrounded by dozens of whales of different sizes. In between a few dolphins had joined the crowd jumping up occasionally as if to try to get a better view of the scene.

The professor was speechless and so was the rest of the crew; even the staff that had been busy previously with onboard duties stopped to see what was going on.



The captain had turned off the motor and dropped anchor to make sure none of the animals would get hurt by the propeller or rudder. The water was busy with waterspouts and jumping dolphins. Baby whales rolled around in play beside their mothers. Excitement was in the air. Somehow a shift had occurred while the professor and Lahni were talking to Kohola

and the energy that was generated was felt far and wide. There were still more whales arriving; seemingly every whale on their way south in the Pacific had suddenly stopped and changed direction to join the event.

“Wow!” the professor broke his silence, “I can’t believe this, can you?” he asked, turning to his crew. His question was met with shaking heads and wide eyes all around.

“I can,” Lahni said, “this is what Kohola was talking about when he told you that they all love humans and want to communicate with us. You see, they see themselves as equals to humans, the only difference being geographical and in the language they use. Other than that they feel equal.”

Kohola continued to speak. “I speak for all of us when I say, we are a nation of whales just like you are nations of people and you have been waging war on us for hundreds of years. In the ancient days people didn’t have the tools to kill us in big numbers and when they did kill one of us it would sustain an entire village of them for a winter, so some gladly gave their lives for it. But what’s happening now lacks respect. The Japanese and other nations are killing us at random and I heard from the seagulls that they make dog food out of us.”

Lahni shook herself in disgust. “That’s so wrong, I don’t want to eat you. It doesn’t seem right at all.”

“They even go after our young babies. They make no distinction! It’s done indiscriminately! I have seen friends die at the hands of a whaling ship. The harpoon hits and explodes inside, ripping into their flesh, tearing them to pieces. The ones hit sometimes take hours to die. We can often hear them for a long time and can do nothing about it. We aren’t fast or strong enough against such weapons,” Kohola said with two female whales right next to him now agreeing to his account.

“We’ve seen it too. Many have perished in the southern oceans,” one of them added.

“Why do you keep going back there then?” Lahni asked.

“It’s our home and our food supply is there, we have no choice. We all know that every time we travel there, it may be our last journey home. We know they will be there waiting for us,” he explained.

Lahni was clearly upset now and looking at the professor for any kind of solution to the problem her friends were facing.

“This is horrible and unacceptable, can’t we do something about this professor? I don’t understand why you put up with this?” she added with a sad voice.

“Politics, I suppose! I know this is a tragedy and it shouldn’t be happening but it seems that most nations who have whales in their waters like Australia and New Zealand aren’t prepared to stop the Japanese, who are among the most prolific killers of whales. They all have trade agreements and treaties and don’t want to rock the boat! It’s a sensitive issue. You see, technically all whales are protected species, world wide, but some of us aren’t willing to respect that. Just like elephants in Africa are protected but still get poached for their ivory and meat! Obviously someone in the world is buying it. As long

as there is demand for whale meat they will be killed. In recent years the taste of the Japanese has shifted and the meat of our friends here is less desirable but since old habits die hard, they keep killing and manufacture dog food instead or freeze and store it for God knows what reason...sorry, Kohola! It must be awful to hear this.”

“I know all these things, professor and I have told many. The birds carry stories from your world to us and many of us have witnessed the slaughter but got away to tell the tale. It breaks our hearts but not our spirits,” Kohola said looking directly at Dr. Morton.

“I promise I will bring this up at our next meeting at the Oceanic Institute and I will write about this for the newspapers and send a letter to the Minister for the Environment. I will try my darndest to do something that will actually have a positive effect this time. I’ve been fighting for years for whales to have a voice and until then I promise to be that for you.”

“We want to celebrate life and do so with you. We don’t want to be afraid of your species and fear for our lives every time we encounter you. As you can see we play a lot a lot and jump for joy. We want you to be cheerful and happy as we are. We have a beautiful place to live and would like to keep it for a long time to come,” Kohola said looking out at his fellow whales and dolphin friends. “See, they are all happy to be here with you!”

Lahni was standing up on her hind legs waving her paws at them. She felt drawn to jump in to join them but decided against it after her last splash in middle of the Pacific, albeit this time she had a few more friends to rescue her. The professor and a couple of his research assistants were frantically taking notes while their cinematographer was filming the entire scene on HD video.

“This is amazing and it must be seen by the whole world, I’ll make sure it gets out there,” he said.

“Did you get it all?” Dr. Morton asked.

“Sure did!” he answered.

“Great, this will help with our cause,” the Professor said looking a little happier.

“We’ll be doing something about disturbing you in your home as well, believe me, enough is enough!” he proclaimed loudly for all the whales to hear.

No doubt, as a thank you for being heard for the first time ever, at least half the whales decided to put on a massive display of breaching, rolling and splashing about, getting everyone on board wet. The big soak was met with laughter and handshakes between all the crew. Lahni was doing circles in celebration of this historic event and was barking as loudly as possible. Kohola however was a little more reserved and so was the professor since both of them knew that the battle for whales and the environment was far from over and that this small get-together was just the beginning of a long road ahead. Slowly the whales moved on but Kohola stayed with the ship a little longer to answer a few more questions Dr. Morton had

for him regarding ocean noise. A few hours later he too went on his way after a teary goodbye from Lahni and the crew.

The rest of the research trip was pretty much superfluous since Dr. Morton got all the information he needed without doing any testing. He just had to write it all down in a way that made sense to the scientific community. He was a little worried about his credibility but glad he could at least back everything up with the lengthy video his cameraman had shot. And then there was the crew, who saw everything unfold before their eyes and ears. It would be difficult with all this evidence to discredit him. On the last day of travel to New Zealand, they again encountered whales and dolphins, who stayed with the ship for some time, chatting with Lahni mostly, who then took any information that was new to the professor to document for his paper.

“Thanks so much for coming with us my dear Lahni. We could have never achieved this without you. You opened up entire new horizons of communication for us with the animal world. It’s truly a miracle. I can’t thank you enough!” the professor said stroking Lahni’s head.

“You’re welcome,” Lahni smiled wide right back at him in appreciation. “I couldn’t have done this without your help either. So we’re even! You gave me the opportunity to come to New Zealand. That means the world to me and I’m glad I could help you with the whales. I hope it helps them too. I really do. Things really need to change. Humans are dishing out way too much pain towards animals and each other. I am so grateful I met you and had the chance to see the work you do.”

“It was a pleasure, believe me, an honor actually!” the prof added, “and now we’ll relax for a few hours before we get back on land. What are your plans when you get there?”

Lahni didn’t answer the question straight away. She sat next to the professor looking out at sea and then finally turned to him. “I’ll just follow my nose as usual.”

The professor laughed out loud and pulled her in for a hug. “Well, that’s worked for you so far, obviously!” he said. After that they sat for a while just listening to the sea and the gulls that had come to join them for the rest of the voyage, now that they were closer to shore.

Chapter 12 Maori and the whales

The next day the Aurora slowly entered Auckland harbor through a thick morning fog on a grey and rainy day, which was nothing unusual for this country; it did however add to the low mood everyone on board was in at the end of a mission and having to say their goodbyes. Lahni quickly got her things together with one of the cabin staff helping her. The vest was folded and stored in her small backpack, other than that she just had some snacks and her paperwork to carry. Again she would have to leave her new friends whom she may or may not see again on her travels. Instead of a long goodbye she decided to say ‘see you’ to everyone and went on her way. She had already had a more in depth and lengthy sit down with the professor, who somehow wanted to stay in touch with her. How exactly this would work she didn’t know.

Not sure where to start she began to walk around the harbor and city without any particular plan. She wanted to get a feel for where she was and how people related to each other. The first vibe she got was friendly but reserved. People looked at her with curiosity, probably wondering what a Siberian sled dog with a backpack was doing in Auckland on her own, Lahni pondered.

After an initial round of the foreshore and surrounds she went into the direction of downtown to see more of the area. The temperature was very comfortable at 23° Celsius after all the tropical islands she had visited but she still felt a little woozy with sea legs and all, so she found herself a park bench to lay under to take a break from exploring the city.

She dozed off again as usual only to be woken up by two of Maori children playing on skateboards next to her. The sound of the wheels on the uneven pavement rattled her awake. She decided to remain in her spot to observe them for a while. Since the little reserve off to the side of the road had a little set of stairs and a wheel chair ramp the kids used it as a skating bowl trying out new tricks and flying right by Lahni every time before landing in the grass next to the bench.

“Nice move,” popped out of Lahni’s mouth rather loudly after which she held her paw in front of her mouth. She ought to be more discerning about speaking to people here. Ah well, too late now, she thought. The kids both stopped and looked around to see who had made the comment about their play but couldn’t see anyone except what they assumed was a white stray dog sleeping under the bench. Lahni had closed her eyes again pretending to be asleep, since she wasn’t sure yet if it was safe to really talk to them, but decided to throw caution to the wind and continued to speak.

“Hey, you two, shouldn’t you be in school this time of the day?”

The boys looked around again and then spotted her with her eyes open and looking right at them.

“Did you say something?” the bigger of the two inquired.

“Yes,” answered Lahni, “I was wondering why you guys aren’t in school?”

The boys’ eyes grew bigger but having seen many movies about talking animals got used to idea of a talking dog fairly quickly.

“We’re on holidays, it’s almost Christmas now, got a couple of months school holidays,” he said.

“And what are you doing here without your parents?” Lahni found herself asking, feeling a little strange about it after it came out. None of my business really, she thought.

“We’re waiting for our dad to finish his shift. He drives a taxi in town; then we’ll be off to the coast to see our granddad for a month. Our mum’s already there. What about you, what are you doing here?”

“Well, how much time do you have?” she asked.

Lahni told the two boys her story. They were now sitting down on the grass, skateboards beside them listening to her amazing account of seafaring adventures. They couldn’t believe it but thought it was such a cool story, they decided to ask their dad to invite Lahni to their tribal village. In Maori culture one needed a personal invitation to go to tribal properties and this was a perfect opportunity for Lahni to get to know the indigenous population and their traditions.

Again, following her nose had paid off. An hour after they’d first met in the little green patch in the city, Itu and Tane, their dad Jim and Lahni were on their way to the Bay of Islands. The taxi Jim drove for a living belonged to the taxi company he worked for, so it had to stay at their base in Auckland. Jim owned a pick up truck with only three seats across the front and therefore Lahni had to contend herself with the loading flat in the back of the car but had access to the kids and their dad through a sliding window behind the seat.

She was tied up due to the fact that it was illegal to have a dog riding on the back loose, which she tolerated for a little while. She sat close to the window to stay out of trouble, with her head peaking through the little opening to be with the boys. The air was crisp and clear, the countryside lush with greenery and intense color. Paihia, the main town in the Bay of Islands, was their first stop to get some food supplies for the week ahead and run some errands before the weekend. The place was bustling with tourists so close to a main religious holiday. Paihia was well known for its beautiful unspoiled beaches and adventure activities. Lahni was excited to be there.

After a quick look around and shopping they drove to their grandfather’s place on the outskirts of Waitangi, a small township just north of Paihia on the water; best known for the Waitangi Treaty between the English Crown and Maori chiefs in 1840 which they signed to gain protection for their tribes on the Maori side and to begin governing New Zealand by the English Empire on the other. Only four chiefs signed the treaty to start with but 450 others joined later.

There are, however still some tribes that never agreed to it to this day Jim explained to her while driving. “Even now this important event influences local politics when it comes to Maori and government dealings,” Jim said looking over his shoulder now and then, to see if Lahni was paying attention to him. “February 6th is Waitangi day where the treaty is celebrated. Marking its anniversary attracts many visitors who enjoy watching us Maori putting on a show for them,” he added, sounding almost a little sarcastic. “Maybe you’ll still be here then,” he added.

Jim was full of useful and interesting information, Lahni thought.

“Thanks for the historical tour, Jim. I assume you don’t agree with what’s happening with this treaty, at least not fully?”

“What makes you say that?” he asked now really leaning back over the seat while still in motion.

“Watch out, Dad!” one of the kids cried.

Jim jerked back in his seat looking straight at the front of another vehicle. Turning his head too far back to talk to Lahni, he had drifted onto the wrong side of the road. He had just enough time to adjust the steering wheel to avoid hitting the truck coming the other way. The vehicle swirled a few times right to left to right; brakes screeching until it came to a stop on the side of the road. Lahni was holding on tight in the back. She was glad to be tied up now. Jim composed himself and checked on everyone, then continued the conversation.

“Sorry, guys, I should keep my eyes on the road. I’ll use the rear view mirror next time. And boys, don’t tell your mum about this!” he said just a little out of breath from the adrenalin hit. He then turned to Lahni to wait for an answer to the question he’d asked before the near hit.

“Well,” Lahni said, “first of all, thanks for not hitting that truck. Nice save. About the other thing, I heard something in your voice that would suggest you have an issue with this. I don’t really know enough about this yet to have an opinion but I feel that you aren’t happy about this treaty and the way it was and is being handled. Am I right?”

“I guess you are right. The treaty has its positives but the way we, as Maori understand it, to the way the Crown view the agreement is very different. We see it as a work in progress, something that needs to be reviewed, overhauled and revised to modern standards and language. It was meant to be a flexible thing. The English want the so-called ‘settlements’ over and done with and then never hear any more complaints from our side. The problem with that is, that it isn’t over. We are still dealing with the aftermath of the white settlement and takeover of our sovereignty as a nation. Our young people are still suffering. It’s not over and maybe never will be.” He took a deep breath and then continued. “I want my boys to be free Maori men but at this point I’m not sure if they ever will be with the way things are. Maoris are generally poorer and more disadvantaged than Whites and other people who come here to live. We often do worse than poor immigrants from

Africa and Asia. We have high unemployment and a big drug problem amongst our youth. We need to work together more but since this is a very big subject I want to talk about this more with you and my father. He still remembers the stories from his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, the latter of whom was actually present at the signing of the treaty. Let's get back on the road and get there, shall we."

A few minutes down the road Jim turned into a dirt track down towards the beach. A little white house with a flat corrugated iron roof sat on a little rise covered in grass and scrub, the beach merely 50 meters below and an amazing view of the bay in front of them. The house was more spacious on the inside than it looked from outside with four bedrooms, a large living room, study and a big veranda on the ocean view side. Grandfather sat on a bench in the back reading, when the boys jumped out of the truck and ran up to him to greet him with a huge hug.

Grandpa Joe was happy to see everyone but a little overwhelmed by the enthusiastic hello. "Slow down, boys. I'm not a young lad any more," he laughed as Lahni came up to say hello with Jim by her side.

"Pa, meet Lahni. The boys ran into her in Auckland. She's come a long way to see us, East Siberia in fact," he said looking at her and then his dad. Joe bent down to get a bit closer to see her better, since his eyesight had let him down a little of late.

"East Siberia, huh? A long way indeed! What are you doing here?" he said, padding her on the head and not really expecting an answer.

"She talks, you know!" Jim interjected.

"Does she now?" Joe came back with, thinking his son was kidding.

"No, really. I do. Talk, that is. Ask me anything you like. It's only fair, since I'll be asking you lots of questions while I'm here," Lahni said to Joe who was now sitting back on the bench.

"I've seen a lot in my days but this one is new. Even I'm surprised. But hey, we can never be sure that we know everything," he paused a moment, taking a deep breath. "OK. I'm good now. Where were we? ... Oh yes, East Siberia. How did you get here?"

Jim followed Itu and Tane inside the house to see about some food and to find his wife who was in the kitchen already preparing a meal. Lahni stayed on the porch next to Papa Joe, telling him the entire story from the beginning. The boys and Jim had already heard most of it during the trip here. Lahni's account was interrupted to break for a late lunch but Joe made it clear that he was very keen to hear the rest of this incredible tale during the afternoon.

"This is my wife, Miriama. Meet Lahni!" Jim said, pulling his wife in for a sideways cuddle. "She's something special." "Me or Lahni?" his wife asked smiling at her. "Call me Miri, that's what everyone else does. I already heard about you

from my beautiful rascals. You must be starving after all those adventures. Let's eat!" she said guiding everyone to the table.

After they finished their meal the boys went off to explore the neighborhood and all the possibilities for getting into trouble, to keep them busy for the summer. Lahni was happy for a siesta after the meal but Joe had other ideas and insisted on hearing more about Lahni's voyage before she finally had the chance to settle down for a nap. Papa Joe had fallen asleep himself right towards the end of Lahni's story but was still sitting in the same spot, his head resting on the wall behind him, with Lahni sleeping by his feet; in the background the sun was setting over the bay to the West. The two were still sleeping when Itu and Tane came running up the stairs onto the porch to attend to their mother's dinner call. They weren't really meant to be out after dark but being vacation time and Waitangi being a safe place for them to roam, Miri made a little bit of an exception during the summer months.

Lahni woke from the bouncing wooden planks under her and grandpa awoke on hearing the second call to the table. He stood up, looked at Lahni and said: "Oh good, I wasn't dreaming all this after all. You're still here. We'll talk more later."

He walked into the house to see if he could make himself useful. Lahni was right behind him. She hadn't really seen much of the inside of the house yet and was curious. It was simple and comfortable. Lahni was hungry from all the activity despite the late lunch. She tucked into the dinner Miri had made without even asking what she was eating.

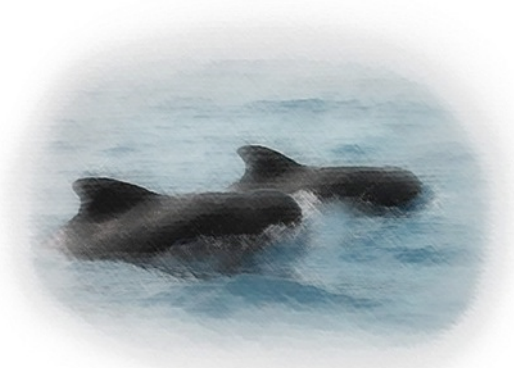
Lahni needed a rest from everything she'd experienced and to integrate all the new things she had learnt, so the next few days she spent mostly by Joe's side on the porch taking turns talking and listening in between naps.

A few days later, during the early morning hours, feeling refreshed and renewed from the break, she decided to take off on her own to explore the area but didn't notice that the boys had followed her down to the little beach by the house and then along the shoreline away from the village. They continued their pursuit of her over the rocks but remained always a few hundred feet behind to stay out of sight. After a few minutes Lahni's keen sense of smell picked up the scent of the boys behind her but every time she turned around they had disappeared from view. Playing games, are we? Lahni thought. "OK then. I'll play. We'll see how long you think you can keep up with me," she mumbled to herself while jumping from rock to rock. "Catch me if you can!" she said louder this time and increased her speed. She was very agile, used to running and jumping around on icy surfaces, so a few flat rocks posed no challenge for her.

Itu and Tane were having a hard time catching up and lost her trail sooner than she thought they would. In the end the two gave up but stayed on the rocks to play for a while. A few miles along the coast still climbing boulders and flat fallen

sheets of stone, Lahni turned a corner onto a beautiful, long and secluded beach. In the distance though she saw dark shapes on the sand and flapping in the shallows. A sick feeling came over her like she'd never felt before. "Was this what Kohola had spoken about...his mates stranding themselves because they are lost?" she mumbled.

She could only see two or three of the animals clearly now but the water was busy with movement which meant more were about to get stuck in the sand. Lahni ran as fast as she could to get to the whales to see if she could help.



She started barking loudly to see if anyone else was in the area to help but no one came forward. Grandpa Joe's little house was already a ways out of town, so this place was even more remote and given that she'd just spent a good 45 minutes running and climbing rocks along the cliffs she didn't know where to get help. Lahni was close to the first whale now. They were a smaller kind than Kohola, black with a little grey and smoother skin. Beautiful creatures really, Lahni thought as she approached the closest one. He was still wet and alive which indicated that it had only just happened. Four others were on the beach close by and a few more were on approach in the shallow water.

She stood up on her hind legs to get closer to his eye. "Hello. What happened to you? Why are you on this beach and not in the water?"

"I don't know exactly, I couldn't hear anything anymore for a while. It was noisy all of a sudden and we got lost. Then the sandbank got us and now we can't turn back. I can hear a bit again now though. There are twelve of us, with four young ones," he answered.

"I will go and get help, then I'll be back. I'll hurry, I promise!" She turned to go back the way she came but then noticed a path up to the road and decided on that instead. Maybe there would be a car coming or someone would be walking and could help. She clambered up the last bit a little out of breath. The hurry made her slip and slide in the fine, dry sand. She finally made it to the road where she sat for a second panting while deciding which direction to take. The left, she thought, towards town; more traffic maybe. Her mind was racing at a million miles an hour. Would she be able to rescue them, would anyone believe her? Would she find anyone?

After running for 20 minutes she stopped for a minute to catch her breath when she saw Tane climbing up the cliff to the side of the road and then helping his brother over the edge. They brushed themselves off and then saw Lahni coming up

jumping up at them wildly.

“Come quickly, you must help. Tane, we must go and get your dad and granddad and anyone else who is available, call everyone who lives here! We need help! There are whales stranded on the beach back there!”

Itu started running towards the beach but Tane and Lahni took off to get Jim and the others.

“Itu, keep them wet if you can! Take your shirt off and soak it and drip it on them. There are twelve. Some are still in the water,” Lahni yelled out from a distance.

“OK, hurry up you two! Don’t leave me here alone too long!” he answered breathlessly, while running but Lahni and Tane had vanished around the bend. Itu didn’t stop until he reached the whales. He jumped into the water, took his shirt off, dipped it into the water to soak it and then ran back to the first whale to keep him wet, then the next. He just kept on going back to keep them moist, all of them.

Most of the remaining whales had now ended up on the sand; there was only one left in the water. To get a break from running around Itu lunched himself into the small waves to get to the one still afloat.

“Hey whale, swim the other way, please!” Itu said while grabbing onto her tail to try to pull her into deeper water. The animal struggled against him. “I’m not leaving without my family.” Itu heard coming from the whale.



“OK then. We are trying to rescue them, so please don’t go any further in. Stay here and you’ll live.”

Itu was so busy with his task that he didn’t even notice he had just had a conversation with a whale. It just seemed normal after Lahni.

Back at the house, Lahni and Tane quickly explained the situation. Jim didn’t wait to hear all of it. He got up from the kitchen table, called out for Papa Joe and Miri, grabbed his keys, a bunch of blankets and buckets and ran out to the truck. He gave his phone to his wife and instructed her to call everyone in the area.

“Tane and Lahni, hop on the back and hold on tight, no time to tie you up now, so stay low,” he yelled while getting in. They reached the beach within 30 minutes of Lahni running into the boys on the road; unpacked all their equipment and hurried down to join Itu, who was frantically trying to keep them hydrated.

“Dad, come quick! So glad you’re here,” Itu said, falling onto his knees in exhaustion. He was wet and covered top to toe in sand. Jim nodded at him in acknowledgement. “Well done, son!”

As they got to work on drenching the whales, others arrived one by one.

Many more than expected helpers had made their way down to the beach, since everyone Miriama had called had also brought their friends, family and neighbors to come along to help.

By the time everyone had arrived, around 40 people stood in line on the beach hauling buckets of water up to the sand. After the whales were all well covered, Jim and all the bigger men started shifting them onto blankets to pull them back into the deeper water.

The first one was a young female who was fairly light and easy to pull. One by one the men heaved and pulled all the animals back into the water.

Lahni assisted where she could. She was walking backwards pulling the blanket with her teeth.

“You could help a bit by wiggling yourself through the sand,” she said to the biggest whale she had first spoken to. “We are trying really hard to get you back in the water,” she added.

“I’m a bit stuck”, replied the whale. “Thanks for helping though. I’ll give the wiggling a go if you think it’ll help.”

“It might,” Lahni said, now pushing him with her head. “Come on, you can do it. Everyone else is already back in the water.”

The whale perked up a little when he heard the news of his family. He wriggled harder and with one big roll right at the waters edge he slid the rest of the way into the waves. He flapped his flukes hard and fast to get himself into the deep.

“Thanks, thanks so much! I don’t know who you are but you are a friend, you all are,” he said jumping out of the water to demonstrate his gratitude.



“Lahni is my name. Say hi to my friend Kohola when you see him,” she responded. A boat had joined the rescuers from the water’s side to help pull the whales further out and keep watch to make sure they would move on and out to sea by morning. Exhausted and soaked everyone sat at the waters edge to watch the whales leave.

Afterwards hugs and handshakes were exchanged and everyone went home. Back at Joe’s house over afternoon tea he started telling the boys and Lahni stories about the Maori and their whale traditions.

“Legend has it that the first of our people who came to Aotearoa were guided by a whale. Maori have a very long history with whales but our relationship with them was somewhat damaged when the Europeans arrived. We had never hunted them before. But sometimes we would take a whale to survive. The method we used was exactly the opposite of what we did today. Beaching them in fact,” he said, looking for disapproval in the kids and Lahni’s faces, “and yes, I’m not proud of it. It seems really horrible now. But at least we only took one at a time and used all of it, while white people took all of them, until there were hardly any left. And we took part in this; I am sorry to this day that this happened. Nowadays we are trying to make amends to our ocean friends. And today you guys did a great thing towards that...anyway, back to my story about the legends,” he stopped for a moment to light a cigar but Miri interrupted him.

“Not here Pa, what about the kids, please! Since you’re done with tea, you can all go and sit on the verandah to continue your stories and your cigar smoking! How about it?”

“It’s my house but OK,” Grandpa mumbled and moved everyone out. “Well, maybe we’ll get this story told today,” he said, looking sternly at Miri for so rudely interrupting him. “Where were we... yes, the legend. Pane-iraira was a water spirit, or taniwah in Maori. Many thought he was a whale, who calmed the waves for the journey of the Tainui canoe. Others think these sea spirits can appear to people in whatever shape needed to guide them safely to their destinations.”

“What’s Tainui?” Lahni asked.

“The Tainui were our ancestors who came from Hawaiiki, Maori mythology tells us, about 800 years ago. Tohunga, the tribal priests, if you will, were responsible for navigation and often used their powers during bad storms,” he continued.

“Like a medicine man?” Lahni interrupted again.

Tane looked at Grandpa expecting a reaction, since he knew grandpa didn't like to be stopped in the middle of something but Joe just answered the question and continued.

"Yes, Lahni, just like that. They would appeal to sea creatures to escort the canoes and shield them from capsizing. Often the tohunga would pull a hair from his head and throw it to the whale or taniwha as recognition of assistance. No one knows for sure why they did this but it seems very similar to whales giving each other offerings of seaweed as a gift. So they thought it would appease them to offer their hair. Whales were seen as the direct descendants of Tangaroa, the god of the oceans. They were awe inspiring to the Maori people, even sacred. So it's only fair that we do everything in our power to look after them now and protect them. They have done so much for us. Today was a miracle for Lahni to be there just in time. If she hadn't, it would have turned out quite differently," he said nodding his head at Lahni in appreciation.

"I couldn't have done it on my own. Everyone helped. Thanks to Tane and Itu following me today, I found help fast."

"Grandpa, tell her the story of Kae who ate the whale...please," Itu said, tugging at Joe's shirt. "Please!"

"OK. Not my favorite story but I'll tell it for Lahni. Here we go! Tinirau was a great chief who had a pet whale called Tutunui. He was said to be the son of the god of the oceans, Tangaroa; his task was to be the guardian of the fishes. One day a tahunga named Kae visited him to partake in a ceremony for Tinirau's wife Hinauri and her newborn baby. After the visit was over, he asked Tinirau if he would allow his whale to carry him home, which Tinirau wasn't happy with. He did however agree to it anyway. Kae rode the whale home and then did the unthinkable. He forced him to beach and then killed him. He then proceeded to cook his meat on a fire. Legend has it that he even built a house and used some of Tutunui's bones as rafters. Kae was severely punished by Tinirau for this despicable act. He took Kae back to his house after putting him to sleep with a magic song performed by his wife and a few other women. When Kae awoke in Tinirau's house, Tinirau killed him instantly. Later Kae's tribe avenged his death by killing Hinauri's son."

Tane and Itu had fallen asleep laying on the verandah but Lahni was still all ears for Joe's tales.

"Tragic!" she said. "Revenge has no end. It seems to be the same story the world over. Unless you forgive someone you can't move on and you'll forever be connected to them."

"True, a very wise thing to say. Where did you learn about this?" Joe asked.

"I met a Kahuna woman in Hawaii who taught me about Ho'oponopono, a prayer of forgiveness. A way of living your life in forgiveness! I really think it works well. Better than this eye for an eye business," Lahni explained.

"Oh, that's interesting. We have a similar way of prayer here called Karakia; these are not so much forgiveness prayers as incantations to bless something or someone. I did travel to Hawaii some time ago and had a few very nice experiences with them. I wish we would get along better here. Politics always seems to get in the way," Joe said raising his eyebrows.

“What do you mean by politics?” Lahni asked with curiosity.

“Well, look at the Waitangi treaty. Jim talked to you briefly in the truck, I believe. We haven’t been able to come to a real agreement with our community and the government because of tribal rivalry and English politics. We don’t work as one unit in this country. There is so much bickering going on about who owns what and who is owed what, that in the end nobody gets anything. It’s been going on for a very long time. And to this day some tribes haven’t even signed the treaty.”

Joe took a deep breath and went on. “Let’s start at the beginning. After the Waitangi treaty was signed by most of the tribes, the Crown went back on their word to give Maori people what the treaty had originally promised. Settlers weren’t meant to get land directly from the Maori but through warring tribes and backyard deals this whole thing went pear shaped. War ensued. It started just a few short years after the signing. They were called the Maori wars. There were series of serious conflicts, which took place here between 1845 and 1872. The wars were fought over a few different issues but the biggest one was about our land being sold to the European settlers, when the treaty was supposed to have protected us from this and should have guaranteed that individual Maori tribes had full possession and rights to their lands, forests, fisheries in return for giving up our self governance to the British empire. We were supposed to sell our land to the government only and surrender sovereignty to the British. I’m doubtful that the chiefs who signed the treaty fully understood what they were actually signing. Sovereignty seems to mean different things to different cultures. It was a mess, to say the least!”

“Wow, no wonder people are still angry about this thing! Maybe you guys need a Ho’oponopono or a Karakia or both!” Lahni yawned. “Sorry, I’m a bit tired, s’been a big day!”

“Maybe we do need one of those. But let’s go to bed, huh! It’s late.” Joe took the still sleeping boys to bed one by one. Lahni settled on a mat on the verandah. Nights were clear and beautiful and she preferred sleeping close to the stars and the ocean.

The next morning at breakfast Kiwi fruit was on the menu, which Lahni thought was a little sour at first but took to it after a few tries. Jim brought up the whale rescue again and praised his boys and Lahni for the effort they’d made. He also brought up the fact that so much more money was being made with eco-tourism like whale watching tours and diving sessions and that it was in everyone’s best interest to keep saving them and improving the human-whale relationship.

“There are many tribes now who’ve taken on the task of showing people how else we can live with nature rather than against it. It’s frankly a lot more enjoyable to watch a whale and save one compared to killing them and eating them,” he added.

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Lahni, “I wish for my whale friends out there that the rest of the world would catch up to

this way of thinking.”

Joe walked in after a sleep in; a very unusual occurrence but then again he wasn't normally up so late into the night having intelligent conversation with a dog.

“Morning,” he said stretching himself, “Jim, I must talk to you and the tribal council some time today. Lahni had some interesting input last night on how to resolve some local issues.”

“OK,” said Jim, looking very curious. “What were you two up to last night?”

“We just talked for what seems a very long time. That's all!” Joe said, pouring himself a cup of tea and sitting down opposite Jim.

“I have some errands to run in town but after that maybe we can get together to have a chat. If you could call everyone, please! And bring Lahni, she's officially invited to the meeting.”

The Marae, a traditional communal area cleared of trees and scrub for meetings; sacred ceremonies and social purposes, was close enough to walk to. Jim and Lahni strolled there together along the side of the road. “Thanks for inviting me to your meeting. I'm very honored.”

“You're welcome Lahni, you are the reason we're having this meeting my dear. You have opened up a whole new way of looking at things for us. Joe is absolutely taken by you and your worldview. I've never seen him like this. He is usually very private with Maori business and would never think to invite anyone unless it's really important to him. You must have really had quite an impact,” Jim said.

They took around 20 minutes to get to the gate of the sacred meeting area. Behind a wide, open space stood the whare runanga, the communal house. Normally a ceremony called ‘te wero’ would take place for any non-Maori visitor but since Lahni was not of European descent, she was welcome to enter on equal footing with Jim. Joe was already there and so were a half a dozen other men and women sitting on the grass waiting for everyone to arrive. Hongi were exchanged and a greeting spoken.

A Hongi is a traditional Māori greeting, which is done by gently pressing one's nose and forehead to another person's forehead at an encounter.

It is still used at traditional meetings among members of the Māori people and at major ceremonies. In the hongi, the 'ha' or breath of life is exchanged and intermingled.

"Welcome my friend," Joe said to Lahni, ushering her to a shady spot to sit down.

"Thank you," Lahni answered and took her place. All the other men did the same after the brief Maori greeting with Jim and the other arrivals.



"Let's get right to the point everyone. Lahni had a lot to say the other night. She is concerned about the environment, animals and people alike and how we've all been treating this planet and each other. We talked about our situation here, the treaty, the way we as Maori live and we talked about whales. Most of you were there that day when we saved the whales. Right?" Joe continued looking around the circle acknowledging all who had been there.

"It's not about making anyone wrong, or laying blame or judging anyone's choices. It's about looking at what works and what doesn't. I know we have very traditional ways of working here some of which are useful and others that are antiquated and get in the way of actually changing things for the better for all of us, including our so called enemies. We have forgotten how to live with the environment in the world and in ourselves; it is high time to make amends and get back to what we know in our hearts," he added, "we complain that our land was taken from us and that the treaty we signed did nothing for us. We went from our old system to their new system, which frankly isn't too desirable either. There must be a better way, a middle path," Jim interjected. "What exactly did you have in mind?" Everyone else nodded in agreement with Jim's question.

"We'd like to know too!" one of the other elders said. "I thought you were all against change, Joe?"

Joe took a deep breath and went on. “It’s not every day a wise dog comes to visit,” he chuckled. “But let me finish; I’m not talking about changing all our traditions; in a way I’m talking about going back to what worked before. I will backtrack a little here into our history to explain the way it was to Lahni and anyone else who wants to brush up. Before the English way of doing things, land ownership was based in our belief that humans came out of the union between earth mother, papatuanuku and sky father ranginui. Our word for land, whenua, means placenta and the term for humans, tangata whenua, which translate to being born out of the earth’s womb. With this way of looking at the relationship, the land is permanent and human life is transient. Maori saw themselves as belonging to, rather than owning the land. So, in a way, we were just the custodians of the land we occupied it and it owned us for the time we were here. The right to remain on a chosen piece of land was confirmed by settlement and the up-keep of the lighted fires, called take ahi kaa. It subsequently transformed into an ancestral right, called ‘take tipuna’. We also had the rights to conquest, called ‘take raupatu’ and right of gift, called take tuku. In most cases the occupancy, use and protection of any resource were enough to claim ownership...And with that last piece of information I get to my point.

Throughout our time in Aotearoa we have taken from other iwi and have had land taken from us during times of conquest and war. Then the whites came and took most of it setting us off against each other. Some of us have also laid claim to having been the first people to arrive here which is now being disputed by some new findings....”

“Hang on a minute now! What are you talking about? We are the traditional owners of this land!” Leni, Jim’s cousin said in protest. “That fairy tale about the Waitaha and Moriori cultures being here first is just that. There’s no proof.”

“Well, that’s not what I’ve been reading lately. There is actually evidence that pre-date our ancestors. What I’m getting at is that we have a tradition of taking land by force and so does the rest of the world. The Moriori people of Chatham Island are just one example. Maori took everything from them with the help of the white folk and it took another hundred or so years for that to be acknowledged. They finally got written into the history books by the government and were given back their land rights as well. We are still ‘fighting’ even if it’s without spears and muskets. We are still fighting! And after talking with Lahni, a little light went off in my head. Fighting doesn’t work. I mean, it had its place, certainly at the beginning when white people arrived. We had to defend ourselves but is it still useful now? Our insistence on the right to take from others in conquest throughout our history has come back to haunt us. Call it karma, if you will. The concept exists everywhere in some form or another,” Joe explained.

Everyone in the circle went really quiet. Even Leni had stopped sending disagreeable looks towards Joe. What had come from Joe’s lips had hit a nerve.

“What do you suggest we do instead?” Jim asked.

“Well, Lahni told me about Ho’oponopono, a Hawaiian way of forgiveness and atonement which reminded me of our way of blessing things with Karakia. We haven’t done that for a long time except for very rare special ceremonies. I think we should incorporate it back into our daily lives. Hawaiians are our cousins and I’m sure we could take a hint from them too. I also want to read a poem I came across in amongst my papers the other day which I think hits the nail on the head,” Joe held an old, slightly crumpled piece of paper in his hand and began to read a Poem.

"My Law" by Tieme Ranapiri (circa 1700AD) and translated from Maori by Kere Graham.

The sun may be clouded, yet ever the sun
Will sweep on its course ‘til the cycle is run.
And when into chaos the system is hurled
Again shall the builder reshape a new world.
Your path may be clouded, uncertain your goal:
Move on – for your orbit is fixed to your soul.
And though it may lead into darkness of night,
The torch of the builder shall give it new light.

You were. You will be! Know this while you are:
Your spirit has travelled both long and afar.
It came from the source, to the source it returns.
The spark, which was lighted eternally burns.
It slept in a jewel. It leapt in a wave.
It roamed in the forest, It rose from the grave.
It took on the garbs for long aeons of years.
And now in the soul of yourself it appears.

From Body to body your spirit speeds on,
It seeks a new form when the old one has gone.
And the form that it finds is the fabric you wrought
On the loom of the mind from the fibre of thought.
As dew is drawn upwards away and in rain to descend,
Your thoughts drift away and in destiny blend.
You cannot escape them, for petty or great,
Or evil or noble, they fashion your fate.

Somewhere on some planet, sometime and somehow
Your life will reflect your thoughts of your Now.
My Law is unerring, no blood can atone –
The structure you built you will live in - alone.
From cycle to cycle, through time and through space
Your lives with your longings will ever keep pace,
And all that you ask for, and all you desire,
Must come at your bidding, as flame out of fire

Once list' to that voice and all tumult is done –
Your life is the life of the infinite One.
In hurrying race you are conscious of pause,
With love for the purpose, and love for the cause.
You are your own Devil, you are your own God,
You fashioned the paths your footsteps have trod.
And no one can save you from Error or Sin
Until you have harked to the Spirit within.

So, it's about taking responsibility for what you've done so far and changing it if you don't like the result?" Leni asked.

"That's how I understand it," Jim answered.

"Yes, that's it," Joe confirmed. "If we want a better way of dealing with each other and our perceived enemies, we need to change the way we look at what we've been putting out there."

Lahni was sitting there smiling from ear to ear. "In all this talk of Karma please don't forget the whales. They deserve an apology, don't they?" she added.

"Of course!" said Joe. "That was next on the agenda to be discussed."

"Well, so far there hasn't been much of a discussion about any of this," one of the younger members interrupted, "and what about the whales? Who cares about whales?" he said and got up to leave in protest.

"Wait a minute, mate!" Jim got up following him to the gate. "If you want to continue being part of the council you have to be willing to listen to the elders, sometimes without getting your own opinion heard."

The young man looked hard at Jim for a moment, then nodded, turned and took his seat in silence. Joe addressed the group again, now with a more serious face. "This here is exactly why we need to do something differently. We have too many

egos involved and nothing gets done. Enough with that!”

In the days that followed they congregated a few more times but invited the whole tribe to partake. A ceremony each for the land, the people, the animals and all the creatures of the oceans were performed. Lahni led the way introducing everyone to the Hawaiian way of prayer and the locals brought song and prayer together in Karakia.

A few mornings later Lahni woke up and somehow knew she had to move on. She had been weeks in the one place with this lovely lot of people and she felt like she was getting too comfortable. Easy to get distracted from my mission, she thought; I must move on.

She asked Jim to take her to the next township if possible but he insisted he would take her as far as Auckland again, since that’s where he had to return to work the next day anyway. The boys were to stay with their grandfather until the end of the summer and so was his wife. He would be commuting on weekends to be with his family and otherwise do his job and stay at their apartment in town on his own.

They took off early the next day. During the drive they both remained quiet. Jim was trying to keep his sadness about their pending goodbyes at bay. After spending a good amount of time with Lahni he was very used to having her around, apart from all the good she had brought with her. He was going to miss her as a friend a great deal.

Lahni was sad but excited about the next leg, even though she had no idea what that would bring with it.

Back in Auckland she got out of the truck at the taxi station. Jim parked the truck to start his shift. As he got out, he stood by his vehicle looking at Lahni and broke out in tears, laughing at the same time. He extended his arms wide to invite her for a last embrace. Lahni jumped right in. They hugged for what seemed a very long time when Jim’s boss waved him to come. “Hey Jim, get a room, will ya!” he yelled.

Jim nodded and laughed still holding on to Lahni.

“Jokes aside, mate, I need you a.s.a.p. We’re short staffed today,” his boss added.

“OK, I’m just saying my goodbyes to my dear friend here and then I’m all yours,” Jim answered. “Thanks for everything, Jim! You and your family gave me such a welcome. I consider you part of mine now. I wish for you all that your lives get better and better from now on and peace be with you and yours,” Lahni heard herself say. Wow, so formal, she thought. Jim hugged her one last time. “You are always welcome. You were a gift to us, a little miracle, really. Thank you for being who you are and making us want to be better humans! I love you, Lahni!”

“I love you too, Jim. See you!” Lahni answered and quickly walked away.

“Happy travels mate and Godspeed!” Jim said walking over to his taxi. While he got in he started singing in Maori to himself.

Lahni could hear the verse in the distance:

**“Kia hora te marino
kia whakapapa pounamu te moana
kia tere te karohirohi
i mua i tou huarahi
Haere e tama haere”**

“May Peace Be Widespread”

Let peace be widespread

Let the sea glisten like the greenstone

May your path be straight

Like the flight of the dove

Go in peace and with my blessings

She knew what it meant and was content to have a blessing for her travels. She took off towards the town center, once again following her nose.

Passing by a bus stop Lahni came to an abrupt halt in front of a poster. She still wasn’t adept at reading human script but the pictures on it were worth a thousand words. The symbols and photos indicated that a current exhibition about ancient Maori culture and the beginnings of a civilization was being held at the National Art Museum in the city. She decided that this would be her next stop but wasn’t entirely sure how to find it. Ah, well, she thought, if I’m meant to get there I will and kept on moving through city streets and alleys at a good speed.

She picked up her pace all of a sudden, as if someone had spurred her on and almost bolted around the next corner running head first into a pair of legs covered in corduroy trousers. Hot coffee came flying across her back hitting her tail. Papers fluttered around them and the folder they had escaped from, landed next to her on the ground. The scene seemed chaotic. The man yelled out in anger. “Ahh, no. Shit, sorry, didn’t mean to swear but you messed up my pants and my shirt

and I have meetings to go to. And my papers..." he crouched down to start collecting as many as he could, stuffing them back into their folder. Lahni sat in front of him and began licking the milky coffee mixture off his pant leg.

"I'm so sorry, mister! I was in a hurry, so sorry!" she said.

"Stop licking my pants, will you," he said when he noticed that he was actually having a conversation. He finished collecting his things and took off shaking his head, now and again looking back at Lahni, then continued to shake his head. Lahni followed him for a while, since she had a hunch about this person she had collided with. There is no such thing as an accident, she thought. Two blocks further he crossed the road and entered what looked like a huge, modern white building with a massive banner hanging on the front of it. The symbols and pictures on it were identical with what Lahni had seen on the bus stop earlier.

"This must be the place, the museum with the exhibition. But how will I get in...hmm?" Lahni said, talking to herself. She sat in front of the door for some time when the man she'd literally run into, causing a spill, walked out again, now wearing a fresh shirt and pants, papers under his arm.

"Not you again? What are you doing here on your own anyway? Shouldn't you be on a leash being taken for a walk at least. Where is your owner?" he kept on ranting, while looking around for the person who Lahni might belong to.

"I am not owned by anyone. I own myself, sir, if you don't mind. And I did apologize to you earlier. I guess you must not have heard me in all the commotion. I am so sorry for messing up your pants and papers. Can we be civil now, please? I have a question for you?"

The man sat down on the small wall adjacent to the museum entrance. "So I wasn't imagining it when I heard you talking to me earlier?"

"Nope, you certainly weren't," Lahni said looking at him with almost a wink.

"OK," he said fidgeting around to look at his watch. "I'm going to be very late for my meeting now but I would like to see you again. In fact I must see you again, actually. I'm not really sure why but since this is so unusual an incident, I insist. Will you wait for me?" he asked.

"I will but I also would like to go to the museum and see the Maori exhibition. Will you help me get in there?" she answered.

Now even more surprised he agreed and left for his meeting.

"I'll see you in an hour, here!" he said walking away still shaking his head. He looked back one more time, shaking his head all the while.

He'll be getting dizzy if he keeps doing that with his head, Lahni thought, while settling in to take a nap under a tree in a

green patch next to the museum.

A hand on her shoulder shaking her a little got her up in a hurry. “Hey, come now, the attendant has gone to the toilet, she’ll be gone a few minutes. I can get you in now,” the man said while Lahni jumped to her paws. They walked over to the entrance. He looked around left and right and pressing his face to the glass doors to make sure the coast was clear.

“They don’t allow dogs in here usually. Oh and stick to the walls to the right so the cameras won’t see you.”

“I figured that,” Lahni said. “Thanks for getting me in.”

“God, I sound like a thief in the night,” he laughed. “And I’m in charge here at the moment.”

They swiftly got across the lobby to the elevator and then into a back room the man had a swipe card for. Lahni was extra curious now about who she was dealing with. He lead her to a tea room and told her to sit down on the couch. He went to the counter to put water in the kettle. While he waited for the water to boil he turned to Lahni and shook his head again.

“Why do you keep doing that?” she inquired.

“Doing what?” he asked.

“Shaking your head. Aren’t you dizzy yet?” she answered.

“Oh, that, I always do that when something really surprises me and you did just that. I’m still not quite over the fact that I’m standing here talking to you and that you are actually talking back.”

“I guess I can understand that. I’m Lahni by the way, on a journey from East Siberia.”

“Siberia, how on earth did you get here?” he said turning around to make a pot of tea.

“Long story, how much time do you have?” Lahni yawned. “May I have some water please?” she added.

“Oh, sorry, of course. Coming right up.”

He poured water into a bowl and placed it below her.

“You still drink like a dog then?” he said smiling a little.

“No thumbs to hold one of those, yet!” Lahni answered looking at his teacup.

“I know, I’m just being silly. I’m Michael by the way, Dr. Michael Kazinsky, Anthropologist and Historian. I’m running this exhibition at the moment, cataloguing it and promoting it. It finishes tomorrow though.”

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Michael Kazinsky! So when can I see this display then?” she asked.

“The museum closes at 5pm, we can walk through when everyone else is gone. I have keys for the whole building. I’ll just let security know before we start. There shouldn’t be any issues with that. Now tell me why you are so interested in this subject and how you got here?” he explained.

Lahni proceeded to tell her story from beginning to end like she’d done many times when meeting new people. She

started at the very beginning with her dream, her leaving the comfort of home, the furry little helpers in Tiksi, Akiak and Tootega, then Katya and all the amazing people in Hawaii plus Samoa and the voyage on the research vessel with Dr. Morton to New Zealand. The professor was sitting there listening, ah-ing and oh-ing a lot, nodding his head and shaking it now and again.

After she was done he sat there with his mouth wide open, looking a little gobsmacked about the extent of her travels and experiences.

“I am amazed at you and what you’ve already accomplished, my dear!” He said looking at his watch. “Oh, it’s five past, so let’s go and see this exhibition then. We’ll talk more on the way.”

Michael led the way through a series of corridors to a large double door that opened into the first gallery space filled with drawings and artifacts laid out in glass vitrines.

“So, tell me about the history of all this. How did it all happen? Can you tell me about the Moriori people?”

“The Moriori? Where did you hear about them?” Michael asked.

“Joe, one of the Maori elders was mentioning them and was telling me how they had their land taken from them by force and how they got taken over and aren’t recognizable any more,” Lahni said with a questioning tone.

“I’m working on exactly that at the moment — wait a minute...how did you know... how did you find me...did someone tell you about me?” he asked with slightly paranoid look on his face.

“I met you over a spilled cup of coffee, remember, earlier today. I didn’t know anything about you and your work here before you invited me in. I just saw the poster for the exhibition on a bus stop and wandered in the general direction of the city center until I literally ran into you.”

“Wow, some coincidence, huh!” he said with a surprised look.

“If you choose to believe in those. I’d like to think it was meant to be. My entire journey has worked in the same way so far. I just trust where I’m meant to go and somehow it always works out,” Lahni answered.

“If you have nothing better to do than to hang around town for a couple more days until I’m done here, we can talk a bit more about all of this. It wraps tomorrow and then we pack up. After that I’ll be just sitting down to write a paper for the University press about Ancient Maori history and legends. By the way, where do you sleep when you’re not visiting Maori chiefs or hanging around on plastic ships and research vessels?”

“I don’t know where I’ll sleep yet,” she answered.

“I have a comfortable apartment in town that’s much too big for me alone, so if you’d like you can stay there and curl up in a warm spot!” he offered.

After a good look at everything in the exhibit the two left the museum and walked slowly to Michael's apartment. Over dinner they talked more about the legends of the beginnings of New Zealand's civilization and how many conflicting stories and accounts there were.

"It's very difficult to pinpoint an actual history with all this different information coming from various camps," Michael said.

"Well, I found out on my travels that history is usually a very subjective thing, since it seems to be always written or told by the victorious side not the losers. Maybe having many stories is a better way of looking at it rather than just one side," Lahni answered.

"That's a very mature way of looking at it, my dear! It goes with the assumption that everyone is right in a way and it may be so in the end. The problem comes when there are land rights involved that depend on proof of ownership. The bottom line as usual is property and money," Michael continued.

"That seems so far removed from what the Maori belief about ownership. It used to look more like stewardship than ownership in the past but I guess things have changed since the arrival of Europeans," Lahni added.

"That is true! But Lahni, I've been meaning to ask you, why the interest in these legends when your whole journey has been about the environment?" he asked.

"It's not so much that I need to know what exactly happened, since that seems to be impossible in this situation anyway, it's more a study in Karma, for lack of a better word. People have always taken from each other, everywhere in the world and it's shaped their way of life and how they treat each other, their fellow animals and the land. It's all about the environment and our survival in the end, isn't it?" Lahni said.

The professor was astounded at the detail with which his canine friend had pinpointed the issue at hand. "Wow, I must admit I couldn't have said it any better. But why are you concerned about that?"

"Well, I'm concerned with reaping what you sow. I have learnt that you get what you dish out in the world and if you take from others with force you might run into problems later. It's very simple, really. Do to others as you want done to you," Lahni answered.

"That's very religious in nature, don't you think?" Michael threw in.

"Not really, it's just pure natural law. And taking property and life from someone for one's own gain— apart from the very obvious need for survival— is on top of the list of violating this law. From there it trickles down all the way to the environment. In order to have a clean earth, people need a clean conscience. One doesn't come without the other. People

will suffer as long as they don't listen," she said while stretching out her front legs as far as she could.

"I can see that makes sense," Michael agreed while yawning and stretching himself. Let's hit the hay. It's going to be a long day tomorrow. You can have the couch or anywhere else you like. I'll see you in the morning."

The next morning the professor left Lahni on her own to go to the museum for the pack down of the exhibition. Lahni decided to stay in and rest for a day since her adventures would get busy again soon enough. In the evening the professor and Lahni discussed everything under the sun until late.

Before falling asleep that night she had decided that it was time to move on. Over breakfast she said her good byes and a big thank you for all the hospitality she'd received. Afterwards she padded off towards Auckland harbor.

Chapter 13 Passage to Australia

The harbor was easy to find since Auckland had many hills that provided a view towards the ocean, so Lahni had no trouble getting there. Once again she was following her intuition. The goal was to find a way to get to Australia, finally, after many detours on her journey, which had been an amazing learning experience. She cruised around the containers and ships for a while; sat on the jetty between sailing ships and lounged in the sun at the edge of the water.

At lunchtime she feasted on a few bait leftovers a fisherman threw her way, which she shared with the local gulls. Then she settled into a little nook between two pylons to take an afternoon nap. She was in no hurry to get anywhere. She somehow knew the right opportunity would come to her if she just relaxed about it.

Later that same afternoon a couple of familiar voices woke her after a short nap. She wasn't sure at first whether she'd been dreaming but the voices she had heard had been very close and were now moving away from her again. They must have walked by me, she thought while getting up. She spotted the two and started following them to the very end of a large mooring platform. The two carried large backpacks and diving gear. The closer she came the more excited she became. As she caught up to them at the end of the jetty she saw her, the research vessel, the Aurora was sitting there in all her glory. Dr.Morton was standing on deck welcoming the two people she had heard talking to each other in passing; they were two of the divers she had met before on the ship. She ran towards the professor barking and turning circles of joy. The professor had spotted her and before she could say anything he called out to her.

“Lahni! Where on earth did you come from? What a lovely surprise!”

“Professor, hello! How come you're here? Where are you off too?” Lahni answered running up the gangway, jumping into his arms and licking his face.

“Australia, we're going to Australia. We've been invited to do some research on farm run-off, pesticide impact and other factors that may have had an effect on the Great Barrier Reef. I assume you are looking for a way to get there, still, am I right?”

“I certainly am! Do you have room for me?” she said back on the ground and leaning against his legs.

“For you, always. It's been weeks, what have you been up to? You have to tell me everything. Come! Let's get you settled first! We're leaving in the next hour. You have impeccable timing, by the way.”

“Thank you, Professor. Somehow you knew that we'd meet again, and here we are! I so look forward to telling you about my time here. I met so many good people and learnt a lot,” Lahni said.

“I can’t wait. Let’s get ready for the journey and then we’ll sit down and talk over some snacks, how about it!” he said, carrying Lahni’s few possessions to her cabin.

An hour later they cruised out of Auckland harbor, the sun still low in the sky. Lahni was sitting on the stern of the ship watching the harbor and city disappearing. She thought about the boys she met in the park the first day, then the trip to the Bay of Islands and Papa Joe. What a journey it had been, she had never been able to imagine all this when she first took off from home a little under a year ago. She had a last look, then turned towards the bow and went to find Dr. Morton. He was already sitting over a cup of tea and cookies in the lunchroom with a few other crewmembers about. He filled Lahni in on the weather forecast, which wasn’t too kind and to brace herself for a stormy night ahead.

“It’s going to be a rough one, so you’d better stay below deck if you can handle the movement and make sure, no matter what, that you keep your vest on and if for some reason you find yourself on deck, a harness is absolutely necessary and that’s an order, everyone! Whatever post you’re on, ask for help if you need it. Lahni, I’ll be on the bridge with the skipper if you need me but you can also use the intercom with the help of a sailor. Don’t hesitate if you need anything. But this aside, let’s have a chat before it gets too wild to sit here; it’s still nice right now. We can enjoy the calm before the storm for a little longer.”

Lahni took a seat opposite the professor and started to tell him about Itu, Tane, Jim, Papa Joe and Dr. Kasinski, going into detail about the legends and all the stories and politics she had discussed with them. “And then one day I went for a walk along the coast on the rocks and found stranded whales. Luckily the boys weren’t far away; Tane and I got help. The whole village came out to rescue them,” she told the professor.

“Hang on, that was you? I read about that in the paper, it wasn’t a big article, just your usual feel good story on page 6 but they didn’t say anything about you in it,” he inquired, “wow, I can’t believe it. You’re a hero!”

“Well, I couldn’t have done it without all those strong men. Those whales were heavy. But we got them all back in the water. And I’m actually glad the newspapers ignored me. Can you imagine what would have happened if the media knew about me and had turned up with camera on grandpa Joe’s door step?” Lahni added.

“I’m glad to hear that it worked out this time, Lahni, unfortunately it’s not good news for them in the future. I just heard that the New Zealand government is opening the coastline to oil and gas exploration, which means a lot of sonar is going to be used to find the fields. This as you know, interferes with dolphin and whale sonar. You heard about Peru and Brazil where all the dolphins got stranded and died?”

“Yes, I did,” answered Lahni, “it’s awfully sad.”

“That it is. I wrote a letter to the government expressing my concerns but I think it might have fallen on deaf ears. I will

keep pushing my point though. The United Nations is next I think. Something bigger has to be done to get all whales and dolphins on the endangered list worldwide and some regulations have to be put in place to protect them from all this nonsense. I can't for the life of me understand why a pristine country like this, with massive tourism capabilities would choose to go there, it's insane," he said with a frown.

"You said it, the mighty dollar speaks again," Lahni said shaking her head. "I hope we are not too late. Now tell me about the next mission you're on...the reef, huh? People were talking about that on the Plastiki. I've been looking forward to going there ever since! The on-board diver told me all about it."

"I've been wanting to get back there as well. I spent time there as a student on a research project and even back then they knew something was wrong. The coral was already stressed but the government didn't heed the warnings and they are still slow to listen now. I hope that this time they will. We have six weeks up there to make a point. The coral are dying faster than expected. It's apparently like a ghost town in some areas already," the professor said.

"What exactly is causing it?" Lahni asked.

"Well, we know that pesticide and fertilizer farm run-off is contributing to the acid levels rising, then you add the pollution from shipping and tourism, then throw in the steady increase in water temperature due to global warming and you have a lethal cocktail," he explained.

"So, why do you need to do more research on this; it seems you already know what's happening?" Lahni questioned.

"You have a point but the powers that be seem to want it all together in writing, again. Somehow the research other groups of scientists have already done isn't good enough. It's a bit like talking to really young children, you have to repeat yourself a lot to get them to learn and understand something. It is a big waste of time mostly because ultimately people know exactly what to do but choose not to change because of fear. There are also economics and politics involved."

"What do you mean?" Lahni asked.

"Many interest groups try to have a say in what gets done and what doesn't in terms of legislation and regulation. See, with the farm pollution alone you're dealing with so many levels of authority that it becomes a huge headache and it's easier for most to give up than to keep fighting. First, there is the farmer him- or herself who has to make a living, so they do what they think is the most cost effective thing, which in this case is using nasty chemicals, which are made by big chemical companies who are also in for a profit. Then you have the chemical company lobbyists trying to get support from the government and environmental bodies to allow their products on the market while mostly ignoring environmental impact studies and that usually involves a bit of corruption, in my opinion. Then you have the local population who want cheap food but also a clean environment and on top of that you have many levels of federal and local government, all with

their own agenda. And none of them ever really get to talk to each other. It gets a bit messy to sort it all out.”

“Wow, no wonder the world is in the state it’s in. It seems so short sighted and selfish on all sides!” Lahni commented.

“Welcome to modern life! It doesn’t make any sense for the most part. What we’re going to be doing is just that; trying to make sense of it and put it all in easy to understand language, so the farmer and the politician can understand what’s going on. See, the thing is, if you can persuade people that they’ll be better off when they change their behavior, they will do so gladly. It’s all about information and it looks like most have been misinformed up to now. I intend to try to change that but it has to happen on a large scale — otherwise it won’t work.”

“The hard part is getting the first person to do something differently, right? It always takes time and we don’t have much time left to fix it the way things are right now,” Lahni said.

“Yes, that’s it. One courageous being is what it takes to start the ball rolling!”

Lahni noticed the rocking movements of the Aurora increasing. Nose in the air she got up to go on deck to check out the situation. As she came up the ladder, she got hit with a wave causing her to slip right back down to the cabin level. She caught herself though and luckily without injury.

“It’s getting rough out there, people!” she said as most of the crew came down to the lunchroom to have a briefing.

“The storm’s here. Let’s be vigilant and careful. Everyone take your posts and do not deviate from them unless you have to! Lahni, you stay down here! Find a soft and tight place like your bed to lie down and stay there until I tell you otherwise. I’ll be on the bridge.” And with that Dr. Morton got up and fought his way through the wind and water to the skipper’s side.

“Hold on Prof, it’s going to be quite a ride!” the skipper said with a smile on his face as if to say he’s happy about the storm.

“She’s a tough lady, the Aurora, she’ll be right!” he continued. “I’ve seen worse, much worse than this.”

“I’m happy to hear you say it, Bruce!” answered the professor. “I’d like to keep her for a while longer.”

The long night of being shaken by the violent storm left everyone a little worse for wear the next morning. Seasickness had left Lahni looking a little ill. She had spent most of the night filling a bucket beside her bed until there was nothing left in her.

When she didn’t turn up to breakfast that morning Dr. Morton went to her cabin to check on her.

“How’s it going? Are you OK? I was worried since I didn’t see you at breakfast nice’n early as usual. Why didn’t you call someone for help or contact me? What’s happened, rough night?” he asked.

“I felt sick, got so seasick, it’s not normal for me, I spent so much time at sea I don’t know what happened here. I didn’t even think to call anyone, was just so busy being sick,” she said looking sallow around the eyes.

“Maybe I should’ve kept you with me on the bridge. Staying below deck makes it worse for some rather than being in the thick of it. Maybe that’s it. Come now and eat a little something to get you going. I know you may not feel like eating anything but it’s the best thing you can do and get some fresh air, it’s really lovely out after the storm. We all made it and the Aurora is fine. All’s well. Come on then,” the professor said helping Lahni off her bed.

She was weak and tired.

“I didn’t get any sleep either, it was so shaky down here, never again. I’d rather hang out on deck and get really soaked than another night of this,” she said following Dr. Morton down the corridor to the lunchroom.

“We can pick up some water and food and go sit on the bow if you like, might be nice,” he suggested.

“OK, sounds good,” Lahni answered with a dry mouth.

The two collected what they needed and went to the front of the ship.

The professor was carrying a couple of cushions to sit on, which he had grabbed from the chairs in the kitchen on his way through. “Metal is too hard to get comfortable on,” he said throwing one in front of Lahni. “Here, sit and eat and breathe, you’ll feel better in no time. We might have a couple more of these summer storms before we hit Sydney, where we’ll stay for a couple of days before heading north to Queensland. But lets enjoy what’s here right in front of us, shall we!” he said pointing out the lovely warm sun, gentle breeze and a pod of dolphins surfing in the wake of the ship in front and to the side of them.

“It looks so perfect right now, doesn’t it? You could just forget everything that’s going on in the world and stay in this moment forever,” she said with a big sigh.

“Well, therein lies the paradox we are living. How to be in the moment and enjoy, appreciate and be grateful for everything beautiful and functioning and at the same time have awareness of what’s wrong and take action to fix it. I struggle with this every day of my life. When we get to Australia you’ll see exactly what I mean; it’s such a vast and beautiful country with a mass of issues expressing this paradox,” he said pausing for a breath. “We have some supplies to pick up and I have a meeting with a few environmental agency representatives to discuss our brief for the research in more detail, which gives you some time to look around, if you like,” he added.

“Oh good, then I can go and have a look at Sydney and afterwards come with you to the Reef, yes!”

“Sounds like a good plan, but you have to promise me you’ll be careful, it’s a big city, much bigger than Auckland, ” he requested.

“Promise! I’m sure I’ll be fine. I got here, didn’t I?” she said looking at Dr.Morton.

“That you did and in style I might add. You seem to always land in the right spot. How do you do that?” he asked smiling at her.

“Well, I trust my gut, it is all there is to it really. It’s not complicated. I follow my intuition without ever questioning it and so far I’ve never been wrong. Even if things first looked like they weren’t working out they turned out in my favor, so I’ve learnt to trust that,” Lahni answered.

“I admire that, I haven’t always been this smart. We humans tend to live in our heads too much, that leftbrain of ours always gets in the way. Rational thinking they call it and look at the result. We’ve created quite a mess, haven’t we? So much for rational thinking! I do firmly believe now that we need to utilize all our faculties, head, heart and gut and make decisions based on the combination.”

“See, I think our intuition is already taking everything into consideration—how you feel about something the instant you think about it is the only answer you ever need. Your heart and your head have already spoken at that point. Your gut feeling should always be your measure and in my experience, if you ignore it, you’ll pay for it, every time!” Lahni added.

“When you put it that way I guess that makes a whole lot of sense. We’re paying for it on this planet and dearly!” he agreed.

“Hey, by the way, what ever happened to your findings about Kohola and his whale friends? Did you ever submit the video and all the papers?” Lahni enquired.

“Of course! Naturally it took a while to put it all together and edit the video but I sent copies of everything to the Oceanic Institute and various government agencies as well as a few key people in the marine biology community. So, now we wait. I am keeping all the originals under lock and key though, just in case someone is trying to bury everything.”

“That happens?” Lahni asked.

“It sure does, it has happened to me! While I was still an intern I took part in some important research on ocean dead zones and all my notes disappeared. I had handed everything to my superiors without making any copies. I was so green then,” he laughed, “I know it’s not really funny, I was just taken back there and it amuses me to think how naive I was. It just shows that there are people who don’t want anyone to know the truth and will go to any length to keep it hidden. I couldn’t prove anything at the time. It made me really mad,” he added.

“Tell me about dead zones, I’ve never heard that term,” Lahni said, adjusting herself to get more comfortable.

“Dead zones are vast areas in the ocean where nothing is able to live anymore because oxygen levels are too low to sustain life. They occur almost always near the coast where there’s usually lots of sea life, which leads us to believe that

we have something to do with the cause. We found an increase of nitrogen and phosphorus in the water, which help algae grow in vast proportions, which then uses up all the oxygen in the water column, so fish can't breed and die in large numbers. Many countries have been reporting thousands of dead fish on their beaches lately. It's definitely connected. The scientific community has known about this since the 1970's. By now there are over 400 of these zones in various sizes, some tiny, some enormous around the world."

"Where do these chemicals come from, what was it... the nitrogen and phosphorus?" Lahni asked.

"It's what we call farm run-off, the stuff farmers put on their crops in the form of fertilizers and pesticides and then there are of course oil spills. Apart from that there are too many people living close to the sea now without proper sanitation, which means all their refuse, like sewage and garbage are contributing to the problem. Talking about oil spills; I'm worried about what's going to happen in New Zealand, I really am."

"So, if you guys have known about this for 40 years, gee that seems long... how come you haven't stopped it or done something different?" Lahni asked.

"That is a very good question and many have asked it but not many people are willing to stand up and answer it for you. I will give it a go though, just 'cause it's you who's asking. It's a matter of responsibility. You see, if you point the finger at anything too specific or at specific people, then you have to prove they caused the problem, since none of them want to have to pay for the clean up or stop doing what they're doing, these problems are never addressed wholistically. You have to start with the chemical companies, then the methods with which their product is being used, then the farmers who choose to use them, then the watershed administrators responsible for cleaning the water on the way out to sea and it goes on and on. So much of this is happening without anyone looking as well. And politicians are mostly in the pockets of big oil and chemical giants," he said stopping to check if he was making any sense to Lahni. "Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Sort of, it sounds like a huge mess and maybe that's why no one wants to really solve it," she asked.

"Sure, it's big but if nothing changes it will just get worse and then we'll have no fish left in the sea and for many people that's their livelihood. We all have to think about that. But right now people just go about their lives not thinking, just making a buck and surviving, until they don't have what they need and then they complain. On the other side of this equation are those, who profit from oil and chemicals that get used by all of us in some way or another and what they don't realize is that in the end when there is nothing left, they can't eat, breath or drink money," he added.

"Same old money. Until I came out of my little world of nomadic dog life I didn't really know what this stuff was. It doesn't seem to have any value unless there is something you can trade it for that you actually need and want, right?"

"True, in and of itself it's just paper or plastic or cheap metal, not worth more than a few pennies. It doesn't cost any

more to print a \$500 dollar note than it costs to print a \$1 dollar note. It's all perceived value and what we agree it's worth," he explained.

"Funny, sounds just like the games the children at home used to play with sticks and stones," Lahni said, thinking about her humans.

"Sticks and stones; that just about sums it up. We haven't really come all that far as a society since the Stone Age, it seems," the professor chuckled. "If it weren't so serious.... huh! Hey, let's take a break from our chat. I have to attend to a few things and check on my crew and captain. Take a nap maybe since you didn't sleep at all last night. See you for lunch later."

"Aye, aye sir," Lahni said and curled up right where she was, since she preferred the fresh air compared to the air in the cabin below.

A couple of hours later they resumed their chat talking about God and the world.

"So, this whole money thing— how did that start?" Lahni asked.

"Well, commerce, or trade has always been a part of most cultures over the past millenia in the form of barter, which means the exchange of goods and services but using coin hasn't been around for that long. Money used to be made of gold and silver mosly; precious metals found in the earth. Then, because more and more people wanted to use it, the rulers of the land decided it was better to make money out of less precious material but still back it by gold and silver deposits that would guarantee it's worth. They would keep the gold and silver and other precious thing under lock and key to be a guarantee for the value of the money they were putting out there. Now, however, that gold and silver reserve is no longer there backing the value of what we exchange as money, so it really is only worth what we agree on, nothing more, nothing less. It has definitely seen better days," he sighed, "but it still owns us on this planet— we seem to not be able to get away from its clutches."

"Maybe it's just the belief that you need it and can't live without it that makes it so," Lahni proposed.

"That's a radical thought in this society. We place so much value on something that we made up that people who don't have it feel lesser than the people who do," the professor explained.

"But how can anyone feel bad about not having something that isn't really anything in the first place?" Lahni asked.

"Ah, good question, it's all about perception, what we believe about the world and about ourselves is what we get. We create all of this, so as we've created the whole monetary system we now feel trapped in it and we also base our entire self worth and esteem on it," he answered.

“Wow, it’s a bit like playing hide and seek with yourself, nothing ever happens and you’ll be trapped in waiting to be found forever. It’s a bit crazy, isn’t it?” she suggested.

“You said it, my dear, you said it! But right now we’re all part of this insane system and as long as people play this game we’ll be stuck in it. I can’t do my research without money and I couldn’t have brought you along without it either. So right now as silly as it seems, we need money to go about our business. Just look at indigenous people of any country, let’s say Australia, since that’s where we’ll be soon. Aboriginal people lived happily without money of any sort for 40,000 years or more; of course they traded things, like many other tribal folk but never money. It’s only taken white society 200 years to reduce them to some of the poorest people on earth.”

“But how?” Lahni enquired. “They have such a big, beautiful country, how can they be poor?”

“See, the people running the country imposed their rules, regulations and way of trading with money on them and since that was very foreign to them, they haven’t really been able to embrace it fully, apart from the fact that most of their land was taken from them by Europeans,” the prof explained.

“That’s what happened to the Maori in New Zealand too. I guess it doesn’t help if you have no money but also no land to feed yourself,” she said, thinking about her people at home, who completely relied on being able to move freely on the land that belongs to all and can be used by all.

“My people need the land to live. So how do people survive without it in Australia?” she asked.

“They have to work for money or rely on the government to feed them. Don’t get me wrong; there are still a few areas in Australia where Aboriginal people live off their land; land that was given back to them by the government. I guess it was land they didn’t deem too valuable to keep for the Crown. There is also a self-sufficient station in the north near Darwin that employs aboriginal people and they live quite well. But there are many that are struggling.”

“It’s such a loss, really, when you think about it. I mean the locals lived there for at least 40,000 years and had a good life and instead of learning from them when the Europeans came, they took over and changed everything... kind of a strange way of being in the world. I have been traveling for almost a year now and I have met so many different people and have learnt something from everyone. It’s sad,” Lahni pondered.

“That it is, indeed!” the professor said. “Hey, we’ll be there sometime tomorrow...are you excited?” he added.

“Yes, I am, I hope I meet some people as great as you, Dr.Morton. I so loved being here with you.”

“Well, it’s not over yet...you’re still coming with me to the Reef, are you not? I would love it if you did.”

“I sure will!” Lahni answered.

Chapter 14 Sydney

The next morning Lahni awoke to massive cliffs rising on both sides of the Aurora. The entrance to Sydney harbor was a relatively narrow opening flanked by the high rock formations of the North and South Heads. The sun was rising in the east, painting everything ahead with an intense orange hue.



The morning was clear and glorious. Lahni positioned herself on the bow of the ship to see the city approach in full view. Being a research vessel and not a recreational boat, they had to dock at Garden Island, a naval base that was also used for larger cruise ships and such. After all the formalities were done, Lahni gathered her things with the help of Derek, who reluctantly let her go off on her own in the big city.

“You promise you’ll be careful now and definitely come back in two days. So, two sleeps and you have to be back!”

“Promise, I will, this time I won’t miss it. Really, don’t worry,” she tried to calm him.

“What do you mean ‘this time’?” the professor inquired. “I missed the Plastiki in Samoa. They had to take off without me because we overslept. I’d been invited to stay for a while by some new friends but I had to go and get my gear on the Plastiki, so we had to catch up on a long boat as they were leaving the harbor. But because of the decision to stay, I met you. All worked out as usual,” she explained.

“I see. Well, just in case, remember I gave you my pager number, so you can contact me with the help of a friendly human, wherever you may be... if you can’t find your way back or you are held up somewhere, page me and I’ll come and get you,” he added.

“Aye, aye, sir! I promise. I’ll be fine and I’ll come back,” she said before jumping down the gangway to the mooring platform. “See you soon!” And with that she disappeared down the path into a row of trees. She came out on the other side into a huge parking area with a mix of military and delivery vehicles. One of those was an old pick up truck like the one she’d traveled on in New Zealand with Jim and the boys to the Bay of Islands. For whatever reason, her instincts told her

to jump on the back of it. Five minutes later the driver arrived and got into the drivers seat not noticing her. She decided to lay low and see where he would take her. It was a Saturday morning with not too much traffic, so now and then she dared to look over the edge to see where she was. The road was curvy and appeared to run alongside the harbor. When the truck ran down a long hill and came to a sudden stop, Lahni looked over the edge and found he'd stopped at a traffic light in a quaint beachfront area. It had a small boat harbor with shops, cafes and houses lining the road on the opposite side. This is nice, she thought and jumped off the truck at a red light. In the middle of her jump the truck started moving again. The car behind screeched to a halt narrowly missing her while she was touching down on the road.

The truck driver looked back to see what had happened and assumed it was a dog just crossing the road behind him. "Stupid animal, bloody lucky though," he said hitting the gas. Lahni looked at the driver who'd almost hit her and nodded at him in appreciation for not doing so.

"Sorry," she whispered at him, looking him directly in the eyes and then jumped onto the footpath. She saw him speed away shaking his head. She walked slowly down a set of stairs, which led to the foreshore. A nice stroll on the sand, that's what I'll do first, to get my land legs back for a start, she thought. She passed a sign on the way down that had a picture of children cleaning up garbage by hand on a beach, with a time and a date below.

"Tomorrow," she said, "people are getting together tomorrow to clean up, I think. I have to come to that, I just have to!" She had decided to join in on the clean up and seeing the beach area before her she knew why this had to happen in the first place. It was dirty with litter of all sorts. The water looked oily from boating; cigarette butts, straws, old cans, glass chards and bits of fishing line were forming wavy, almost ornamental lines in the wet sand along the waters edge. It wasn't anywhere near as bad as Kamilo beach on Hawaii but nonetheless it needed cleaning up. Lahni was glad to know that someone cared enough to do so. Just as she finished that thought, a dog came running up to her smelling her behind and then trying to lick her face afterwards. She turned and jumped, backing away from his advances. "Excuse me, I don't enjoy that very much. You could just say hello first," she said sitting down to protect her rear end and frowning at him.

"Sorry mate but that's how we say 'g'day' to each other around here. But no offence! You from out of town, mate?" he asked.

"I sure am!" Lahni went on to explain her landing on this little beach in detail. The dog in front of her was astonished to say the least. He just sat there listening, his eyes getting bigger, his head tilting a little in wonder until she was done.



“That’s some story, mate...you must be tired. Come with me, I know where to get some grub and a safe place to hang out for the hot part of the day,” he said leading the way. Lahni followed not so much because she was hungry or tired but because she was curious to find out what he had in mind.

“Name’s Fred, by the way. Nice meetin’ you! ‘S not every day of the week you meet a sheila from East Siberia, eh!” he said looking back with a weird grin on his face.

Don’t get any ideas now, Lahni thought, I better stay vigilant.

They went a bit further along the water; then crossed a small road that ended at the shore and climbed up a ravine to a rocky and sandy path through scrub and woods. The track ran up and down, across large tree roots and little creek beds that joined the harbor below.

After a good 20 minutes of fast jogging, they came out onto parklands of cut grass, enormous Moreton Bay Fig trees, a playground and benches with a view of the harbor and the city skyline in the distance.

“Gotta watch out for the rangers here, mate...no dogs allowed off the leash, so stick with me, eh. Gonna go and see a mate of mine. They’re sittin’ under that big, old tree over there. See...” he whispered to her now trotting beside her.

“OK,” said Lahni, still curious. She could see a whole group of what looked like tribal people sitting together talking to

each other. A couple of other dogs sat beside them. One of the mutts came running towards Fred and Lahni, greeting Fred the same way Lahni had experienced earlier.

“G’day, mate, mmmh, where’ve you been...haven’t seen you in a while, mate! What do we have here?” said the mutt, fast approaching Lahni to repeat the greeting. Lahni sat down just in case and said hello quickly to avoid the local custom.

“Oh, just cruisin’, mate, nothin’ exciting to report except I just ran into her,” answered Fred, looking at Lahni and then his mate, “don’t get any ideas, mate, she’s not from around here, behave yourself, alright!” He paused for moment; then turned to Lahni, “meet me mate, Nige. He’s a bit of a ladies man, so better watch out, eh,” he said with a wink.

A whistle from one of the men interrupted them.

“Over here, Nige. Come! Bring your mates, will ya!” he yelled. Nige turned instantly obeying his owner. Fred and Lahni followed.

“Who have we got here, Nige? Who’d ya find there, a pretty lady dog, huh? Your new girlfriend?” Nige’s owner said laughing with a broad, deep laugh. Everyone joined in.

“Yeah, mate, pretty she is,” another guy said.

“Excuse me, sir, my name is Lahni, I came from East Siberia and I am on a mission to save my world,” she said looking straight at them.

“Whoa, did she just say that or am I drunk,” Nige’s owner said looking around for confirmation.

“I heard it too, mate. Must be so. I’m clear in my head, so you must be having a word with a dog, mate,” one of his friends proclaimed.

Everyone laughed again.

“Alright, in that case, let’s have a talk then. I’m curious...Lahni, was it? What’ya doin’ in this neck o’ the woods, then? Nothing worth savin’ here!” he said, addressing her directly.

“I beg to differ, sir. I’m sure Australia is also having trouble with pollution, severe weather patterns, garbage, water shortages, no?” Lahni answered confidently.

“She’s got a point, right! I reckon it’s worth savin’,” another guy said sitting on the other side of the round.

“Thank you, sir,” Lahni offered.

“Alright then,” said Nige’s owner, “we’ll have to take you to a mate who’s doing all this dreamin’ and healin’ stuff and that. How’d you like to come meet him?” “Oh and my name’s Jack by the way.”

“OK, sounds interesting. Where to?” Lahni said all ready to go.

“Hold your horses, mate! Gotta have some food first...a bit of fish’n chips?” he said, offering her a piece as he bit into

another piece of battered fish.

“You probably prefer this stuff raw, eh?” he added, laughing again.

“If I can get it, sure, but food is food when on the road, thank you! I’ll be happy to have some,” she answered and took the offering. “It’s good, mmmh!” she said, turning to her new found friend Fred. “Do you want some too?”, giving him a little of her piece.

“Thanks, mate!” he said, taking the piece of fish with his mouth. A few minutes later Jack, Nige, Fred and Lahni took off on a lengthy walk to Jack’s friend’s house.

Lahni began the conversation again. “So Jack, how did you get to be in the big city sitting under a tree with your friends? I get the feeling you haven’t always been here?” Lahni asked.

“What makes you think that?” Jack replied. “I look like a country boy, do I?” he asked grinning at her. “I guess you got me there, mate. I used to live in the Northern Territory...worked on a station run by my people as a Jackeroo, runnin’ cows ‘n’ that. One day I got thinkin’ and took off to the city. Not sure why, just had the urge to go, and so I did. I had some distant relatives living in a part of Sydney called Redfern at that time and I was thinkin’ I’d get me a job on a building site and earn some dollars. But it didn’t work out all that well and I’m plannin’ on going home again.”

“Is that where the name Jack came from, I mean the Jackeroo thing?” Lahni asked.

“How’d you guess?” he answered with a question. “Just thought it’s not an indigenous name, is it?” she explained.

“Nuh, it’s not but my dad was Irish, so people always called me that—Jack the Red Irish.”

“Ah, I was wondering where you got that red head of hair from and the green eyes, makes sense now. Do you miss it, the country life with your family I mean? Lahni continued.

“Yeah, sometimes, that’s why I was thinkin’ about goin’ north soon. Sydney’s a bit tough lately. Rents are too high and work’s slow. Not a good combo. I don’t like being on the dole; gettin’ money handouts from the government, that is. I like to be independent, you see. Can’t do that for much longer here the way things are,” he added.

“I prefer the country too, there are too many people in big cities. I’ve had my taste in Honolulu and Auckland already; I’m ready for a bit of country. I’ll be sailing north in a couple of days with the research vessel I came here on from New Zealand. I’ll be helping out doing research on the Barrier Reef; I’m so excited to go there,” she said with a little jump in her step.

“That sounds like fun. I wish I could do something different with my life, something that means a bit, you know, like helpin’ to make things better. My friend Jagga, the guy we’re gonna see today wants to go north as well. We were thinkin’ of doin’ something together, something worthwhile. Not sure what yet, though,” he said looking off into the distance.

“Well, you guys can start by coming with me tomorrow, there is a clean up in the city and on all the beaches, early in the morning. Will you come?” Lahni asked, excited about the prospect.

“Oh, right, it’s that time of year again, Clean-Up Australia Day—is that tomorrow? I guess it’s that time o’year again...alright...why not, start doin’ somethin’ worthwhile right here, right now, eh! I’ll get Jagga to come too. He has a flat in Bondi. That’s where we’re headed; maybe we can all stay the night and help clean up there in the morning. I think they meet on the beach at 6AM,” he said looking a little happier already. “You’ve inspired me already, mate!”

After a rather long walk along a straight road, past a golf course and housing they stood on a grassy hill overlooking Bondi Beach, a kilometer long stretch of light yellowish sand lay nestled in between rock formations on either side with a promenade above. The beach was busy with people running, playing and swimming on this fairly warm Saturday. It looked inviting to Lahni. “No dogs allowed, mate!” said Fred. “Yeah, I know. It sucks, don’t it!” he added looking at Lahni’s disappointed face.

“But how will we clean up here in the morning then?” she asked.

“Well, we’ll have to blend in and maybe do the rocks and the promenade and that!” Fred answered.

“We’ll see! I’m sure if we help collect rubbish, no one will complain, eh!” Jack suggested.

“Not to worry now, mate, we’ll see. Let’s go over the rocks on the north end. Jagga lives up there in the last building, in a small flat but with a big view. He always says you gotta be close to nature.”

They skipped and jumped over the rocks, avoiding the crashing waves, then up a steep staircase and a little hill into the building to Jagga’s door.

The door was leaning open already and a voice greeted them from inside.

“Come on in, mate; knew you were coming,” Jagga said.

“How’d ya know, mate?” Jack asked.

“You know, I just do!”

“Yeah, I know,” Jack said, “just don’t understand how you do it.”

“I don’t really understand it either. I gave up trying... just a hunch really. Intuition I guess. I’ve learnt to trust myself, that’s all,” he added as he spotted Lahni entering the living room. “Got yourself another dog then? Hi Nige, hi Fred, a new mate of yours, huh?”

“Nuh, mate, not me dog, she’s a special one, come a long way too, East Siberia, an’ is on a mission. Wants us to help with the beach clean up tomorrow. Thought you should meet,” Jack answered.

“OK, now I’m curious; start from the beginning then. I gotta hear this story,” Jagga said, patting his hand on the couch

inviting Lahni and Jack to sit next to him.

“So Jack, tell me what you know and how you know this from a dog?” he asked looking at his friend.

“You ask her, she’s a talker,” Jack answered with a grin.

“What are ya sayin’ mate? The dog talks... come off it, mate!” Jagga said sitting back from Lahni a little.

“It’s not so unusual, is it?” Lahni said addressing Jagga. “I talk to everyone and everything. And so far I’ve had no problem being understood.”

Jagga got up and walked into the kitchen without saying a word. He rubbed his ears and eyes.

“Man, do I need a cuppa right now.... mate, do you want one? I must be tired, man, I’m hearin’ things,” he said, putting on the kettle.

“Mr. Jagga, I was actually talking to you sir, so you were hearing correctly. I’m from East Siberia! I set off to save my world almost one year ago and to find out what’s been happening in the world and do something to save it if possible; I have been to Alaska, Hawaii, Samoa, New Zealand and am now here,” Lahni explained.

Jagga took his and Jack’s steeping cups of tea and sat back down again and took a deep breath. “A talking dog, eh? Alright; I thought Jack was kiddin’ when he said you’re a talker. Sorry, no offense, mate, it’s not your every day thing, is it? Fred and Nige here don’t talk, do they?” he asked Lahni directly now.

“Well, they sure do talk, you just have to listen and you’ll understand,” she answered.

Jack sat on the windowsill rolling a cigarette and smiling; he seemed so amused by the fact that his friend couldn’t believe what was happening.

“Hey, man, I thought I was drunk when I heard her earlier in the park. But since I don’t drink much these days, it’s not an option. Might as well get used to it mate! She’s a talker!” he said lighting up.

Lahni proceeded with her entire story. Nige and Fred were lounging at Jack’s feet snoozing, since they’d already heard most of it earlier. Jagga was all ears now that he had gotten over the initial shock of this canine miracle. After the long version of her story they sat for a while without talking. Jagga didn’t speak much unless spoken to. He just sat there next to Lahni taking in the experience of what he’d just heard. He was deep in thought when Lahni started again.

“So, Jagga, Jack told me something about you being into healing and dreaming. What exactly did he mean by that?” she asked.

“Oh, did he now? Well, I dabble a bit with energy healing, a sort of connecting myself to the energy of mother earth to help people through stuff. Been doin’ that my whole life without ever really knowing what it was and how to name it. I kind of pull juice from her—the mother, I mean, and then pass it on. The dreaming thing is also part of it but that’s also in

my culture. Have you heard of aboriginal dreamtime? It's all about how it all started and how we can still dream up stuff in our lives every day. And if you're conscious of what it is you want, you can dream it up better now, even if what you've been given isn't that great," Jagga said, still looking a little lost in his thoughts.

"So, it's the same idea as creating your own reality, yes?" Lahni asked.

"I guess it's similar but still different. See, dreaming is something we do all the time mostly without knowing, so becoming aware in the dreaming is what we need to do to change our current status. Nature is the answer, for me anyway. All the religion in the world doesn't come close to what nature has to offer. We are nature; we're connected to it, whether we like it or know it or not and all the denial in the world won't change that fact. The powers that be are working so hard against it, including some religions but they will never truly succeed because we are part of it," he explained.

"That sounds very nice and more true to who I am. Dogs are totally connected, at least most of us are. We can feel storms coming and earth quakes and other troubles long before they arrive. Is that what you mean?" Lahni asked to get clear.

"Sure, that's part of it. We humans have forgotten how to do that. We've blocked it somehow, living just in our heads instead of our whole bodies. Animals, especially the ones who live in the wild, still have this skill. But we can relearn it and that's what I'm on about," he explained.

"Great, the world needs people like you to save it," Lahni said.

"And you!" Jagga added. "Jack said something about going to clean up the beach tomorrow. Sounds like a good thing. I'm in. 6 in the morning, right?"

"Yep, can't wait," Lahni said, all excited.

The evening was uneventful. They shared a meal and lazed around. Lahni went for a stroll on the cliffs and they all went to sleep pretty early in anticipation of the morning. At exactly 6 a.m. Lahni sat at the door waiting for the others to finish their coffee and put on their flip-flops.

They climbed down the long stairs to the rocks above the entrance of the beach. There they found almost 100 people waiting. A group of young children with their parents and teachers, teens, grand parents and a selection of all sorts of people willing and ready to lend a hand.

"It's great so many people showed up. I'm so happy I'm here," Lahni said to Fred.

A few volunteers in Clean Up Australia t-shirts handed out gloves and garbage bags as well as little sticks with clamps on the end to make the pick up easier. Lahni, Nige and Fred didn't need such things and decided to start cleaning up right where they were. Fred seemed nervous and kept on looking over his shoulder.

“What’s wrong, mate?” Lahni asked.

“Ah, just lookin’ out for the rangers. No dogs allowed here, off leash as well. Better stay alert, don’t wanna get caught again ‘n go to that horrible place where they keep us, so youse better watch out,” Fred said.

“I’m here and I won’t be taken anywhere by anyone, believe me. So, stick with me and you’ll be alright,” Lahni proclaimed with much confidence.

Jagga came towards them to help clean up the rocks and baby pool at the north end of the beach. “It doesn’t look too bad for a weekend,” he said and started to pick up bits and pieces around him.

“You wait until it’s all in bags, I’m sure it’ll be plenty,” Jack said joining in.

One by one bottles, cans, wrappers, butts and other trash were placed in large garbage bags to be collected by a big truck at the end of the day. It didn’t really look that dirty as Jagga had pointed out earlier but as Jack had foretold, it added up to a huge mound of bags in the end.

“It’s great people get together to do this, isn’t it?” Jagga said.

Lahni replied: “Yes, it is, but it’s also sad that people actually have to do this in the first place. If everyone would just take their bottles and cans and wrappers and leftovers with them this wouldn’t be necessary.”

“True that,” Fred said to Lahni, “I see it all the time. People just chuck stuff out on the street without thinking about who’ll be there next. Don’t get me wrong! I do like the leftovers thing. I practically live on it. But the rest of the rubbish I don’t need, neither does anyone else, I reckon. This is such a beautiful place and it would be nice if people cared more!”

“It’s so sad. I saw what happens to most of this stuff with my own eyes and it isn’t pretty. There is tons of it in the North Pacific Ocean just floating about. It was ghastly, as my friend Katya would describe it,” Lahni answered.

“Yeah, I’ve read about that. It’s horrible. If we only cared for our planet half as much as we care for our gods, this wouldn’t be happening. Somehow people have forgotten that this was a gift to start with and we were meant to look after it better but instead they run around with the belief that it’ll somehow fix itself and that the next time around will be better or they believe in an afterlife, like a paradise; without realizing that we’re in paradise right here, right now,” Jagga added.

After the big clean up was done they sat around on the promenade by the north ramp for a while. Jack rolled a cigarette. Lahni watched on with a frown.

“You should quit that, it can’t be good for you, you know and besides we just cleaned up hundreds of butts on the rocks over there and the kids picked them up from the beach,” she said.

“I know,” Jack said lighting up, “you’re allowed to smoke up here away from the beach and I’ll take the butt with me when I’m done, unlike a lot of people... and yes... I know I’m doing something bad to myself, yeah, yeah,” he said nodding

his head, “but I do like a smoke now and then,” he explained. Just as he finished excusing himself, a ranger came cruising along on a buggy, stopped and looked towards Lahni, Nige and Fred. Fred saw him first.

“Mate, gotta go, am not gonna go back to that hole with the ranger guy. It was bad the first time. ‘Twas nice to run into you, mate. Have a good trip! I’ll see ya ‘round the block, Nige!” And with that he disappeared over the rocks. Lahni had no time to respond. He was gone. The ranger stopped short of Jack and Jagga and looked disagreeably at Nige and Lahni’s off leash status.

“They’re with us mate. They just helped cleanin’ up this joint, mate. It’s all good! We’ll be on our way in no time. Alright!” Jagga said to him. The ranger said nothing trying to avoid a conflict, frowned and left.

Despite the danger of being caught, Lahni decided to walk the promenade for a little while on her own before returning to the ship for the voyage north.

“I’ll be back at your house a little bit later. You can page the professor for me so he can pick me up, if that works for you. Just taking a stroll now.”

“Be careful, that bugger of a ranger is still about and if he catches you, you’re toast, mate and you’ll be on no ship tomorrow. Run if you see him, alright!” he said.

Lahni took off towards the middle of the promenade along the beach. She so wished she could go for a cooling dip but decided it was too risky with so many onlookers around. Instead she passed under one of the showers, which was still on after someone had washed off their boogie board. It was cool and refreshing. She drank some and as she came through the other side of the wet she shook off the rest. Suddenly she stopped with a confused look on her face.

She thought she had run into what looked like a mirror. A snow white, well groomed, happy Samoyed dog came towards her pulling a girl on roller blades behind her. The other dog stopped for a moment just as surprised as Lahni. They sat in front of each other first, looking straight at each other, then got up and walked around the side to make sure this was not just some kind of mirage.

“Hi,” Lahni said first. “I’m Lahni, from East Siberia. You look like my sister. Where are you from?”

“Really? I’m Lahni too. I live in Bondi, just over there, on the other side of the road. I live with my human. This girl just takes me for walks or more like I take her,” the local Lahni giggled.

“Wow, I didn’t expect to see myself when I came here. We must be related somehow. We look the same except that you are a little cleaner and you don’t have any knots in your coat. Weird, huh!” Lahni said still in surprise.

“Would love to hang around but I got this hanging on me,” she said looking back at the girl behind her who was just as surprised at the sight in front of her.

“Must be from the same breeder,” she said trying to pull her Lahni away from the scene. “Come on, I got more dogs to walk today. Gotta take you home.”

The local Lahni resisted for a little while but then said goodbye to her Siberian twin and moved on. She turned a few more times to get another glimpse of her double before crossing the road and disappearing into a doorway.

“Wow, I didn’t expect that,” Lahni said to herself still looking into the other Samoyed’s direction, “that was strange and wonderful. I have a double on the other side of my world.”

She was trotting back towards Jagga’s flat when she saw the ranger in the corner of her eye and instantly took off running as fast as she could, leaping down the stairs, past the baby pool and onto the rocks. She briefly looked back at him standing above on the promenade where it ends, shaking his head in disapproval.

“Don’t let me see you here again, you hear me! I’ll get ya next time, for sure!” he yelled and then turned to walk away. Lahni was already at the north end of the baby pool. She sat at the top for a minute taking in a last look back at the beach. That was close, she thought and walked the rest of the way back slowly.

Jagga was already waiting by the door. “Got into trouble, eh, mate? Saw what happened, close call! Told ya to be careful, didn’t I!”

“Sure was close, I’d rather not spend any time in detention, thanks!” Lahni said entering the flat. “We’d better get in touch with the professor now. I need to get back to the ship I think, tonight if possible. I think they leave for Queensland tomorrow morning. Can you please call his pager?”

“Ah, don’t worry about that, mate, I’ll just drive you, it’s quicker and easier, ain’t it!” Jagga offered. “Have a rest now with these guys and then later I take ya down there.”



In the evening Jagga took his keys off the table and told Lahni to say her goodbyes to Nigel and Jack, both of whom were still napping on the couch. Lahni wandered over and kissed Jack on the cheek to wake him up. He opened his eyes finding Lahni's face close to his and smiled.

"You made it by yourself along the esplanade then, mate. Well done. See anything interesting?" Jack asked, stroking her head.

"Well. I saw myself... a twin I guess," she said.

"What? ... Ah, I know who you're talking about. I've seen that dog around. A bloke owns her. She lives on Campbell I think. She does look a lot like you, true!" he added. "Must've been too weird, eh!"

"It was a little freaky but good too. I'm leaving to get back to the research ship; I just wanted to say thanks and see ya! Was great meeting you and Nige and Fred. Tell him I got away from the ranger, will you! He'll appreciate the news and say thanks to him for me, since he brought me to you. I hope I see you again one day. Take care, mate," she said and came in close for an embrace. Next she went on to kiss Nige who was still reclining.

"Pleasure, mate," Nige said looking at her in admiration.

"Nice to meet you too. Thanks for the help," she answered.

"See you around, mate," he said while she walked off to follow Jagga to the car.

The trip was short but Jagga had a few more things to add to what they'd discussed the day before.

"Remember to keep dreaming your dream, mate, no matter what anyone else is saying or doing, you hear me. Don't lose sight of what you want, ever. Everyone is dreamin' a different dream. Some of us are on the same one and that's why we run into each other. Just like us, mate. You gotta know that, alright," he said looking her way with a serious look on his face.

"OK. I will. Promise. I know it's easy to get all negative with all that's happening out there and I don't want to be in denial about how bad things really are but I also want to keep in mind how much good stuff is going on and that people like you are out there doing something about it," Lahni said with conviction.

"That's the spirit. That's what I wanna hear. You'll be right. I just know it!" Jagga said turning off the main road into the Garden Island parking area.

"This is it, mate. Sorry to see you go so soon but that's how it is. Safe trip, eh!" he added.

Lahni kissed him on the cheek and jumped out of the car. "See you 'round."

At the end of the pier Lahni saw the ship docked. It was close to sunset already and only a few lights were on onboard.

She climbed up the gangway and went around the side to the bridge to find the professor. The bridge was empty. Strange, she thought but didn't think about the fact that it was around dinnertime and that they were anchored in a safe place. She proceeded down to the cabins to find her space and drop her things off. When she passed the kitchen she heard loud laughter and talking coming from the dining room.

"Oh, good, I was worried that there wasn't anyone here yet," she said walking into a birthday party for one of the crewmembers. Almost all the crew was onboard but the professor for some reason wasn't.

"Where's Dr. Morton?" asked Lahni.

"Still in some meeting somewhere, he's running a little late but he called in. It's all good," the cook said. "Sit, mate, there's plenty, so dig in. How was it out there?"

"T was good," Lahni said with mouth full of food, "met a couple of nice dogs and some interesting humans as well."

"Good on ya. Glad you're back safe though. It's a jungle out there," he said taking another swig of beer. "Eat up! Derek should be here soon. We're not leavin' 'til the morning, so enjoy yourself a little," he added offering Lahni a beer.

"Oh, not for me, thanks. Can't take that stuff. But thanks for offering. The food's good and I was very hungry," she said while she kept on eating.

She had just finished her last bite when the professor arrived. She smiled at him broadly.

"Boy, am I happy you are back safe, I was worried about you out there alone. How did you go?" Dr. Morton asked.

"Really well, actually. First, I got a ride with a guy who didn't know that he gave me one," she said laughing, "then I met a dog called Fred on a little harbor beach who took me to some of his friends. One was Nigel, another dog and then his human Jack, an aboriginal man who introduced me to Jagga, a very wise indigenous man in Bondi Beach. Then we cleaned up the beach the next day. It was Clean Up Australia Day and we all helped. And then I ran into my twin with the same name and that was weird."

"What do you mean, twin?" Derek asked.

"A Samoyed from Bondi also named Lahni; she looked a lot like me. I didn't know they lived here too. It was strange but nice as well. We didn't have much time together, unfortunately. She was working, pulling a human on rolling things."

"Oh, roller skates, ah, that sounds like one strange encounter!" the Prof answered.

"Blades, Prof, you mean blades," a young ship's boy called Daniel added.

"Well yes, that is what I meant and I'm happy to report that we have our brief and all our funds for the trip to the Reef sorted out. We leave 5 a.m. sharp, so get some rest everyone! And stop the drink please, especially you!" he said directly to the skipper.

“Lahni, you can stay with me tonight, if you like and you can tell me more about your shore leave,” he said smiling at her. She took the invitation and followed him to his cabin.

The two sat and talked for a while longer, then Lahni curled up on the rug and quickly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 15 North

Lahni was up early, on deck, enjoying the last views of Sydney harbor ahead of their departure; the air was still crisp and cool shortly before sunrise. The crew was already busy getting the ship ready to leave. Dr. Morton followed soon after with a coffee and muffin balanced on top of his iPad, to have breakfast with a view as well. “Don’t you have work to do?” Lahni enquired.

“Nope, I did everything yesterday, the crew takes over from here, and they have their orders. So it’s easy sailing for me now until we get up there,” he said while accessing the morning paper online. He started reading and frowning almost at the same time. The headline read ‘Queensland Government unsupportive of Great Barrier Reef in favor of heavy industry!’ and underneath ‘UNESCO threatens to downgrade world heritage status as mining and shipping industry threaten the survival of the reef.’ Dr. Morton continued reading the article with an even bigger frown on his forehead. Lahni had never seen him so annoyed.

“What on earth are these politicians thinking? We are on our way up there to try to help and they do this. Typical! I have to make a phone call, excuse me Lahni. I’ll explain when I get back. In the mean time put your vest on and get Daniel to tighten it properly. We’re off soon,” he added and went to his office to make the call.

The phone conversation was loud enough to hear on deck. He was quite angry with whomever he was speaking. “What is the point of our mission, might I ask, Sir, if you people don’t even wait for our findings before making outrageous decisions?” Lahni heard through the floor. “Why even bother doing anything...is this a joke to you?” he continued.

When he returned his mood hadn’t improved. “This is ridiculous. They are sending us on a fact finding mission to be able to make informed decisions, supposedly, but then don’t wait until they get said information. I just spoke to the Federal Minister of the Environment. I woke him up. He seemed apologetic but isn’t willing to stand up and fight for the reef. It seems that the premier of Queensland has the last word over what happens to this world heritage wonder. It’s not good news, to say the least. He gave the go ahead to heavy industry, harbor development for increased shipping and mining transport all along the reef. His decisions are all based on business, money and the so- called economy; an economy that seems to disregard any life negatively affected by this. Or anything but the profiteering of a few people who stand to gain an awful lot from this. To hell with all the locals who live there trying to run a tourist business or small fisheries or people who just want to bring up their children in a pristine environment. The reef itself and all the life it supports underneath the water level isn’t even being mentioned,” he went on. “I don’t know what the point of our mission is anymore,” he said

shaking his head sadly.

“That’s terrible. Are we still going to go?” Lahni asked.

“Well, yes I guess, maybe we can still change the course of action but we’d better hurry. I am just so annoyed. Sorry for my high energy but I feel strongly about this issue,” he said apologetically and then called the crew together to have a last briefing before heading out to sea.

It was a calm day; the sun was just above the horizon when they came out through the Heads into the Pacific Ocean heading due north.

A day that had started with excitement was now a little flat, at least for the professor who was back on the phone trying to get through to the Queensland government to see if he could sway them before it was too late.

Lahni was still on deck looking out for some dolphin friends to have a chat with.

Daniel, the ships boy, a tall, lanky looking young man of 19, came up and sat next to her on his break. He had been given instructions to tighten Lahni’s vest and look after her in a general sense while on the ship.

“The prof told me about you, pretty cool story. I wish I could travel around the world and help out,” he said.

“But you are, aren’t you. You’re here doing just that,” Lahni said looking him in the eyes.

“I guess you got a point. I am here, aren’t I? Yeah, you’re right,” he said all proud of himself. “I’m already doing what I want. That’s great!”

Below, a pod of dolphins showed up swimming in the wake of the ship, bopping up and down. Lahni was lying down with her head well over the edge to see her ocean friends.



“Hi you guys!” she yelled adding a bark at the end. The dolphins acknowledged her greeting by jumping and saying hello mid air. There was pure joy in the air.

“Ah, it’s nice to be alive,” Daniel said sitting back down, “and look at these guys down there, they are always happy...I mean as long as we don’t hurt them.”

“Hey, careful there you two, not too close to the edge,” Dr Morton said coming around from the other side. “Don’t you have some work to do, Daniel? Long break, huh?” he said with a half smile.

“Oh, sorry, sir, I forgot all about the time. Right, back to it,” he said and ran back to the kitchen to see if the cook needed help.

“Keeping my crew from working, are you Lahni,” he said, taking Daniel’s spot next to her.

“He did what you asked him to do, so he was still working, really,” Lahni said in Daniel’s defense.

“Ah, I see, your friends are here,” he said, noticing the dolphins racing alongside the Aurora. “No wonder! Timeless creatures always get us away from our clock bound lives. It’s kind of a good thing, though. We get too locked down and restricted with all the tick-tock around us. I wish I could be more like them,” he added looking towards the pod below.

“But they only have the ocean,” said Lahni.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“I’m saying that you have the choice of earth, air or water and people still aren’t as grateful and happy as they are with what they’ve been given. Humans are never quite satisfied, or so it seems to me. No one is making humans do anything. They are choosing to live the way they do by what they do over and over again, every day. Dolphins are happy with what they have, if left in peace of course. Not all are having a good life. Many are living in captivity having to perform for humans. It must be like being in a prison without committing a crime. I will never understand that idea. How would people like it if someone came along, took them by force out of their environment, took them to a zoo or circus and made them perform silly tricks for a bit of food. It’s such a strange thing to do,” said Lahni.

“Thousands get killed for every one that gets captured for the international Sea World market. I’m not sure which ones are better off,” the professor agreed.

“Neither, I think, are particularly happy under the circumstances,” Lahni sighed.

“I will always be mortified by what humans do to whales and dolphins and dogs—don’t forget dogs and other animals too,” he added.

“What about what they do to each other?” Lahni asked.

“That’s a whole other story. No one can explain that to me, ever and make any sense of it. Why would anyone choose to hurt another deliberately, unless they are truly fighting for their life,” he said shaking his head, “and there’s the bottom line. I think I just hit the nail on the head. It’s all about survival and only we humans have taken that to a new level of grotesque. Instead of hunting and fishing for a living and only taking what we need, like we used to, we take a huge amounts of everything, much, much more than we’ll ever need and store it and trade it and sell it, take it from others, waste

it and fight over it. All to make a dollar, which in turn allows us to go and buy food to feed our families. It does seem a bit complicated and insane when you look at it that way,” Dr. Morton admitted.

“It sure is insane. Greed is what’s causing all this trouble,” Lahni said.

“Maybe, but I’m not sure if that’s all it is, really. I think it may also be a disconnection from nature. So many people are living in big cities and aren’t having a relationship with nature anymore. Maybe that has something to do with it?” the Professor added. “I have to check on a few things now. Just chill out while you can,” he said and left Lahni to herself on deck.

She saw the last of the pod disappear below the water into the deep when she remembered the blessing from Hawaii. “I am sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you,” she whispered to herself a few times in a row looking down towards the water.

Daniel passed by on his way to his next job overhearing it. “That’s nice, what is it you’re whispering, Lahni?”

“Oh, it’s a ho’oponopono for the animals and the ocean. It has healing powers. I just thought of it again. I hadn’t used it since New Zealand. I learnt about it in Hawaii from a Kahuna woman. A lovely lady!” she added.

“That’s sounds great, I want to do that. Can you teach me later when I have time off from my duties?”

“Sure, no problem. Just come and find me after your work is done,” Lahni offered.

“Thanks,” he said and walked off with excitement in his step.

Later that afternoon the two sat on the bow of the ship, Daniel dangling his long legs over the edge and Lahni sitting beside him repeating the ho’oponopono blessing again and again. Daniel joined in once he got the words right. They got louder and louder every time and faster and faster. In the end they started laughing out loud, lying on their backs looking at the clouds racing passed. “This makes me feel good, I’m sure it works for the ocean and all the life in in too,” Daniel announced, “wouldn’t it be great if you could get the whole world to do this at the same time... I wonder what would happen then?”

“Half the world sleeps when the other half is awake, so that’s not really possible but a good idea.” Lahni answered.

“Maybe we could start something and see if it keeps going, you know, like a wave.”

“That’s an amazing idea. Maybe we can use Facebook and Twitter to get the message out there and....” he continued but was interrupted by Lahni’s question.

“What’s facebook and tweeter, I haven’t met them yet, they sound funny?” she asked.

“Oh, of course you wouldn’t know that. But you know what a computer is and a mobile phone?” he asked.

“Yes, I do; my friend Katya had a phone like that and Itu and his brother Tane showed me their computer. Strange things they are but go on,” she said.

“Well, Facebook is a Social Networking website where people can have an account, like a webpage, where they can post their ideas and photos and interesting things and also connect with friends and family and even people they don’t know but may have something in common with. So it’s a great way to get a message out there,” he explained, “and Twitter is a sort of similar thing for mobile phones. People can put their thoughts about anything out there for everyone to see in writing, so you see it’s also a great way to get information to people and could be used to get people together to do ho’oponopono. I think when we get into the next harbor I will connect with my friends and get this thing going,” Daniel said with excitement.

Lahni was excited too. She would never have been able to do this herself. “I thought it was just the one person at a time for me when it come to creating change but it looks like we can do a lot more. Thanks for coming up with this beautiful idea,” she said hugging Daniel.

“It’s about time these networking sites were being used for something more than just gossip. Some people are already doing good things on them but not enough yet,” he added.

“Not enough of what yet?” asked Dr.Morton on approach.

“Oh we’re just talking about ho’oponopono and how to get a lot of people to participate in it via Facebook and Twitter. Do we have an internet connection on board?” Daniel asked the professor.

“Well, we do but it’s satellite and expensive, so for this purpose—and I agree it’s a good idea; you guys need to wait until we get into Brisbane. We’ll be there for 24 hours to refuel and get some more supplies and I have a meeting with the government there as well. That should give you enough time to get the ball rolling,” Dr.Morton explained.

“That’s what I said already but wanted to know for sure. Thanks Dr.Morton,” Daniel said as he got up. “I’m thirsty... do you want a drink, mate?” he asked to Lahni, “I’m going to the kitchen to see what’s cookin’. I can bring you something. Water, maybe?”

“Yes, water would be good, thanks. I’ll stay here a little longer. Come back and we’ll watch the sunset together, will you?”

“I’ll be joining you for that as well,” the prof added, “see you in a bit.”

Lahni was alone for the moment. She thought about all she had done so far. “I wonder if it’s enough. I wonder if I could really save the world?” she said out loud.

“But you already are!” Daniel said, sitting back down with a sandwich in hand and a bowl of water for Lahni.

“That was quick!” Lahni said.

“Didn’t wanna miss the sunset,” he said while taking a bite. “You are doing more than most people already and you can only do so much on your own. But with our brilliant idea to use the phones and the Internet we can make this a whole lot more effective and spread your message everywhere.”

A couple of days later, as planned, Daniel took Lahni onshore to see a friend about getting the Twitter and Facebook campaigns for Lahni’s mission started. They had a bit more than 24 hours to arrange things.

“Be back by 4 p.m. tomorrow, you guys! I am counting on you, Daniel, to get Lahni back here safe. See you then and good luck on your mission!”

They took off towards New Farm, a hip and fashionable area on the river close to the city. Daniel’s friend, Aden, was a good networker, with thousands of friends on Facebook, many more followers on Twitter and known to everyone who was anyone in town. He was so connected in fact that Daniel was confident it was the quickest way to get any sort of message out there. Within hours the entire community and then some would know about their plan. Daniel had called ahead and given Aden some basic information about his plan to assist Lahni in helping the environment.

Aden’s house was on top of a hill above the river. It was on one level with a huge glass window facing the city and river. He greeted them formally and offered a welcome cup of tea to Daniel.

“So, Daniel, how’ve you been, mate? Traveling the seas I hear. Pretty cool job you got there.”

“Ah, it’s just a ship’s boy position but I wanna work my way up a little. Was thinking about being a skipper one day! We’ll see,” he answered.

“Sounds like a good plan, I wish I knew what I want. Still just hangin’ out. So, what’s this blessing about, ho’opono or whatever you call it?” Aden asked Daniel.

“Lahni, you explain it to him, you know more about it!” Daniel suggested.

“OK,” she said and began to talk. “You see, we all have our energy in the mix of the world’s energy, so everything we think, feel or do has an effect on what’s happening out there. We’re all connected, not only to each other, but also to all of nature and the oceans and all the animals in it. So, the ho’oponopono blessing is about taking back and forgiving all that we as individuals have contributed to the troubles of the world and blessing it with positive energy.”

Aden was sitting down now, a little taken aback by such a detailed description coming from a dog’s mouth. He’d heard from Daniel about a talking dog but thought it would be simpler language, not this sophisticated. On the other hand he seemed excited about the prospect of being able to help in this way. He was used to planning parties mostly and other

social gatherings, not ever had he participated in or initiated something so meaningful.

“I can do that. I have so many connections. This is good... we start with making Lahni a Facebook page, telling everyone about her travels and her mission, then we invite all of my friends and their friends and yours, Daniel, then we’ll tweet the whole thing and get it out there. We can also make a specific event for one of those blessing ho’opono thingies. Yes! This is gonna be good,” he said and got up to get his computer and iPhone.

Within minutes a page named ‘Lahni’s Mission’ was up on the screen in front of them. “So, you can add anything you find, anything you’re interested in or you can post what you want to say about your journey and your thoughts. Whatever you want, really! Then you can invite people to ‘like’ your page. I’ve made it ‘public’, so everyone can see it. Daniel, maybe you can be an administrator as well, then you can keep track and we can both invite our friends to ‘like’ this page as well. Voila!” Aden explained. “Here you are. One down, one to go! Also make sure you show her again how to get into the page with some human help, of course, so she can keep it up to date as well,” he added.

“That’s amazing, how did you do that so fast,” asked Lahni. “I can’t get my head around that.”

“It’s cyber space, so it’s much faster than anything we can do physically. But not to worry, it’s easier than you think,” Daniel reassured her.

“We don’t ever think about how it all works, we just use it. And that is something anyone can learn,” Aden said, turning his attention to twitter.

He sent a message to all his followers about Lahni’s page and to look out for an upcoming online event.

“Done! We have set a date for when you want people to get together to do this ho’opono thingie...”

“Ho’oponopono” Lahni corrected him.

“Yes that’s it, I’ll get it right one of these days, I promise. As long as I spell it right and explain what it is in my message, we should be OK, right?”

“I guess that works. Can you set the date for next Sunday?” Lahni asked. “We’ll be near the reef and have some time to sit down and do this. Having everyone’s blessings go out at the same time will be great!”

“Many people on my list will also re-tweet this, which means that in the end it’ll be thousands, at least I hope so. I will re-tweet it closer to Sunday as well,” Aden added.

“So will I,” said Daniel. “I hope the prof will let me use the Internet and phone on board, if I do it quickly.”

“I’ll ask him for you; I’m sure it’ll be alright to use it for this purpose,” Lahni said.

“See, team work is always the best way,” Aden said with a big smile.

“Twelve noon this coming Sunday is our time for everyone to say the blessing. I’ve tweeted the words and all. Also

let's put this on your page now and create an events page as well. We'll cover all our bases that way."

"Can you tell people to please do this regularly as well as taking part in the event Sunday? It has to be done more than once," Lahni added.

"Sure, no probs...done! I'll keep tweeting it to remind people," Aden promised. "Hey, it's late, 'you guys hungry? I was thinkin' about ordering some take away. Do you want anything?" he asked.

"Sure, I could eat; what about you Lahni, hungry?" Daniel enquired.

"Sure, some meat maybe or fish is good for me," she said.

"There's a nice steak place, I'll get some stuff from them," Aden said, making the call to order.

Lahni and Daniel made themselves comfortable for the night. Daniel took the couch and Lahni was content with a shaggy rug on the floor. Dinner arrived shortly after. They sat quietly and just ate for a while.

"You guys mind if I go out for a little bit? Daniel, do you wanna come or stay? Either way is fine. I'll be out late. Dogs are not allowed in the clubs here though. Sorry Lahni. You'll have to stay here."

"Pass, man. I'm tired from working those early morning shifts on the ship, mate and I'm not used to late nights anymore," Daniel confessed, feeling a little embarrassed, given his age.

"Whatever suits, mate, make yourselves at home, please! We'll have breaky then... a late breaky before you leave. You gotta be back, when?" Aden asked before leaving.

"Four in the afternoon, mate, so, plenty of time. See you in the morning," Daniel answered.

"See you, Aden, good night! Thanks so much for your help!" Lahni said while still tucking into the last bites of her dinner.

They both fell asleep with their stomachs filled and content with their accomplishments of the day. Lahni woke during the night feeling hot and decided to sleep on the balcony. She had just settled on a rug she had pulled down that had been hanging on the railing to air, when a squeaking noise in the adjacent tree caught her attention. A big branch was moving and now touching the side of the balcony rail. Lahni stood up to investigate where the noise had come from when she spotted two big brown glowing eyes looking her way. They belonged to a furry creature with big ears and a long bushy tail. "Hello!" Lahni said. "Who are you? And what are you?"

"Possum, they call me possum. My name is Mimm. I live in this tree. But who are you? I've never seen you here before," the possum said.

"Oh, excuse my rudeness. I am Lahni, Samoyed, seafaring dog from a far away place... I'm visiting Aden who lives here in this apartment," she explained.

“Yes, I know about him, I see him sometimes early in the morning before I go to sleep. He seems to keep similar hours to us. He leaves food for us on the balcony now and then...have you seen any?” Mimm asked.

“No I haven’t but if you are hungry I can see what he has in the kitchen. What do you eat?” Lahni inquired.

“Fruit, any fruit will do, thank you!” she said.

“Wait here, I will be right back!” Lahni said. She found an old bruised banana and a bunch of spotty grapes sitting in a bowl on the kitchen counter. I’m sure Aden has forgotten about this stuff, looks fine to me for Mimm, she thought grabbing it all with her mouth and carrying it outside for her neighbor. “Here, will this be OK...it’s all I could find?”

“This is wonderful. Thanks! We can’t find much fruit anymore. All the mango trees are gone and so are the avocado trees, fig and mulberry trees too. They all used to grow around here. People are planting all these strange trees without fruit. They look pretty and provide shelter but we can’t live on them,” Mimm explained.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Lahni said. “I’ll ask Aden to give you more. I’m sure he doesn’t eat half the stuff he buys since he is always out.” Mimm consumed all she’d been offered looking very satisfied.



Lahni proceeded in telling her about her entire journey up to this point, while the possum was sitting in the tree chewing on the banana. After Lahni finished her story, she found out from Mimm that possums were considered a pest by a large section of the population, even though they had been here for much, much longer than most people and all the houses and buildings. Somehow now they were in the way of development, so co-existing with humans had become much harder in recent years.

Daniel woke up around 10am. Lahni was already awake, stretching her limbs and grooming herself. “Wow, you’re up already. What time is it?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t know. It was daylight when Aden came home,” Lahni said. “But I was up half the night talking to a possum on the balcony. She lives in this tree and loves it when Aden leaves food for her. Her name is Mimm. They seem to have trouble finding enough to eat around here now.”

“Really? I had no idea. I’ll have to tell him to feed them more often then. I think he’ll be sleeping in, so we’ll have to wait for a while to get breakfast.”

“I don’t need breakfast, we can go anytime if you like.” Lahni said.

“You guys leaving already?” Aden asked, walking out of his bedroom in his underwear, yawning big. “Mate, sorry, slept in a bit, had a late night,” he added, stretching himself. “How about a coffee, mate, then I’ll take you guys down to the ship. Was gonna tell you also, I heard last night that the Sea Shepherd is in the harbor today, I thought it might be cool for Lahni and you to meet the crew, if you want?”

“Oh, really? I heard about them in New Zealand. Would love to meet them, since they do such great things for the whales,” Lahni said.

“Me too, always wanted to meet those guys; they are so brave, man. That’s a great idea!” Daniel threw in excitedly. “Alright, let’s have coffee on the way then. I know a nice place. But gotta wash my face and brush my teeth first. Won’t be long,” Aden said and disappeared into the bathroom.

The drive to the Sea Shepherd’s vessel wasn’t long and with only a short stop to get coffee, they found themselves back at the same place the Aurora was moored. Daniel noticed that some of the crew from the Aurora was also on board the Steve Irwin, one of the ships in the Sea Shepherd’s fleet, which was docked very close to the research vessel.

“Hey, this is their flag ship, the one that did all the fighting with the Japanese whaling fleet in the Antarctic,” he told Lahni.

“Can we go on it?” Lahni asked, wagging her tail in excitement.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Daniel said as they came close to the ship.

Lahni noticed him first. “Hey, isn’t that....” she said speeding up her walk.

The Professor was sitting on deck having lunch and a beer with the captain of the ship. “Hey, you guys, how did your Facebook thing go? Glad to see you made it back,” he said holding up his beer to wave at them. “Come on up and meet the crew!”

They climbed up the gangway and joined everyone at the temporary table set up for lunch. “Here mate, have a drink!” one of the crew said throwing a beer towards Daniel and one towards Aden. Both caught the stubbies with one hand. “Nice catch. So tell me, how did it go?” the prof continued.

“Well, we made a Facebook page for Lahni, then tweeted it and also made an events page for this coming Sunday for a Ho’opnopo, you know, that Hawaiian thing,” Aden explained.

“I know what you mean, it’s a hard word to say. But that’s great. We’ll be on the ship near the reef by then. I guess you’ll need access to the Internet, huh, Daniel, so you can remind everyone again?” the Prof asked.

Daniel nodded quietly, his lips pressed together in anticipation.

“I know it’s important to you and Lahni, so be my guest.”

“Thanks, Dr. Morton, really, thanks a bunch!” Lahni said.

“Derek, call me Derek, you too Daniel, or Prof, but not Dr. Morton. It’s too formal out here.”

“OK.” Daniel and Lahni said in unison.

“You guys, bonded already,” Derek said, nodding his head in approval. “Nice. Now, let’s meet the crew here and I’m sure that you, Lahni, will have to have a chat with the captain here about their mission and yours. Am I right?” the prof added. Lahni nodded her head in agreement.

“Been wanting to talk to these guys since New Zealand but didn’t get a chance there. So, yes! Absolutely! Do we have time before we leave?” she asked eagerly.

“Yes, we do, hours in fact. It’s only 1p.m., we leave at four, so plenty of time.”

“Captain Watson, meet Lahni, wonder dog...Lahni meet Captain Watson,” he said introducing her to the Captain. They sat and began a lengthy conversation.

“I heard that during the Japanese’s last so-called whale research season, they only killed a third of what they intended, thanks to you and yet too many still. That must be a little bit of a win for you guys,” Lahni said, “and I also heard that they couldn’t sell the whale meat. They are freezing and stock piling it instead. I just wonder why they keep doing it when no one wants it?”

“Good question, Lahni, I wonder about that too and I think it’s called ego. They simply don’t want to be told what they

can and cannot do. It's a sad fact that all these whales have died for nothing but canned dog food in the end. No offense, but I don't think dogs should be eating whale."

"None taken! And I agree, I won't eat it!" Lahni proclaimed. "Ever!"

"If only the Japanese could hear what you have to say and what the whales have to say. They would probably stop what they are doing, immediately," Watson said.

"We have it recorded, so if you ask the professor, I'm sure it could be arranged to send a copy to the Japanese government and the Whaling Commission. We should post it on Facebook and Youtube as well," Lahni suggested.

"You know about social networking, wow. Now I'm even more impressed," the Captain admitted.

"Only just! We wanted to reach more people with my campaign of blessing the ocean, so we started a Facebook page and Twitter and Youtube campaigns to get it out there faster," she explained.

"You should go to Japan on your travels and talk to them," he said. "They would fall over if they heard you speak, let alone show and tell them about your travels and communications with whales."

"Oh, I absolutely am planning on it. I want to not only stop them hunting and eating my friends, I also want them to stop going after Dolphins in Taiji. I have to. It's horrible what's happening there. I am amazed that you've been fighting them for more than thirty years already. It takes courage and determination to keep on doing this. I admire you!" she added.

"Once you make a decision to go on this kind of a journey, you can't go back. I'll be fighting them until they quit decimating our ocean friends and fish stocks. I'm hoping they'll wake up soon though. I'm getting old," he said with a half smile.

"I'd love to go on one of those missions with you one day!" Lahni said.

"Too dangerous for you, I think. We often have rough seas and very heavy altercations with the Japanese. I wouldn't recommend it but you might see us in the Coral Sea soon...if the Australian government does what it says it will do and extend their protected marine park zones, we'll be there to help enforce security. At least we offered our help to them. We'll see!" he answered.

The professor was close and overheard their conversation. He quickly interjected, "Watson, isn't that already a done deal?" he asked.

"Not to my knowledge. I think they are still in the proposal stage. It would be the first decent thing they've done for while now. I'm sure we'll hear about it soon. On the other hand, I'm not sure how much good it'll do with the Queensland government granting building and operating permits to heavy industry along the same stretch of coastline. Doesn't make a whole lot'o sense, does it!" he continued. "Not to mention that there will, no doubt, be enormous protests from pro industry

interest groups and pro fishing and gaming lobbies against the marine park proposal.”

“We can only hope that it will make some difference to the creatures living in there if they go ahead with it.” Lahni added, looking towards the water below.

“It is good news that the federal government is even putting this proposal on the table. It’s a step in the right direction anyway. So, I have to commend them for that. How effective it will be in really protecting this precious environment...well that remains to be seen but I do agree with Lahni, there is hope!” the prof said, “and what you guys are doing is making people aware of what’s going on out there. It’s a tough job, but someone has to do it,” he continued addressing the captain, “...just glad it’s not me.”

Captain Watson replied, “I wish Australia would do more for the whale sanctuary in the Southern Arctic, like defending them against Japanese aggression for instance. They make such a big deal out of small illegal fishing boats taking from Australian waters at the top end, reacting with military and all but when the Japanese even bring a warship with them into their territory, the Aussies do absolutely nothing. I know it’s all about trade deals and such but to allow this slaughter to continue against all sense and against international law, not to mention their own laws, is unbelievable and unsustainable. Maybe if you start sharing your experience with them things will change. You should show it to the Australian government as well.”

“I do have a lot of footage from our conversation with Lahni’s whale friends, so be my guest to use it. I’ve already shared it with a few people yielding mixed results, ranging from absolute surprise and awe to accusations of CGI and dubbing, etc. I’ll put you in touch with my cinematographer if you want a copy of the tapes,” Dr. Morton explained.

“What? You don’t have them? Aren’t you worried about them disappearing or sabotage?” Captain Watson asked.

“Nope, it’s all good. I have some copies secured in a few different places. Believe me, I have learnt my lessons when it comes to securing my proof!” The prof explained, “I’ve had a bad experience early on in my career and have since been hyper-vigilant about back-ups and securing my findings.”

“Smart,” Watson said, “I’m sure there would be many people who would love to bury all of it, if they had the chance. The truth is right in front of us but so many don’t want to know. I fear we are playing musical chairs on a sinking ship but once I started on this journey and seeing what’s going on out there, there was no turning back.”

“I sure hope it’s not sinking yet, even though that was the very dream that got me started on this journey,” Lahni answered, “I have seen so much hope on my travels though, that I would like to believe otherwise. I’ll stick to that for now, I think.”

“You do that, Lahni, someone has to stay positive amongst all this crazy-making stuff,” Dr Morton said,” but let’s get

our ship ready soon, so we can be part of the hope instead of the sinking of this planet! There is much work to be done! We'll come back for another chat before we leave!"

Aden had already taken off for other important ventures and Daniel had returned to his duties on the Aurora. The crew was busy readying the ship. There was excitement in the air, despite the fact that the odds of saving the Great Barrier Reef from further damage were stacked against them. It does seem a little like preparing for an ocean race, Lahni thought, you know where you want to get to but you have no idea if you'll make it... in the end all you can do is your best and keep going. With that thought in her head she went around the deck saying hello to everyone.

"What's going around in your head, mate?" Daniel inquired.

"Ah, just thinking about this trip and everything so far and if it's made a difference to what's happening on this earth. It feels a little like a race against time but I guess we'll have to keep trying, right?" Lahni answered.

"Yup, that's all anyone can ever do, Lahni, and you have certainly done a lot already. You don't know what will happen, ever. You can have ideas and plans in your head but you never really know for sure how it plays out. I mean, when you took off from your home, you didn't know what was going to happen, right? But you went anyway because you thought it important enough to do something. Remember, only two days to go 'til the Ho'oponopono happens. I hope we get loads of people participating!" Daniel said to reassure her.

The trip north was a slow one, with stops along the way to collect water and soil samples as well as some much needed population estimates of all the sea creatures in the area. The first stop was Morton Island, just off Brisbane, a sanctuary for big sea turtles, dugongs and dolphins, which had been hit with an oil spill from a tanker that had run aground a few years prior. The spill had had a fast clean up response from the local emergency services but evidence of its occurrence was still present here, in the water, the sand, vegetation and the animals.

Years of dredging the Brisbane River and the Bay had resulted in much damage. This shallow bay had been the breeding ground for many species for thousands of years before human activity began. Major environment groups had fought the government to stop this archaic and harmful practice, which is used to keep the area deep enough for ships to get through the bay into the harbor, located inside the river delta. Some fisheries also dredge in this area to collect Moreton Bay Bugs, a crustacean delicacy served up in local and interstate restaurants.

The effects of this practice were plainly visible. The spawning of fish was being disturbed and the water was contaminated with toxic chemicals that had been dormant in the sediment of the seabed. This was evident in the samples

taken and tested on board. Water birds were suffering from starvation due to low fish stocks as a result. Dugongs and turtles were being injured regularly by boat activity and dredging in their breeding habitats. The industry had expanded in recent years and so did recreational boating and fishing. Business interests and the public largely chose to ignore the enormous impact this practice was having on the environment.

It all looked pretty above the water and that was enough for most to think all was well below the surface.

“This place looks beautiful,” Lahni observed.

“That it does,” said the professor, “but it’s also really, really fragile. We weren’t really hired to check on this area but since we’re ahead of schedule, I thought we should take a look and send our findings to Brisbane. Maybe it’ll help what’s left in there. Turtle counts are low, we haven’t seen any dolphins yet and this is supposed to be a dolphin hot spot ...the same for dugongs. It’s not good. If they stopped what they are doing now, there maybe hope for this area’s recovery yet!”

Chapter 16 Sand Dunes, Dingoes and Blessings

After a day of collecting data and making notes on the state of Moreton Bay, the Aurora set off towards Fraser Island, just a little further up the east coast. The world's largest sand island marks the gateway to the Coral Sea and Great Barrier Reef and the habitat for the infamous dingo, the last of the pure bred wild dogs. The beach went on for miles with fine, white sand, bordered by low scrub and trees.

Daniel and Lahni had taken off in a small dinghy after the Aurora dropped anchor well offshore in the bay. The ship was too large to come in closer due to the dangers of all the sand banks in the area.

"You know you have to be careful with those dingoes, they can be dangerous. They killed a couple of kids here a few years back. Tourists just don't mix well with wildlife, I reckon. But people come anyway and they camp on the beach and get too close sometimes. You're not meant to feed them but people do it anyway. There is a warning sign over there, see! As usual dingoes get blamed for tourists' stupidity!" Daniel said to Lahni while getting out of the dinghy in the shallows and pulling the boat onto the sand. "Stick with me and we'll be fine," he added.

"What do you mean by blamed? What happens to the dingoes?" Lahni asked.

"Oh, they cull them when they think there's too many of them and they get in the way of summer holiday crowds," Daniel explained.

"Cull?" Lahni asked, looking at him a little confused.

"It's just a nicer word for 'kill', really!" Daniel answered with sadness in his voice. "I know, it's not fair, is it?"

"Nature has to make way for humans again. I don't understand why people won't live with their environment, why is it always that nature has to bend and change to fit humans?" Lahni asked Daniel who was checking out the beach and surrounds. It wasn't busy since it was offseason; with just a couple of campsites way in the distance.

Daniel pondered Lahni's very difficult question for a while before answering. "You know, that is a very good question and I don't know the answer. Maybe it's because people aren't hanging out in nature enough. I mean without cars and tents and boats and radios but just sitting on the ground and being connected and all. But dunno, really!"

After securing their dinghy they set off on foot to have a closer look.

Fraser Island was also a turtle breeding area with many nests being disturbed by human activity. Turtles' nests were usually up the beach near vegetation, dug into the sand and filled with multiple eggs. When they hatch, the little baby turtles have to fend their way past hungry dingoes and seagulls to the water. Out of thousands only a few will make it to

adulthood and since turtles have a natural homing instinct, the survivors will all one day return to the beach they were born on, to lay their eggs. With the odds already stacked against them, having cars roll over their nests during vacation times and crushing the eggs was a major blow to the local turtles population. Fraser Island management had adopted an eco-tourism spin long ago but the Island was still open to everyone to go about business as usual.

Lahni lagged further and further behind stopping to smell shells and various flotsam and jetsam on her walk. Daniel was in a hurry since he had work to get back to on the Aurora. He was soon out of sight, so she decided to sit for a while and rest at the waters edge. They would anchor here overnight so there was no urgency involved for her to get back onboard. She suddenly heard faint foot steps in the sand behind her. As she turned, a dingo was in the middle of stalking her and at this point was only a few meters away.

“Howdy!” Lahni said, starting the conversation. “You must be a local dingo then, nice to meet you!” she said stopping the wild dog in his tracks. He seemed startled by her words but came closer to sniff her just like Fred had done in Sydney. Lahni obliged and treated him in kind.

“What are you?” he asked shyly, sitting in front of her now.

“Oh, of course you wouldn’t know. I’m a dog, a Samoyed. I normally pull sleds on ice and snow and look after livestock for my people far, far away from here. But now I’m traveling the world to see about saving it!”



“It needs saving? Why, what’s going on? What’s snow and ice if I might ask?” the dingo enquired.

“Oh, I don’t really know how to explain that. It’s water, just like water that you can drink without salt but it’s frozen, hard and cold because it’s very cold where I’m from, you understand?”

“Kind of, don’t really know what that feels like. It doesn’t get cold here, really,” he answered. “What’s your name?” Lahni asked. “Mine’s Lahni. Wanna walk with me a bit? We can talk more and I can tell you all about my journey as well.”

“The name’s Kal. Most kinds I meet around here aren’t as friendly as you. They usually scream loudly, which hurts my ears and then they try and run or make themselves really big to scare me off. Strange really, since they’re already so much bigger than us. I’m not tryin’ to hurt anyone, just living here. ‘S all we got. Can’t leave this place, I was born here!” he said with a rather sad look on his face.

“I heard some human children got killed by your kind here. Is that true?” Lahni asked.

“Yeah, a few years back, mate... it was a mistake. One of the young human boys got lost and a couple of hungry fellas got him. You see, there’s not enough food to go around here all year around. I’m sorry that happened but you know, when you look at how many of them come here, it’s not many that get hurt by us. It’s really the other way around. Lots of my mates have been shot ‘n killed here by the rangers. It’s not fair. They think we shouldn’t be here but it’s our place; been here a long, long time. I hear we used to get along with the people, the locals anyway but not the soft ‘n pasty lookin’ ones.”

“You know, people are always afraid of what they don’t know. See, I didn’t know you either but I talked to you and you understood that I’m not here to harm you and you’re not here to harm me, right?” she explained, looking sideways at Kal to make sure that was the case.

“Well, I did stalk you, you know. Could’ve been somethin’ good to eat. But then you started talkin’ and well here we are walking together,” Kal said.

The two new friends walked on for a while. Lahni soon became aware that behind her a group of other dingoes was following them at a safe distance. Kal turned and signaled them to come closer.



“Hey guys, meet Lahni, a dog from far, far away. She’s my friend, so leave her alone, you hear me,” he growled at them. “You can come along if you want, but no trouble,” he added.

Lahni felt the sudden urge to turn back towards the Aurora but was a little nervous facing the pack behind her.

“Kal, I kind of need to get back to the Aurora, my ship, see over there, tonight. Can we turn around?” she asked.

“Sure we can,” and with that he swung around and walked the other way. As if by magic all the other dogs let Kal and Lahni pass and then followed them without discussion or wrangling for position. Kal must be the leader, Lahni thought, I am glad to know that.

Daniel had radioed in that he was concerned for Lahni’s safety, since they got separated and had asked to stay on the beach with the dinghy to wait for her. The sun was about to set with hues of orange and purple and deep blues in the sky. Daniel sat on the edge of the boat looking up the beach to see if he could spot her.

In the distance he saw a group of dingoes coming towards him at a significant speed and got worried about his own safety, given it was getting darker fast and they were probably looking for dinner; that was until he spotted the white one in the middle. It was Lahni surrounded by wild dogs. He was amazed but not in the slightest surprised that she had made friends here so quickly.

“Hey you, I thought you got lost...been waiting a while! Got all worried for nothing by the looks of it. Introduce me to your friends!” Daniel said giving Lahni a big kiss on the forehead.

The dingoes had gathered around them in a circle.

“This feels strange, should I be nervous about this?” he whispered to her.

“Nope, they’re fine. Kal here is my friend and these are his mates. It’s safe!”

Daniel quickly contacted the professor to relay the good news about Lahni. “We’ll be along soon, Dr. Morton, I promise. She just has to say her goodbyes to all the friends she’s made here,” he said into the radio.

“Thanks, copy that, Daniel,” they heard coming from the other end. Almost all the dingos except Kal cocked their heads wondering where the voice had come from.

“Ah, he’s talking to his boss on the ship and this is a radio to call in with. I know it’s all a bit confusing. Believe me, it took me a while to get used to what humans here do,” Lahni said, trying to explain.

“Don’t worry about them. They’ve been around humans for a while; they don’t want to get it. I’m interested though,” Kal announced. “Are you leaving already?”

“We’ll be here in the morning still, I think we leave at lunch time or just a bit after that, so I’ll try and come over one

more time, OK. Thanks for your friendship and your protection. It was very lovely to meet you!” Lahni said leaning in to kiss Kal.

“Ooohhhhhh,” said all the other dingos in unison.

“Don’t get ahead of yourselves guys, it’s a just a friendly snog, alright! See you tomorrow, I hope. Good night, then,” Kal said.

Daniel and Lahni pulled the dinghy into the water and paddled back to the Aurora. He looked back at the pack sitting at the beach all lined up looking out towards them. “You are amazing! You know, you alone could bring peace to this earth if it wasn’t so darn big,” Daniel said smiling and shaking his head at the same time.

Lahni lifted her paw one more time to wave at them. “I hope I get to go ashore again tomorrow. I really like him,” she said, then turned and sat for the rest of the short trip.

That night she slept so deeply that not even the wildest dreams could have disturbed her. She woke early, refreshed and eager for another dingo encounter. The prof was already on deck taking in the sunrise with a warm cup of tea.

“Hey you, I heard about your dingo friends. This would be a very rare opportunity to get some insight into their lives for me but I don’t think they’ll talk to me as freely as they would with you. So today, I want you to go again but not only for you. I want you to go as my assistant and get as much information as you can before we leave!”

Daniel came on deck yawning. “Happy Sunday morning people... OMG, it’s Sunday! Gotta go!” He ran back downstairs to get to the satellite phone to call Aden to initialize the tweet for Lahni’s ho’oponopono at noon. After he was done he went back upstairs to join the professor for breakfast.

“Alright, let’s start that again, happy Sunday morning everyone! I can’t believe I almost forgot. Lahni, your blessing is today at noon. I just called Aden to re-tweet the time and all. Should be good. I’ll come with you to the beach; we can do it there. The crew can take a break, right Dr.Morton?” he said with a little yawn.

“Sure you can, it’s Sunday but we’ll leave around 2pm. Maybe your dingo friends can help you with your ceremony. Wouldn’t hurt them to get a bit of a blessing,” the prof added.

Daniel and Lahni packed all they needed to perform the blessing. They got into the dinghy and paddled back onto the secluded beach. There, waiting at the waters edge was Kal and a couple of his mates. “Where are the others?” asked Lahni.

“Ah, pups to attend to and stuff. Always something. But we can talk some more,” he said, eagerly sniffing the things Lahni and Daniel were carrying out of the boat.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

“We are blessing the ocean and all the land and all its creatures including us today with what some people call ho’oponopono. It’s just a simple forgiveness prayer and blessing. It’s lovely and it helps everyone. Wanna be there?”

“Sure, if it helps,” Kal said. “I’ll go and fetch the others. Be right back.” He ran into the bushes. His mates stayed behind, quietly watching over the preparations.

Daniel lit some candles in paper bags and placed them along the water, Lahni took the leis out of a bag and began pulling them over the heads of the two dingoes that had stayed behind.

“What’s going on with this flower stuff here? You two look silly!” Kal said trotting towards them, the rest of his pack in tow, pups and all.

“It’s a Hawaiian thing, we got them in Brisbane to bring along because Lahni thought she should stick to traditions with this. I’m sure it would work without but it is kind of fun to add some flowers,” Daniel explained.

“Well, you see in Hawaii the leis are made from real flowers and at the end of the ceremony they place the flowers on the water to finish the blessing. But we couldn’t find real ones, so we got fabric ones but it’s the thought that counts, right!”

“We can find some real local flowers if you’d rather. We know where they are. They’d be smaller bush flowers but nice smelling ones,” Kal suggested. He didn’t wait for a yes from Lahni and sent two of his pack to collect some for the event.

“Go with them Daniel, you can help pick and carry them, they’ll show you where they are,” Kal instructed. Daniel followed them into the bushes. He was a little apprehensive, given he was about to go bush with two wild animals but he trusted Kal and went anyway.

Dr. Morton and his crew decided to show up as well. They came in a rubber boat with an outboard motor but had turned the motor off well before the beach. So, by the time everyone else noticed, they were wading through the water towards them.

Lahni jumped for joy at the sight of them all. “The more of us, the better this works,” she said. “Nice of you to come, Doc.”

At noon, two dozen people, one dog and a large pack of dingoes sat on a Fraser Island beach looking towards the ocean, candles burning, leis around their necks saying. “We are sorry, please forgive us, thank you, we love you!” to the ocean in front of them and the earth beneath them. Afterwards Lahni spent a couple more hours with her new found friend Kal walking the beach and discussing the world, which Kal new very little, if anything, about. He was keen to learn more.

“If I tell you all of this, you’ll want to leave and go travel like I did,” Lahni said.

“Nah, never...can’t leave my family! We’d only leave if life were to get harder here than it already is. With more and

more pasty folk showing up every year that might still happen. But I'm not sure where we'd go or if we'd even be able to leave. I hope my little one can grow up and have a life here. It's a beautiful place, don't you think?"

"It's amazing, you are lucky to have it. I wish you could talk to all those 'pasty people'," she smiled repeating his description. "Maybe then, they would respect you more. Dogs don't seem to be loved by everyone on this planet, no matter the country," Lahni answered.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, in some places they eat us and make fur coats out of us," she explained shaking herself in disgust, "and in many other places we get put in kennels, cages and boxes to breed for pet shops and if you're what they call a stray you can get captured and even killed."

"That's horrible, what did we ever do to them?" Kal asked with a confused look on his face.

"Nothing, we never did anything to any of them. I have had to be very careful and will have to be so careful on my way up towards home. I mean people here have been really nice, same in New Zealand and Samoa and Hawaii...when I think of it there was only one bad person, who I guess was just doing his silly job and that was the ranger in Sydney, on Bondi Beach to be exact. No dogs allowed, you see. So I had to run away from him; otherwise I might be in a box now...!" she shuddered.

"It's not lookin' good for dogs, then? Why would I leave here? It's not so bad, only when there is no food for a while; then it gets hard. I guess those pasty people leave stuff behind sometimes and that helps. So I guess it's all good at the moment, anyways," Kal pondered. "When it gets busy here in the summer they sometimes shoot at us. It doesn't kill us but it hurts a lot! They want us to stay away from the pasty folk but there are so many now it's almost impossible. But thanks for telling me about the world, I had no idea about any of it, since nobody ever tries to talk to us."

"I promise I will talk to the professor about what's happening here as well, maybe he can help.... I mean about too many pasty folk and all," Lahni said. "It was a pleasure talking to you. It was great you had the time."

"That we got lots of, mate!" Kal replied.

Once again, Daniel was waiting for her by the dinghy. It was early afternoon now and time to get back to the Aurora.

"Time to say goodbye Lahni. We gotta get back, they're leaving in a half hour or so," Daniel said when they came close.

"Sorry, Kal, I know you like having her here. Frankly we all feel the same way. She's missed wherever she comes and goes again. It's just who she is," Daniel tried to explain.

Kal kissed Lahni one last time before she climbed into the boat. "Thanks mate, thanks so much! Maybe I'll try talk to

some of them sometime and see if they can understand me,” Kal added.

“Talk to the kids, but don’t stalk them first. You’ll scare them and when humans get scared they do stupid things like killing and such. I so enjoyed meeting you. Love you!” She waved with her paw sitting back on the rocky boat.

Daniel had started paddling while she was still talking to Kal, who in turn had started wading into the water, to his neck now, to stay close.

“Don’t go too deep, Kal. Remember me! Bye!”

“See ya! Love ya!” Kal yelled out now sitting in the water dripping.

“See ya!”

Lahni was climbing up onto the Aurora. She could see him still sitting in the water watching on.

“I’m really sad about leaving him here. But he’s got a family....” she said to the professor, while still lifting her paw at Kal to signal her goodbye.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be OK. This is his home; people are only guests in his world, even if they don’t know it.”

As he finished his sentence they saw Kal turn around, wade up onto the beach, shake himself off and then disappear into scrub.

“Aren’t these the last dingoes? At least that’s what Daniel said,” Lahni enquired.

“They’re the last pure ones. In the rest of Australia they started interbreeding with wild, formerly domesticated dogs. Many have been shot or baited and poisoned by farmers who think they took their livestock,” he explained.

“It’s the same old story of man versus nature instead of man with nature. I’m sure there would be plenty for all if people were willing to share it!” Lahni said.

“They don’t even share it with each other let alone animals,” he replied. “But lets get this show on the road, we have to get out of here. There’s another storm forecast for the afternoon and we’d like to stay ahead of it.”

“I must talk to you some more about Fraser Island, Doc. Later maybe? It’s not good what’s happening there,” Lahni said.

“Afternoon tea’s a good time; we’ll talk then,” Dr. Morton answered.

Later in the afternoon the prof came on deck with tea and a snack for Lahni. She was sitting on the bow taking in the scenery. The sky was clear before them. The forecast storm had moved further out to sea and wasn’t a threat any longer.

“So, what do you want to know about Fraser Island? Or was it that you wanted to tell me something? I don’t recall...it’s been a busy day!” he said sitting down next to her. “This is turning out to be your favorite spot, huh?”

“It’s a bit of both, actually, asking and telling. I’m sure you’ve never spoken to a dingo, so getting it from them directly

is new, right?" she answered.

"That is true. I've been here many times in the past and have done work here but never that," he reminisced. "That would've been miraculous, to say the least!"

"Well, what they told me is alarming. The increase in tourist numbers is pushing them to the limit and I fear they won't last very long if this continues. There is not enough space for both to thrive. Apart from that, a lot of people who go there aren't nice to them," she said taking a deep breath.

"What do you mean by that?" the prof interrupted.

"What I mean is that some tourists, and it seems more and more, are deliberately nasty to the dingoes. They scare them, taunt them and try to hit them with their cars, those big, square four-wheel things they take onto the beaches. They laugh at them and yell at them. Kal told me that the rangers shoot at them frequently when it's tourist season but with some kind of bullet that doesn't kill them, it just hurts them badly for a few days. They do it to keep the dingoes away from people on the beaches. It doesn't seem fair. It's their place to live, the only one they have, so why are people so cruel to them?" she wondered.

"Wow, I hadn't heard about that. Fraser Island is heritage listed and is supposed to be an eco-tourism site only, which means people are supposed to make sure the environment and its creatures are left alone. I'm going to have to make some inquiries into what you are telling me. It sounds serious enough. It is in fact the last of the pure breed dingoes out there, so if they go...that's it. Yet another of many Australian species gone for good! It would be sad indeed."

"I hope you find the right people to talk to; people who actually have the power to act. I mean why are they allowing this anyway? If the island is heritage listed, shouldn't the native animals be protected as well?"

"That makes way too much sense. As usual, there are many interest groups who would have a major issue with closing it to tourism," he said.

"Money?" Lahni asked.

"You said it, same thing again. See, when it first opened it was an eco resort only but then they got greedy and opened it up to back packers and the four-wheel drive crowds, which I think was a huge mistake. And they didn't spend any of the money on making sure the dingoes are safe and happy. They started what they call managing them instead."

"What does that mean? Killing them, starving them and taunting them?" Lahni exclaimed.

"I guess so because that is what's been happening. I am going to make a call today, promise," he said, sipping his tea.

"Why are humans so different? Why do they do cruel things to us and other animals?" Lahni asked.

"Wow, you ask some difficult questions, my dear but I will try and answer you. I guess people who do such things, do

them because they can't feel what they do and they don't believe that animals feel anything. That's just my guess. I can't really see any other reason why anyone would be deliberately cruel! And I also think there are too many of us now and we're still growing in numbers fast because people don't think much about the consequences of over population. But it's the same everywhere," he answered.

"It's funny that, we stop having young ones when there isn't enough food to go around. No dog wants to see their babies starve to death," Lahni said.

"Humans could really learn so much from animals if they only listened more. The whole idea that we are somehow the superior element on this planet is preposterous, given how we treat it. No animals would ever defecate into it's own nest, if given a choice, yet we do it day in day out with our choices towards the environment!" the professor stated.

Chapter 17 The Great Barrier Reef

Just before sunrise the next morning Lahni sat on the bow of the ship again, waiting for the day to arrive. The view before her was breathtakingly beautiful. The water was dark turquoise blue with shimmers of green with faint orange and yellow sparkles started to appear on the surface as the sun rose. To the right of them lay the most gorgeous little reef atoll she had ever seen. She couldn't stop staring at its' magnificence.

"That's Lady Elliot Island!" Daniel said behind her stretching himself. He was barefoot and still in his sleeping gear. "It's a little jewel, isn't it!" he added, yawning widely.

"How come you're up so early?" Lahni asked.

"Oh, I knew we'd be passing by this and when I woke up I saw the pretty colors of the sun rise and had to see for myself. Snorkeling would be nice, huh?"

"I'm going to ask the prof if we can stop here for breakfast and go for a snorkel!" Lahni said. With that she jumped down the stairs to the prof's cabin.



She gently opened the door and quietly approaching his bed, she whispered in his ear and nuzzled him with her very cold nose. He jerked up seemingly startled. "What was that?" he asked confused.

"Oh, sorry that was my nose. It's cold. So sorry!" Lahni said tail wagging. "Had to wake you—you must come and see. It's so beautiful and Daniel and I want to maybe go..."

"Hold your horses, slow down, I'm not quite awake yet," he interrupted. "What's going on? Go where?" he asked.

"We are at Lady Elliot Island right now, it's amazing outside. You must come! Daniel suggested that we go snorkeling and have breakfast there," she explained.

"Sure, sure but let me wake up here, will you!" he said, yawning while getting out of bed and putting on his robe.

"Coming!"

They arrived on deck to the most glorious of sunrises. Lady Elliot was glistening in the rich, yellow morning light.

“Ahh, I see what you mean, it’s beautiful, thanks for waking me up. I’ll talk to the skipper about anchoring here for a little while. We can’t get into the atoll, it’s too narrow and not deep enough for us but you guys can take the motor boat after anchoring is done and go in if you like,” he said on the way to the bridge.

Daniel prepared all the gear for snorkeling and invited a couple of other crew to come along as well. When the prof returned she addressed him with a rather serious look on her face.

“So, Doc, explain something to me please. This looks so amazingly pristine and clean from where we are. What are you looking for in there that Daniel and I can help with?” Lahni asked.

“It always looks pretty up here from above and most of the time even from below. What we are doing is testing for acidity and pollution, like chemicals and silt from farms and industry waste on the coast. This is just the very start of the reef; it stretches another two to three thousands kilometers north from here. Right here isn’t much industry along the coast and only a few smaller towns. There is however farm run-off, like pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, which you can’t see and in most cases can’t smell either. They cause the water to become more acidic and also interfere with the breeding process of everything alive in there. Farm chemicals like pesticides function as endocrine inhibitors....” the prof explained, “which means they disrupt the nervous and reproductive systems of most living things, not just the weeds or bugs they are produced for. The result are lower egg counts, low sperm counts, birth defects like under developed reproductive organs and hence they break the entire cycle of life!”

“That sounds serious! Why do they use them then...don’t they know this?” she enquired.

“Sure they know but it yields more produce if they are used since you don’t have to share with the insect world. Organic farming is less lucrative on a big scale, so they say. At least that is the perception or what the farmers have been sold. So again, it’s the bottom line versus the environment! And that is what we are here for... a last ditch effort to sway the government and the farmers to stop using this stuff once and for all. We have to make them understand that what they stand to lose here is greater than their gain will be,” he said taking a deep breath, “but you guys just go and enjoy the morning. My divers and marine biologist on board can take care of water samples and such, just don’t swallow any sea water, please,” he explained.

Daniel came back with all the snorkeling gear and directed Lahni to the inflatable boat, which was already waiting in the water. He carried her down the ladder backwards, since it was the only way to navigate the steep side of the ship. He had to drop her into the boat from the last step. When she landed everything shook for a few seconds. The other crew

members climbed in, all sat down and set off slowly towards the atoll's inner lagoon.

The water looked clear and was as warm as a mild baby bath. A slight breeze was blowing and waves lapped into the lagoon over the reef.

Amazingly beautiful, Lahni thought. "You wouldn't think anything was wrong here at all, would you?" she said to Daniel.

"You sure wouldn't, looks perfect to me, at least right now. Why don't we stick with that thought for today and just really enjoy ourselves. The ugly truth will be revealed soon enough. But that isn't our gig on this trip, is it!" he answered.



"You have a point there, right here, right now it's all well and good," she agreed.

"Let's stay present and enjoy it then. Come on guys, time to get in there," one of Daniel's friends said while leaning back over the boat to drop into the water. A big splash hit them.

"Let's!" said Daniel, following suit. One by one they entered the water and began snorkeling around the inside of the reef.

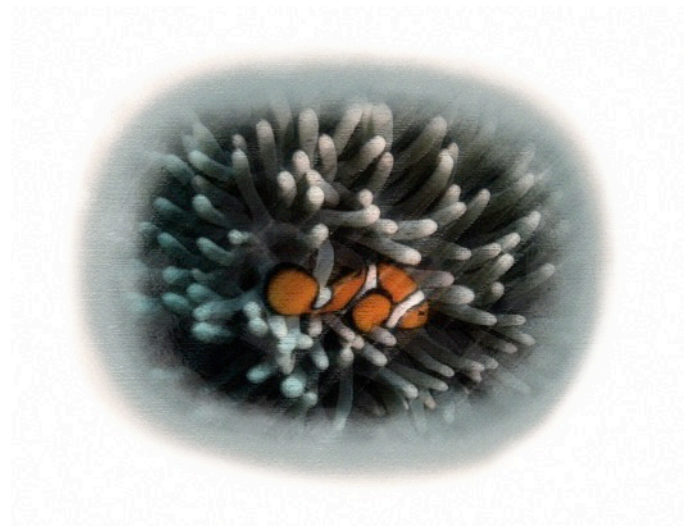
An array of colorful fish, starfish, sea snails, sea snakes and cuttlefish gathered and started following Lahni while she was swimming around the lagoon. She hadn't noticed her entourage but Daniel pointed them out to his fellow divers. Lahni saw him pointing at her and was wondering what he was saying. As she looked around she caught her followers in the corner of her eye and decided to stop and turn around very slowly, so as not to startle or scare her groupies.

They all settled around her. She now had two feet on a bed of coral, her snorkel above the water and her body and head under the water. It was quite the picture!

A white, furry, fluffy dog surrounded by all manner of curious sea creatures looking at her, coming in for a nibble and a sniff.

"Hiiiiii," she said with big eyes, not really knowing what to say. She sounded muffled and hollow being under water with the snorkel in her mouth. It was difficult to speak.

"Hi, what kind of creature are you, we haven't seen anything like you here before?" A yellow, silver and pink striped fish asked Lahni.



“I’m a doug, a snouuw doug really, frwoam a coold plaece and that’s why I have so much fuur, you know—all my white haiir!” she answered sounding as if a sock was stuck in her mouth.

“You look funny and you sound funny,” a small sea turtle commented giggling a little.

“Don’t mind her, she is young!” said a sea snake. “We are happy to meet you. Do you have any stories to tell? We love stories!”

“Do I have stowies? I have lots of stowies but I have to tell you on the outside of the water, maybe you guys could come closah to the suhface so I can breave and take oud my snorkel, so you can unnerstan’ me,” Lahni suggested.

“I can!” said the sea snake.

“So can I!” said the turtle.

“And I!” said the snail.

The fish looked disappointed but Lahni assured them they would hear it all if they came up a little closer and listened carefully.

“I have a brilliant idea,” the snake proclaimed proudly, “we can put all the fish who need to stay under water in the little pool on the coral over there—I’ll show you where it is. The tide is still a bit too high right now but it’s going down already, so they can swim in and then at low tide in a little while they’ll be in there and you can sit on top and we can be in between and you can tell us everything you know. Everyone will be able to hear you then.”

Everyone bobbed in agreement. “Great idea! Thank you, snake.”

Daniel's mates couldn't believe their eyes looking at this bizarre scene. "I would normally say this is very unusual but knowing Lahni for a few weeks now, I am not in the least surprised. She's already conversed with whales and dingoes and humans so why not with sea snakes and octopus and fish," Daniel said, shrugging it off as if it were normal.

"I can't believe it. This dog's magic, mate!" one of them said, the other one agreeing with him.

"Yup, that she is!" Daniel acknowledged.

Soon all the little fish that could fit as well as the octopus and other creatures needing to remain under water filled up the little pool that stayed full during low tide on the coral reef. Lahni sat next to it as low as possible surrounded by the snakes and sea turtles, who climbed up next to her; some starfish who were holding on tight and many snails and shells that had taken shelter from the tides on the rock below the coral.

It was a colorful picture. Lahni proceeded to tell her story from the beginning. She left nothing out. Her adventures with Akiak, Katya, New Zealand, Samoa, Kohola and the whale rescue, the dogs and lovely humans in Sydney all the way to the dingoes and sea creatures of the reef she was sitting on. The animals around her listened on in awe, nodding and looking at each other and then at this wondrous creature before them.

The boys had joined the group after seeing all the animals gather around her. Daniel hadn't heard all of her adventure stories and his two friends wanted to know all about it as well.

Back on the Aurora, two marine biologists took to the water to take samples from the coral, the sand and the silt below the sand. They didn't take very long to finish their task. Afterwards the entire crew went for a paddle and a snorkel in the lagoon. The boat approached slowly and carefully. When they entered the lagoon, Lahni turned around to see who was coming.

"Slow down and please keep your distance, I am surrounded by the local residents here and they are a little delicate. Thanks!"

"Duly noted," said the prof, "you heard her, swim around the edges and keep clear of Lahni. No doubt you'll fill me in later, right" he said in her direction. She nodded and kept telling her tales to her audience.

Before sunset the prof had ordered everyone back on board for safety reasons. It was shark-feeding time at dawn and dusk, after all. Lahni bid her friends farewell and promised them that she would do everything in her power to keep up her vision of a better world for all. She thanked them for listening and returned to the Aurora.

Deeply satisfied with her day Lahni went to her cabin to rest before the next day's journey. She thought about all the animals she had met and in an instant knew that she was on this mission for much more than her people and the animals around her people as she had originally thought.

She was in fact the voice of many voiceless creatures, like the starfish and snails and rays and sharks and many, many more animals who were never going to be heard by anyone, much less humans. She also knew this wasn't just about saving the world from melting or warming or pollution; this was about life and evolution on a much larger scale. It was about opening new avenues of communication between the animal and human kingdoms and healing deep wounds that had become bigger and bigger over the past 100 years or so. A little overwhelmed by her realization her thoughts drifted back home to her world of nomads, her humans, her siblings and all the reindeer.

A gentle knock on her door took her out of her daydream. The professor stuck his head in just a little. "Hey, you awake? Can I come in? Got stuff to tell you."

"Sure, sure, come, sit!" Lahni said looking at the space on the bunk next to her. "What's the news?"

He walked in and sat down. "Well, it's good and bad, really. You know how we are doing this testing on acidity levels and the chemicals residue? We found higher than expected levels out here and this is one of the good areas with less farmland close to shore, so that's not good. It's not too high yet to sustain life in there but it is affecting their life cycles already with less fish and really less of everything as a result. However, the good news is, that if we can halt the pollution now we can turn this around — at least that's what I think," the prof explained. "The coral looks ok here as well, only a bit of bleaching. That's also good news. It is only the start though and it's remote and not as busy with tourism and industry as other areas but we'll see," he added.

"That is good news and let's stay with that for a bit. I am soooooo tired," she yawned big, "it's been such a long day and exciting too. I feel a bit sad to leave my new friends behind. So if you don't mind, I'll tell you about my day over breakfast and I'll sleep some now. Thanks for letting me know, though."

"That's fine! I just wanted to add that you looked like you were right home talking to all those sea animals out there. It was an amazing sight. Sleep now. Good night! See you in the morning," the prof said leaving her cabin.

Lahni awoke earlier than usual and went up on deck where she found the prof already up with a cup of tea waiting for the sun to rise.

"Hey you, I didn't expect to see you so early after the day you had yesterday," he said.

"Couldn't sleep, was thinking about what you said last night. What's bleaching?" she asked while taking a seat next to him.

"Oh, I didn't explain that. You were tired, so I thought I'd leave it till today. It's a bit complicated, so bear with me. I'll try and make it understandable for you. And that's not to say you're not smart enough or anything, it's just a lot to take in

early in the morning. Are you ready?” he asked, taking a deep breath. “Coral are very special creatures. They have a symbiotic relationship with zooplankton, or otherwise called zooxanthellae. Zooplankton is photosynthetic, meaning they create oxygen from the carbon dioxide and ammonia the coral produces and also provide the colorant for the coral. They need each other to survive...!”

“What does photosynthetic mean?” Lahni interrupted.

“It’s called photosynthesis, and it’s a process that takes place in plants which take sunlight and carbon dioxide to produce energy for themselves and oxygen for us, so that we may breathe. You know it’s funny you should ask. One thing most people don’t think about is that our oceans are our biggest supplier of oxygen, bigger than any forest on this planet. And without it we won’t do very well in the future. But anyway let me get back to...where was I... ah yes, when conditions like sea temperature and acidity amongst other factors are changed these symbiotic cells can’t live and get expelled from the coral leaving it devoid of color. Without them the coral can’t live very long. These processes rely on balance and if the balance is off, coral bleaching and eventual death is the result. Some coral recover but most don’t. With rising sea temperatures and pollution, it’s clear that more of this will happen around the world. The animals you spoke to yesterday all rely on the coral reef and will die if we don’t get it under control.”

“Humans don’t seem to really want to know how bad it already is, huh?” Lahni added.

“Well, not all of them. There is one special human who is trying to spread the word about the natural world and has done so for decades. His name is Sir David Attenborough, naturalist and broadcaster. I call him the patron saint of the animal and the natural world. He knows how bad it is and isn’t afraid of saying so, in public. I heard a radio interview with him just recently when we were in Sydney. He happened to be visiting during the same week. It’s a pity I didn’t get to meet him. Ah well, there was just no time,” the prof sighed. “But he did have a few things to say about the Great Barrier Reef. I hope that a few politicians were listening in and taking notes. Let me see if I recall this correctly?” he said stopping to think for a moment.

“Oh yes, I remember! He said that the loss of the Great Barrier Reef would be a huge disaster since it is the key to the whole life of the ocean. He also said that it would be the loss of a universe of every type of sea life in existence...the nursery for hundreds of fish species would be gone. But he also says that rising sea levels are only part of the problem and he agrees with me that acidification is a much bigger threat to the reef at present. If lost, recovery would take hundreds of years if at all possible. So, you see, there are other people besides me and my crew and you of course, even though you aren’t in the people category, who care very deeply for the sea and the earth. Mr. Attenborough thinks that the amount of carbon humans produce and pump into the atmosphere is one of the biggest issues.” The prof stopped to take a few deep

breaths. “Wow, I didn’t think I’d remember all that from a radio show but I guess I already know all this anyway,” he added with a self congratulatory look on his face.

“Explain the carbon thing to me again, please.” Lahni requested.

“OK. So when humans burn fuel like petrol or coal, carbon dioxide gets released into the air. This carbon dioxide gets absorbed by the water in the ocean and turned into carbonic acid, which lowers the ph levels of the water, hence making it more acidic. Life like coral is having a hard time with this.”

“So what can we do then?” Lahni asked.

“Well, hopefully, enough people get the message that we can’t keep on living the way we do. Some countries like Germany are already changing things on a big scale becoming green, meaning using clean and renewable energy but it’s not enough, I’m afraid. China and India are trying to catch up to the lifestyle of the wasteful West and have everything that we’ve enjoyed for the past 50 years and more. Doing this on such a large scale isn’t helping our cause at all. Think about it. You have two billion people, just under one third of the population of the earth, producing, using, discarding and polluting as if there were no tomorrow. By 2050 we’ll need 3 Earths to sustain these life styles,” he said, sighing again but even louder this time. “On the other hand they have started to implement renewable energy sources like solar and wind more than the US or Australia has. One has to commend them for that. I just don’t know if it’ll be too little to late. David Attenborough seems to think so.”

“He sounds like an amazing human being, this Mr. Attenborough! But I sincerely hope he isn’t right about it being too late,” Lahni said. “I hope he is not alone trying to save things.”

“Well, there is always you, so he’s not alone,” he said smiling at her. “But he isn’t really on that side of things anyway, he travels and makes documentary programs for TV to educate the masses about the natural world which is a big task and he’s very good at it. There are many more who are doing things right, like Dr. Sylvia Earle who’s a marine biologist, researcher and oceanographer. She is a huge advocate for saving the oceans; it’s her whole life. Then there was Jaques Cousteau, a French conservationist and filmmaker who absolutely adored the ocean and everything in it. He died 15 years ago, he was 87 but his son Phillip is keeping up the good work of his father now. So you see, we aren’t alone!” he answered.

“That’s good, I get a bit worried sometimes, since I’m just a dog and it’s a huge world out there and I can’t do it all,” Lahni admitted.

“Nor should you have to. And when you look back at your journey you haven’t been alone much, right. There were many on your path to help and participate in your quest!” The prof pointed out. “I’m hearing some doubt in your voice all

of a sudden?”

“I guess I’m just tired and a little overwhelmed— it’ll pass. When I look back, it has been amazing and rewarding and I should stay present. I never used to worry about anything. Maybe I’m hanging around humans too much,” Lahni pondered.

“I think you’re just growing and learning a lot and that takes energy and effort. It’s tiring and draining. Just give yourself a break, relax on the ship for a few days, enjoy the sunshine and go inwards. You’ve been out there a lot lately. You need some repose from saving the world, at least for the moment,” he said, stroking Lahni’s head.

“I agree, but I’m not giving up, just taking a day or so. I’ll never give up. Like Captain Watson said. Once you’re on this path there is no turning back,” she answered with her eyes half closed.

The prof was still stroking her head making her fall asleep where they sat. She drifted off into a deep slumber.

It was dark when she woke up and very quiet, no one seemed to be around. Hungry and a little dazed she stumbled below deck into the galley to see about some food and water. The cook smiled at her and pointed to the dining room. Through the doorway she saw lights on and heard the voices of the crew and the prof laughing over what looked and smelled like dinner.

“Dinner?” Lahni asked loudly. “How long have I been sleeping?” she asked the prof on her way through the door.

“All day, dear! You must’ve needed it. It’s 8pm and we’re half way up to the reef now. I couldn’t get you to wake up. I kept checking on you throughout the day but you were out cold. How do you feel?” he asked.

“Hungry!” she said. The crew laughed.

“Well, you’re in the right place to solve that problem, sit then, so we can feed you. What would you like? There’s meat, chicken, a little fish... what’ll it be?” he asked.

“I’ll have the meat, thanks, I’ll skip on the fish from now on I think, after talking to them yesterday. Doesn’t seem right to eat them now,” she yawned.

“Better not talk to any cows then, mate,” Daniel threw in for a bit of amusement. “You’ll have to become a vegetarian!” Lahni dug into her food ignoring Daniel’s comment.

“Leave her alone, mate!” said the chef from the kitchen, “a dog’s gotta eat meat!”

“Right, you hear that,” the prof threw in, “don’t tease her.”

“Alright, don’t get your knickers in a twist.... I was just kidding.” Daniel said.

“Well, you may not be wrong after all, Daniel, I might decide at some point when I’ve talked to other animals, not to eat them anymore but right now, it’s really good!” she said with extra emphasis on the ‘really good’ part for the chef to hear.

“Besides,” the professor continued, “we can’t all become vegetarians because an animal might die for our food needs. Look at nature and how everything consumes something. You can’t make a lion live on grass or a croc live on sea grass or a shark on plankton. We have to do what we’re designed to do and that didn’t include highly processed soybeans in the form of tofu. Not only is that stuff tasteless but it’s also bad for us in more than one way— in my opinion anyway!” he proclaimed.

“You’re making a good point about the predators out there who cannot live on anything other than flesh but surely humans can live on other food items that aren’t violent?” Daniel commented.

“Let me tell you what’s violent...violent is cutting down hundreds of thousands of acres of old growth rainforest in the Amazon to grow soy! How many animals lose their lives that way? Countless, my friend! That’s not very vegetarian or vegan now, is it...apart from the fact that soybeans aren’t fit for human consumption unless you process the life out of them to make them remotely palatable. Look at all the so-called healthy food out there! Unless it’s fresh vegetables from the market, or basic grains, it’s processed. Most of it has palm oil in it as well...another big problem for many animals like the Orangutans in Borneo who have their entire territory and lives taken from them for the profits of a few people. I could go on and on about this. Just because people decide they won’t eat meat anymore doesn’t mean they are doing anything good for the planet,” the prof explained.

“Well, when you put it that way!” Daniel said in defeat.

“Also, you can farm animals in a much nicer, more sustainable way than it is done at present. It’s called sustainable animal husbandry! It involves smaller farms that graze the animals on fields instead of feedlots with grains in tight stalls and no hormones or pharmaceuticals are used to grow them. They have a good life and are happy and healthy! It’s better for them and for us. Look it up sometime on Google, mate! It’s back in fashion, there is one I know of in the States called Polyface Farm,” the chef added, coming through the swing door from the kitchen. “The meat I use for you guys is all from small farms, grass fed, humanely slaughtered by the way, so you can rest assured, we’re doing the best we can,” he added.

“And a lot of those so-called vegetarians still eat fish, which is frankly even worse!” Daniel’s friend Michael, the prof’s second assistant threw in. “It’s so hypocritical.”

“How can they call themselves vegetarian, if they eat fish?” asked Lahni, looking up from her meal for the first time since she’d started eating.

“Good question? How sustainable is that, given the ocean is 90 percent overfished?” the chef asked. “Says I, who is still putting fish on the table,” he added with a smile. “Mind you, it’s caught by me, locally with just a line in the water. No dragnets, super trawlers and nasty fishing methods. I only take what we need for the day.”

“What’s a dragnet or a super trawler?” asked Lahni who was sitting down beside the professor now, having finished her meal, licking her paws.

“Before you explain that to her, here’s the other point I was going to make regarding the meat eating thing, which started this whole conversation. In nature animals who have to kill to live, only take what they need, never more. But we humans take way too much and in most cases way more than we’ll ever need. So much gets wasted out there. And that is the real problem. Go ahead, explain the super trawler thing now,” he said giving the floor to his cook.

“I agree. It’s like the Japanese stockpiling whale meat for no good reason, huh!” Lahni threw in before the chef had a chance.

“Much like that!” the prof responded.

“Well, if I may now? Super trawlers are massive fishing boats designed to take massive amounts of fish. They have nets the size of Tasmania, well, maybe not quite that big but you get the idea. They go out to sea and drag those nets over the ocean floor, taking everything with them that lives down there. In the process they destroy entire eco systems like reefs and breeding grounds for all kinds of sea creatures. Usually they’re only after a few types of fish though, so they throw the rest overboard when they sort out the catch. Unfortunately, most of those animals are already dead from the stress and lack of oxygen. It’s greedy to no end, for lack of a better word,” the chef told Lahni.

“Isn’t there one of those massive things headed to Tasmania right now? I thought I heard something on the radio about it?” Daniel enquired.

“Yup, the Margiris, she’s a Dutch boat, and a huge one at that...on it’s way to the Tasman to catch red bait and mackerel. They’ll be decimating fish stocks for the locals and chasing all the tuna away. They need those types of fish to live. So do dolphins, who in turn eat the tuna. They claim they have safeguards for by-catch. You know, all the other animals they don’t want like dolphins, seals, turtles, sharks and such but I think it’s bull, if you ask me, and why on earth would the Australian government allow our fish to be taken by a Dutch boat and the catch to be sold to Africans? It’s bloody beyond me,” the chef said, shaking his head in disgust.

“I heard that’s been put on ice, so to speak. The environment minister stopped it. Now the thing is sittin’ in Port Augusta in South Australia, going absolutely nowhere... just came in over the radio!” the captain of the Aurora added while sitting down with his dinner.

“Oh, that is good news,” said Daniel.

“It is indeed! Let’s see how long it sticks,” the skipper added.

“I’m glad to hear that but it looks like whatever you choose for yourself you have to do it with open eyes and make sure

you research things before you make a choice,” Lahni commented.

“Education is the key, you are quite right. We have to educate people to make better choices. Most people, even if they call it an education are well trained, not educated. Education is something you have to do for yourself. No school anywhere is going to do that for you. Schools are designed to make everyone the same and conform to national standards. Most of these standards are based on very old information. Those standards are what’s causing most of our problems,” the prof said to finish the chat. “Time to get to bed I think, for me anyway... it’s going to be a long day tomorrow. When our real work begins.”

The next day the professor was sitting on deck reading the morning paper on his iPad. All of a sudden he coughed and splattered his coffee all over the screen. “Lahni, come here, you must see this. Remember when we were talking with Watson about the Coral Sea becoming a protected marine park?” he asked while trying to wipe away the spill with his shirt.

“Yeah, I remember!” she said chewing on her breakfast snack.

“Well, he was right. He said it wasn’t a done deal, right! And here we have it. The opposition party leaders are already saying they want to have more research done to see if it’s actually warranted to do so...can you believe it? Once in a while a politician has a grand idea but following through with it, is a whole other story,” he explained. “The environment loses out again! Against big business interests, I believe. For some odd reason humans seem to always put profits before the environment. People need to understand that the two are infinitely connected. You can’t truly have one without the other. Try breathing in money instead of clean air. You’ll last less than a minute!”

“I hope that’s not true in this case. I hope they’ll still protect the Coral Sea and all its inhabitants. Maybe you can send them your research and then they’ll know for sure that it’s the right thing to do, I mean, to make it a marine park.”

“I hope so too, Lahni and of course I will do everything in my power to aid their decision with our findings. The Australian government is in effect paying us to do this, so they are the recipients of our research. I sure hope they use it wisely.” he added with a slight doubt in his voice. “But let’s get to it. Gotta go. Work to do,” he said, leaving the deck for his office.

Lahni sat for a little while longer watching a few dolphins play in the waves the ship was making. She was wondering what would happen to them if their home weren’t going to be saved.

They seem happy, always happy, she thought. I used to be that way, before the dream. All of a sudden one of the dolphins was right beside the ship looking in her direction.

“Hey you, you can choose to be happy, no matter what. It’s easy! See! We are! Right here, right now all is well. We know about all the problems of the world we’re in but we choose to look past them and spread happiness instead. That is

our work here,” he said jumping for joy and splashing Lahni with seawater.

“Thanks, I needed to hear that. It gets so heavy sometimes and I can’t seem to ignore what’s happening, now that I know what’s going on.” Lahni admitted.

“Therein lies the paradox, you have to decide on your state in every moment you have; if you get dragged down by all the bad stuff you won’t be able to do any good for anyone. We’re here and alive and we’re joyous about it. Remember that! Have some fun!” he added before diving back into the water.

“OK...I will,” she replied realizing that the dolphin must’ve read her mind. “Hmmm, he must’ve!” she said out loud.

“Who must’ve what?” asked Daniel.

“Oh, the dolphin, did you see the dolphin?” she asked.

“Yeah, they’ve been tagging us since early this morning. Nice to look at, aren’t they. They always make me feel better, no matter what else is going on,” he said.

“That’s what we were talking about, exactly that. I was sitting here thinking to myself that they are always so happy and how I used to be that way, when one of them came closer and started talking to me about that very thing. The dolphin said that I could just choose to be happy no matter what’s going on and that they are always aware of what’s happening in the world but are not putting their attention on it because their work is spreading joy and happiness,” Lahni explained. “He read my mind. I wasn’t thinking out loud or anything, really, I was just thinking it.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least, they are very magical animals. I think they are a bit like dogs; dogs can read people’s minds too. You, of all dogs should know that.” Daniel pointed out.

“Yeah, I kinda knew that already. I do it all the time. Was just not expecting it just now and not from dolphins. They are very smart.”

“That they are. Another reason to adore them rather than hunt and kill them.” Daniel agreed.

“I know...but hang on...be quiet for a second...I think I can still hear them,” Lahni said turning her ears back towards to ocean. “They are singing.”

“I can’t hear anything and I can’t see them anymore either. You’re sure it’s them, maybe it’s the cook in the shower?” he added, laughing.

“No, no, it’s them. For sure, they are singing to each other. It’s amazing,” she said with a smile on her face. “It makes me happy too.”

I have to get to Japan soon, I just have to, so I can help them, she thought to herself. “But there is more work to do here first,” she said quietly.

A few days later further up the reef, while the crew was collecting samples and taking photos of the coral and surrounds, Lahni decided to go for a snorkel on her own. There was no one on deck at the time to aid her in getting into the water, nor warn her of the danger of going in alone, which meant no one knew she was gone or where she was. She put her vest and goggles on haphazardly and plunged herself down into the water below from a considerable height. Her fall made a huge splash and dragged her down deep at first despite the vest, which then brought her back up to the surface again, where she took a deep breath and oriented herself.

She was still some way from the actual reef since the ship had to anchor well clear of it. She began to swim towards it with head underwater paddling with front and hind legs as fast as possible. The water was deep here and it brought up some unknown fears in her, she hadn't been aware of before. Curious feeling, she thought but ignored it in favor of the reward ahead. Soon she was out in the reef surrounded by beautiful fish and coral in all manner of colors and shapes. She paddled further in to inspect the different sea life and coral up close, nuzzling little fish who had came up to inspect her from all directions.



Some time had passed before she realized that it was getting dark fast. This was the Tropics with shorter days and nights setting in faster than elsewhere.

She looked around to see in which direction the ship was sitting only to notice how far away she was from the Aurora. A little bit panicked, she started swimming in the direction of the ship. After what she thought was half way there she looked up and saw the ship even further away from her than she had been when she began her return.

It only now dawned on her that they didn't know she was missing since she hadn't told anyone that she was going out for a snorkel.

"Oh no, they must be moving in the same direction and away from me. They're not leaving without me, are they?" she

cried out loud.

“Looks exactly like that to me!” a voice next to her said. She looked in its direction only to be startled like never before in her life. “Wauw,” she yelled out loud, “where did you come from?” she asked.

Looking around she noticed there were more around, swimming around her in a circle. The one that spoke was right next to her, not circling with the others. She was surrounded by a group of about six reef sharks, one of whom had started the conversation.

“What ya gonna do now?” he asked without answering Lahni’s question.

“I don’t know. Got any ideas?” Lahni asked back.

She was unsure about this encounter, since she had heard about people dying out on the reef forgotten by their group and eaten by sharks.

“Well, if ya want ya can come wif us, we’re gonna go hunt for dinner. You look a little skinny!” he answered.

“So you won’t be eating me then?” Lahni enquired shyly. She was a bit surprised by the invitation but decided to go with it for now.

“Nah, who told you that!” he laughed looking at his mates. “We like fish, fresh fish. Humans taste funny and dogs got too much fur, not fun to eat. Tried it once, didn’t like it,” he answered, while the others looked on and smiled at Lahni. She still didn’t quite trust the situation but decided there was really no other way out of this than to keep talking. Maybe they would be nice to her and even help her, she thought.

“Well, thanks for the invitation but I think I need to stay here and see if someone’s looking for me. I’m sure they are. I think I heard the bell in the distance, which means they know I’m missing. So if you don’t mind I’ll take a rain check on the dinner dive,” she said with a half smile.

In the distance the man overboard bell had sounded on the Aurora. Daniel had raised the alarm after he had tried to fetch Lahni for dinner from her cabin and couldn’t find her. He had asked everyone on board if they had seen her. No one knew where she was.

He went straight to the bridge to alert the professor, who was in conversation with the captain giving instruction for the next leg of the trip.



“Stop the ship Dr.Morton, Lahni’s missing! She might’ve gone for a swim while no one was looking. She’s nowhere to be found,” he yelled on the way up the small steps to the bridge.

“What do you mean stop the ship, where is she? Where could she be, it’s not that big a ship. Have another look before you panic,” he said trying to assure Daniel that she must be somewhere on the Aurora.

“I looked everywhere, really and I asked everyone. I searched every nook and cranny, honest. She’s gone. Her vest is gone too and her snorkel. I think she was bored and went in while we were all busy. She’s on the reef and it’s dark and there’re sharks out there and it’s feeding time...oh my God, I hope she’s OK. Can we please stop and look for her, please?” Daniel pleaded. He was so upset at the possibility of Lahni maybe dying out there.

“Calm yourself, I’m sure she’s fine. She’s a smart dog...well, not as smart as I thought given that she may be out there on her own. I’m going to have to have a talk with her when we find her,” he said while the captain began reversing the

engines to turn the ship around. Once the anchor was back in the water a couple of search parties went into inflatables with floodlights to look for her.

“Lahni! Where are you?” Daniel yelled out. “Laaaahniiii!” They kept calling out but the sound of the crashing waves on the reef was drowning out their calls.

Lahni was still in the same spot with six sharks all facing her instead of swimming around her. She had decided to keep them interested by having a chat about her mission and what she and the crew were doing on the reef in the first place. She told them about Dr. Morton’s work, her trying to save the world, where she came from, where she’d been and everything she’d experienced in a very condensed version.

“We can help her, we can swim with her...back to the ship. Who’s comin’?” one of the smaller sharks asked.

“Alright, good idea. Who’s comin’?” repeated the big shark, as if to take credit for the idea.

All but one decided to assist her back to the Aurora. They flanked her while she paddled very slowly towards her rescuers. It was pitch dark by now and they had been swimming for a while when Lahni spotted the searchlights coming from a small inflatable with two silhouettes on it.

“That must be them, keep swimming with me please, will you? They are looking for me,” she said swallowing a mouthful of seawater. She coughed loudly to expel the water.

“There, over there, I heard something. Shine the light this way, mate...yeah, that’s her.... what the hell...no way mate, check this out!” Daniel shouted, shining the light towards Lahni and her companions.

When Daniel and Michael got closer, they couldn’t believe what they saw.

Here she was in the middle with five sharks swimming on the surface alongside and it looked like they were escorting her. The boys nearly fell overboard. While Daniel was pulling her to safety, Dr. Morton arrived in the dinghy; he just sat back in the boat observing the scene.

“What on earth happened here? Are you telling me that these sharks brought you back to us?” he asked, completely flabbergasted.

Lahni was now in the boat leaning over the side as far as she could to say farewell to her chaperones.

“Hey you guys, thanks so much for not eating me. Much appreciated! And next time I’m out here I’ll go hunting with you,” she said, knowing full well that that would never eventuate.

Michael was shaking his head in disbelief.

“Sounds good! Nice ta meet ya!” said the shark who had been conversing with her. “See ya ‘round! Keep up the good work. Glad to know someone’s lookin’ out for us!”

“See ya, thanks again,” Lahni said, now turning to the professor who was still sitting in the dinghy beside her with an open mouth.

She sat back down in the boat herself and turned to answer the prof’s question.

“Yes, that is exactly what happened. I went snorkeling on my own...I’m so sorry! I know I shouldn’t have done that.... that was so silly of me. Won’t do it again, promise! But then these guys showed up and swam back with me. Thanks for coming back for me. I was worried there for a minute! I guess I would’ve been OK, since my friends here invited me to go hunt for dinner and all but it is a bit scary out there, I must say. It’s so beautiful during the day but when it gets dark...fffwww!”

The sharks’ fins disappeared below the surface.

“Are you kidding me, Lahni, you could’ve died out there. You don’t even know how bloody lucky you are to be here. It’s a veritable miracle that they didn’t take you,” the prof said, “I’m so glad we found you.”

“They told me that humans taste funny... their words, not mine. And they don’t like dog either. They said they prefer fresh fish and since there was plenty of it they invited me to come along which I declined, since I really wanted to come back to you guys instead. Weird experience, I must say. Can we get out of here now? I’m hungry and wet and tired,” Lahni added. “Sorry about this!”

“You ought to be, but we forgive you, since you’re alive and well. I still can’t believe this,” said Michael.

Back on the Aurora they had dinner and a long sleep. Lahni dreamt about actually hunting with sharks deep under the ocean. She was flying through the water at enormous speeds catching fish. Up and down and around like she had seen dolphins do. It was a wonderful dream.

The second she woke up the next day she ran to see the professor to apologize again.

“You don’t have to keep saying sorry, Lahni. I believe you. Best we forget about it. Just promise me you’ll never ever scare me like that again!”

“OK. But I won’t forget it. I’m trying to figure out why I was so scared when I’ve never had a reason to be scared of sharks. Never met one before. I was thinking about it last night before going to sleep. So many people are scared of them without having ever encountered one. Why is that?” Lahni asked.

“I guess it’s a primal fear. They are predators, they eat other animals to survive and sometimes that may be one of us. I know most of the time they would prefer not to eat us as your friends pointed out so elegantly but it’s still always a possibility, so people are scared,” the prof explained.

“I think it’s the media, if you ask me!” said Daniel, butting in. “They always blow the shark stories out of proportion! We kill 100 million of them around the world every year and when a couple of people a year get taken by a big shark they call for another shark culling; it’s stupid,” he said chewing on his breakfast.

“Yeah, mate, but you know last year five guys died from getting attacked in Australia alone. More than usual! But I guess you’re right anyways, we kill a lot more of them than they kill of us. It’s not fair,” Michael threw in.

“It’s not even good for you, I mean the shark meat. It’s full of mercury and other heavy metals and PCBs,” the prof said. “PCBs? My friend in Alaska told me about that and that we all have them in our blood,” Lahni added.

“True but eating it from large predators makes it even worse. And the mercury on top of it... nasty stuff, that! Causes all kinds of trouble for the body,” the chef said.

“Most of the attacks this last year happened in Western Australia, big White Pointers they were. There are more sharks this year and closer to shore than ever. I guess fish stocks are lower than they were out at sea, so they try and feed closer to the rocks and sand banks. They gotta eat too,” the prof chuckled. “Sorry, it’s not really a laughing matter but you have to look at the circumstances in which these things happen. It’s always surfers or swimmers who go out really early or late during shark feeding time. They ought to know better,” he emphasized looking at Lahni.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I got lucky. I thought I’d talk my way out of it and it worked. I told them about the work we do here which is for them as well and they thought it was great,” she tried to explain while she couldn’t help the smile on her face.

“You told them what? You had a chat with a bunch of sharks. Ah, I guess it doesn’t make any difference to you, does it?” the chef asked. “Here I am, asking a dog,” he mumbled, on his way back to the galley.

Everyone laughed.

“Don’t worry about him, Lahni. He’s just a bit weird,” Michael explained.

“I’m the weird one, huh?” the chef shouted from the other side of the door.

More laughter followed.

“Now, seriously, let’s get back to the discussion about the plight of sharks. They are in trouble you know and it’s some nasty stuff they do to them in Asian countries and other places,” Daniel continued.

“What do you mean, nasty?” asked Lahni.

“Oh, it’s cruel, really; they catch them alive, then cut their fins off and their tails and then throw their bodies back in. They can’t breathe without being able to swim around, so without a tail and fins they die a slow, horrible death and in pain at that. It’s awful and wasteful,” he told Lahni.

“Ouch, that is horrible. I’m so sorry they do that to them. Why only the fins and tails? It seems odd,” she asked.

“Because a lot of Asians people like to eat shark fin soup. And other countries allow it in their restaurants too. Yup, soup! 100 million sharks die every year for soup! Kind of ridiculous, don’t you think?” Michael added.

“Australia kills a lot too, but they eat all of it. They do take too many though, I think. And as our chef pointed out, it’s unhealthy! I don’t eat it ever,” the professor said.

“So what are people doing about this? Is anyone doing anything to help them?” asked Lahni.

“Well, for years everyone just went along with this, despite animals rights groups fighting the good fight and frankly a lot of westerners ate the shark fin soup in Chinese fine-dining establishments as well but in recent years shark fin has been banned in a few countries. The Navy here has been working hard to catch fishermen off the coast in Australian waters but most of the time it’s already too late and all they can do is confiscate the fins. The sharks are already dead! It’s a huge problem. In some places the shark population is so low now, some shark species are under protection. However, that doesn’t mean people who subsist on fishing in poor countries are adhering to the law. They do what they have to do to survive,” Dr. Morton went on.

“Nor do people in developed countries protect the sharks! Look at all the restaurants in America and Australia and Europe who still sell this stuff, apart from the health craze of shark cartilage. Everyone is taking it for joint health or something. It’s not a good thing,” Daniel added.

“Agreed,” said Dr. Morton, “if this keeps going there won’t be any left soon and that is the end of this oceanic ecosystem as we know it.”

“What do you mean... the end?” Lahni budded in.

“Well, the situation is like this; sharks keep the large predator fish at bay by eating them, so they can’t eat too many of the smaller fish. In turn the smaller fish consume zooplankton and such keeping it at the right level to balance things out. When there aren’t enough sharks, the big fish get bigger and more plentiful, consuming more small fish, which means there won’t be enough small fish to feed on zooplankton anymore, which makes the plankton and algae they normally live on grow out of proportion, which in turn creates algae blooms that take all the oxygen out of the water, creating dead zones where nothing can live,” he continued to explain. “You see, the entire system is based on balance and we arrogant humans think that we can mess with it and get away with that. It’s not going to last very much longer, I’m afraid”.

“Oh, no,” Lahni cried out. “We must save it. Where are my friends going to live?”

“Where are all of us going to live is probably the better question?” Michael added. “If the ocean dies, we won’t make it for very long. It’s a delicately balanced thing, this earth and it’s really only humans who don’t seem to understand the consequences of their actions. It’s weird how we have so many smart people but not that many of them listen,” he said.

“Not sure if I agree with that statement, Michael. It’s the smart ones of us who are here right now doing something about all this! And there are many people and groups and organizations out there doing something about it. I get what you’re trying to say, though. The majority of the planet is still in a deep slumber about the impact they are having on their environment. People at the survival level are generally not deep thinkers. They are too busy trying to make it through the day. So, the more of us who wake up, the better! We can do a lot by keeping up our work here and pulling more people in along the way. Not everyone is going to come on this path, though. But that has always been the case throughout history. People grow at different rates,” the prof explained.

“I think people need to be rattled awake. We don’t have time to wait for them to wake up anymore,” Daniel threw in with a tone of urgency.

“Oh, believe me Daniel, they are being rattled awake. And faster so than ever before! It’s not going to be an easy ride for most of the population. Climate change is having an impact on millions already and the animal world is feeling it a lot as well, maybe even more intensely than we are right now. Take the Arctic for example with two-thirds less sea ice than usual this summer, which makes it nearly impossible for big predators like walrus and polar bears to get to their feeding grounds. They need ice floats to rest on and feed from. Many are drowning from exhaustion because they have to swim for hundreds of miles before they get to ice or never find any. In Alaska they found hundreds of walrus stranded and starved to death because they couldn’t swim any further. It’s a tragedy! Same with bears! If we continue at the current rate we’ll have none left very soon,” he answered.

“It was a polar bear who helped me first on my trip. He shared his food with me and got me on my way in the right direction to get on a ship. He still looked well fed but he was in East Siberia. I sure hope we can help them,” Lahni told them.

“Wow, you hang out with the coolest animals, mate!” Michael said.

“Did you guys read the news this morning... what I mean is that there was a story online about Shell oil having to pack up and leave the Chukchi Sea, where they had just started to drill for oil because there is a huge ice drift coming towards them and they were afraid of getting ripped to pieces by it,” Daniel announced.

“No, I hadn’t heard that,” said the prof, “that is good news indeed if they really stayed away now, which I doubt. I’m sure they’ll just come back soon when the ice is gone but I’m wondering what ice is doing so low down at this time of year?”

“They did explain that too but it sounded bit complicated. It was kind of a similar thing to El Nino and La Nina, to do with the sea temps and that....” Daniel tried to explain.

“Ah, I know it’s a regular temperature shift that happens up there. It’s called Pacific Decadal Oscillation. I read an article a while back about this. Let me see if I remember... hmm...ah, I do. This was discussed by a few people in scientific circles, never released to the public as usual when it’s important but... anyway. I think it was a writer by the name of Holtcamp, a woman who went along for a research trip on the Thomas G. Thompson, a research vessel. She wrote a blog for Nature magazine I think... or something like that. Anyway, I don’t remember exactly but I do recall what the research was about. The Bering Sea Project, yes...that’s it. An extensive research project by the National Science Foundation in partnership with Alaska’s North Pacific Research Board covering many years and disciplines on how climate change is affecting the Bering Sea eco-system. I think I have that article she wrote about it saved somewhere in my archives. But where...?” he said scratching his head. “It would be interesting to read that again. It was about that temperature shift or PDO, due to a long-term atmospheric circulation pattern much like the one in the South Pacific that causes El Nino and La Nina, the two siblings causing either drought or too much rain. It is a much longer cycle though, I mean the northern cousin PDO, which happens more like every twenty or so years. What this means is that from now on and for the foreseeable future, there will be much more than usual sea ice lower down in the Chukchi and Bering Sea, which means temperatures are going to drop significantly in Alaska and Siberia. Brrrrrr, it’s going to get colder than cold there. Which of course will affect your people very much, Lahni! Remember the big storms up there last winter?” he added.

“I know it was colder than usual and my friend Akiak got stuck there over the winter because they couldn’t get out due to the weather. I knew it! I was right to leave and do all this... I just knew it. I must get home soon to warn them all before it’s too late...hang on but I thought it was melting and getting warmer, not getting colder?” she said.

“It’s not going to be that quick Lahni. I’m sure you have time to finish what you started and then when you get back you will have done everything in your power, no matter the outcome and they’ll be so proud of you,” Michael added.

“It’s doing both, to answer your question, Lahni! The ice further up towards the pole is melting faster than before; we’ve had the least ice ever up there this year but the lower end of the Arctic circle is getting colder and is having more ice form. It’s a bit confusing. Climate change isn’t all about temperatures going up everywhere. As the ocean gets warmer in some parts and with increasing acidity and erratic weather patterns, it’s changing the climate everywhere. It’s all connected. There is no such thing as an isolated event on this planet and there never has been. People think that but it’s wrong. It’s about temperatures becoming more extreme on both sides of the range, so it might get hotter in one part of the world while it’s becoming much, much colder, feeling more like an ice age elsewhere,” the prof explained.

“I am beginning to think this is all man-made anyway and I don’t mean because of pollution...even though that doesn’t help anyone, especially not the animals out there...!” Daniel proclaimed.

“What do you mean by man made then if not from our over use of resources, then what?” the prof asked.

“Well, I know it’s gonna sound weird but I believe some of these conspiracy guys out there who talk about geo-engineering. It’s a way of modifying the weather and I think that’s what they’ve been doing for a while now. We’re the guinea pigs. They can make storms more severe; create floods and drought and so on. Just what I think!” Daniel added.

“Well, you can’t dismiss our behavior, Daniel, and the whole geo-engineering thing is still in its infancy, at least that’s what I’ve heard,” the prof said. “I reckon the big oil companies are much more to blame for all this.”

“Why are these people drilling up there? It’s so remote...what if something bad happens, like a spill? From what I’ve seen on my travels, oil is not good for the environment unless under ground, where it belongs. Who would clean it up?” she asked.

“Nobody, most likely! ‘Cause they don’t care about the environment. They just pretend to but when it comes to cleaning up after their spills they leave it for someone else to do. It’s awful. And given the location in this case, I bet that would be up to the local Indian population!” Daniel threw in.

“Indian? There aren’t any Indians in Alaska; they are in India, aren’t they? I was there and met a Yupik man, my friend Tootega and other indigenous people but no Indians,” Lahni asked.

“Quite right, Lahni. People used to call them Eskimos, which is not used anymore for obvious reasons. There are many Iñuit tribes but the one most involved in this are the Iñupiat. And they aren’t happy about this development at all. I don’t think anyone asked them what they really think, especially not the president of the U.S., who made the decision to open Alaska’s coast for deep water drilling. A very careless decision if you ask me,” the prof said, taking a deep breath. “It gets a bit overwhelming at times, I must admit, even for me. There seem to be so many things we are trying to do to help all at once and not enough time to do it all, plus all these corporations and governments who work in exactly the opposite direction. Sometimes I feel like a hamster in a treadmill, just going around and around in circles, not ever getting anywhere and then I see what Lahni has accomplished being who she is and I just get myself up and at it again. Like my friend Watson says, once you’re on this path, there is no turning back!” Dr.Morton said yawning and stretching his arms over his head. “Guys, enough talking, I’m growing roots on this bench, it’s time to get a move on after our extended breakfast chat. We’ve got work to do trying to save this beautiful thing right below us. So, let’s get on with your chores, please!” The prof got up and started moving towards the doorway.

Everyone dispersed in different directions on the ship starting their various shifts. Lahni sat for a while contemplating the discussion they’d had. She was concerned about all of it and wondered if she’d ever make it back to warn or help her people.

“Maybe they already know and have moved somewhere safer, who knows?” she mumbled to herself. “I sure hope so!”

With that thought she went for walk around the ship to work off her soreness from the big swim the night before.

After a brisk spin around the deck Lahni settled on her favorite spot at the bow of the ship but this time she lay on her back staring into the sky. Nothing but blue, she thought nicking off into a little sleep. A short while later she was woken up by something dropping on her from above, then a seagull landed next to her.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to get you there. I apologize profusely!” the seagull said. “Anything I can do for you? Jonno, at your service!”

Lahni had been busy trying to see the damage the bird poo had done on her white coat. She attempted to brush it off but it stuck to her even more.

“No point, sorry, it’ll stick to you ‘til it’s dry, then it’ll brush off. Honest!” Jonno said. “So, what’s going on here then, mate?” he continued with his questions.

“Nothing much today! Just chilling out. Had a big day yesterday, was hanging out with sharks. Reef sharks. I’d gotten stuck on the reef out there and they brought me back to the ship,” Lahni told Jonno. “I’m Lahni, sled dog...”

“Sharks, huh...sled dog, what do you sled then, no sleds here, you don’t pull the ship, do you?” he asked, waddling around Lahni inspecting every inch of her and picking bits off her hair to determine what exactly she was.

“Seen lotsa dogs, mate but none like you before. You look like you got feathers, mate. Can you fly?” he asked.

“No, of course not! I don’t have wings like you, do I? I can swim though, now! Learnt it on my journey,” Lahni explained. And she went on to tell a little about her trip and how she got to be on this ship. The gull was sitting next to her now and Lahni was on her back again looking at the bird beside her when out of the corner of her eye she spotted a plane, a big plane overhead but not so high that you couldn’t see it, making strange lines in the sky; white fluffy lines that didn’t go away like she usually had seen over Siberia very high up. She turned to the gull who was also looking up towards the sky now.

“Oh, they are spraying again,” Jonno said, “I hate that stuff, it’s weird metallic stuff that sticks to my wings and takes forever to wash off.”

“Who is spraying what?” asked Lahni with a confused look on her face.

“Dunno but it’s been happening lots lately, mate! It’s not good, whatever it is. It reflects the sun and hurts my eyes when I and my friends go high flying sometimes and it makes us heavy and some of us get sick trying to clean it off our feathers,” he announced, now waddling around again picking stuff off his own feathers now and then.



Michael came up from below deck to check on Lahni during his morning tea break. He was holding a hot cup of tea in one hand and a muffin in the other. The gull jumped back a little on his approach but stayed looking at Michael's hand carrying the muffin. "Do you want some, mate?" Michael said, breaking a little off the top and throwing it towards the gull.

"This is Michael," Lahni said to Jonno. "Michael, meet my friend Jonno, the sea gull! He's taking a break from flying for a bit and we were just looking at what this plane overhead was doing. Jonno said something about them spraying metal that sticks to him and his fellow birds? Do you know anything about this?"

"Matter of fact I do," he said with a mouthful of muffin while seating himself on the free side of Lahni.

"Those are chemtrails, trails made by planes with mostly alumina particles and sometimes other stuff like barium, strontium and sulphur...weird but that's what I heard. It's not the same as contrails, which are the ones you see following a plane but they quickly disappear again and are really high up. That's condensation making ice crystals! They are messin' with the weather again, I reckon."

"Is that what Daniel mentioned at breakfast... I mean the thing he said about weather modification? Why would they be doing that here?" Lahni asked. Jonno just nodded as if he'd understood the question.

"Well, there are different theories out there. Some say it's to change the weather, like cloud seeding to make it rain more or make it rain less. I don't really know which it is. The strange thing is that they'd be doing this over the ocean...we don't need rain here and usually they use silver iodide to make rain and spray it into already existing clouds to make the water droplets bigger and heavier. So it's weird. But I think it's more than that anyways," Michael pondered.

Just as he was going to continue the plane cruised back the other direction making more trails in the sky. "Woaw, man I've never seen it this close overhead," he said pulling out his iPhone to film the event. "I gotta put this on Facebook when we get to port. My friends are gonna love this."

“So what’s the other reason?” Lahni asked. “Come on, concentrate, Michael. Or should I go get the prof, he might know something. He is a scientist after all,” she said, about to get up to fetch him.

“You can’t do that right now, he’s busy. Besides, I know the other reasons and will tell you if you’ll sit down and listen. They say that it limits the radiation from the sun and will help cool the earth but I think it’s still more than that,” he said, stopping to take a sip and another bite. Lahni couldn’t stay still and was twitching with anticipation. “Come on tell us!” she said urging him on.

Jonno was trying to pay attention but also couldn’t help himself being drawn to the crumbs that were falling onto the planks around Michael with every bite he took from his mid-morning snack.

“OK, it’s a bit out there and a bit technical,” he continued while flicking bits of muffin towards Jonno, “I hope you and your friend here will understand. The latest thing I’ve read was about the fact that all our electronics on earth are dependent on one little thing called the semiconductor which are part of every bit of electronic equipment in the circuitry everywhere.

We are sooo dependent on these things for everything to function in our world that the powers that be are really paranoid about things not working. I can understand that somewhat. Imagine if computers didn’t work all of a sudden or my phone here, or military installations or fridges or radios, planes or... man it’s everything when I think about it... banks and the stock market too, almost forgot those. All the money people have would disappear since it’s all in computers these days. We can’t function properly without any of it. So, anyway, if these things get hit with too much radiation, ions, protons or neutrons or whatever, they can malfunction and create errors in the system,” Michael tried to explain. Jonno was still looking for crumbs and Lahni looked a little lost with all the electronic talk coming her way.

“Told ya, it’s complicated,” he said, pausing for a moment to watch Jonno collect the last bits around him. “But plausible, I reckon. Anyways, there are so many reasons, but the main thing is that those things are poisonous for everyone not just seagulls, but bad for the soil and plants, our water supply and fish and plankton and us too. But they don’t seem to care about that, which is kind of weird that they would be so worried about their equipment but not the people it’s used for. Makes no sense at all to me. Nobody is gonna need any of it when we’re dead... hmmm!” Michael said with a mumble.

“Why don’t they protect these... what was it...?” Lahni asked

“Semiconductors...” Michael repeated.

“Yes, those, why don’t they protect them another way if they are so clever to make them in the first place, especially if it hurts all of us and all life on earth to cover us with this alumina. What exactly is that anyway?” Lahni asked.

“That’s a good question mate. Maybe when they invented those things they didn’t know enough about solar radiation

and cosmic rays, you know, where the protons and neutrons and ions would come from?” he re-explained to Lahni, since it looked like Jonno wasn’t paying any attention anymore.

“I’m still listening, I’m gonna tell all my mates about this. This is not good! We gotta get out of here and fly somewhere safe, I reckon,” Jonno added.

“Oh, I thought I’d lost ya there with all the tech stuff,” Michael said, looking at his phone. “Crap...look at the time, man I’m late, gotta go. Hope that helps mate. You can always ask the prof, he’ll probably confirm what I said, though. Nice to meet you, Jonno! Happy travels! See ya soon, Lahni!” he added on the way down below.

By now the trails in the sky had turned into milky stretched out thin cloud cover. The sun seemed less harsh that way Lahni thought which must be good against global warming. But what about the places where it’s already too cold and what about the animals and plants that rely on the heat from the sun? What was all this doing to them? She pondered.

“What ya thinkin’ mate?” asked Jonno.

“Ah, just more about this stuff up there. I fear its not good news what they are doing. See the prof explained to me that if you start messing with earth and nature on one end, everything goes out of balance by the time you get to other end. It’s all connected. People tend to do things in straight lines whereas nature does things in circles and cycles,” she said, staring towards the sea.

“I wonder why people can’t live without those thingies, you know, what Mikey said?” Jonno asked. “Semi-somethings...”

“Semiconductors!” Lahni answered. “Well, because they depend on all this technology to live their lives. We can do without all that. You and I and even my people can and do live without all that. Maybe it would be a good thing if they had to do the same for a while. Maybe the earth would get clean and pristine again,” Lahni added. “I’m definitely gonna ask the prof when he has time.”

Jonno cleaned himself, stretched out his feathers and moved closer to the edge to check out the wind flow. “You leaving?” Lahni asked.

“Yup, gotta fly, thanks for the chat and all the info. I will carry that a long way and tell everybody. Sorry again about the poo. Didn’t mean to,” he said taking off. He hovered for a moment.

“See you, thanks for stopping by, no worries about the poo,” said Lahni scratching it off now that it had fully dried.

“See, it’s already gone. Be well!”

“Bye! See ya ‘round!” Jonno called out while climbing higher above the ship on an updraft.



Lahni got up, turned for one last look up towards her visitor who was now just a speck in the sky and then went to find the professor.

She went to his cabin first, which doubled as an office; he wasn't there.

Then she checked the bridge, he wasn't there either.

She went around the ship a couple of times to see where he might be but couldn't find him, so she decided to just stay by his cabin until he returned from wherever he was. He couldn't have left the ship; we are way out right now, she thought.

When the door from the toilet down the corridor opened with the professor emerging from it whistling a tune and a book in his hand Lahni got up and walked towards him. "Ah, I forgot you humans use those things to relieve yourselves," Lahni said when she spotted him.

"Yeah, well you wouldn't want us all to do what you do on deck, would you now. Somebody would have to scoop up all that poo and be cleaning up constantly. It would smell too..." he said holding his nose. "I wouldn't want to be the next person in there right now either!" he added with a chuckle, looking back at the toilet door.

"You know not all that long ago before toilets were invented people used to have to do just that. It must've been disgusting...but this discussion aside, what's up? You look a little worried," he said, inviting her into his cabin. "Come in,

sit! Tell me what's on your mind."

"I just had a visitor, a seagull called Jonno. We sat for a while and talked and saw this plane make funny looking trails in the sky overhead with metallic stuff in it. Michael came up for his morning break and explained some of what's going on there but I want to know more about it 'cause I'm really worried!" Lahni said.

"Wow, that's quite a subject. And it's been discussed in the scientific community like crazy apart from the Internet of course. I'll see what I can do here. But first things first...what did Michael tell you about it?" the prof asked.

"He said it had more than just one reason. One was about controlling or slowing down the warming of the earth and ocean and another about military stuff and another theory about solar radiation and such destroying semiconductors, which he said everything humans use from fridges to air planes depend on. But it's bad for people and animals and the environment. Is all that true?" she asked.

"OK, that's a big load of information to give you. I imagine he didn't have time on his morning tea break to go into too much detail with this. But he is right, I think. The entire process of seeding clouds for weather change, global dimming, radar control and protection against solar and cosmic radiation is called Geo-Engineering, which began decades ago but it's only maybe the last 20 years that it's been used regularly," he explained.

"But you said that geo-engineering was still in its infancy?" she interrupted.

"Well, I did say that, didn't I? I actually know better and really just didn't want to get into all the conspiracy theories with Daniel earlier, so I changed the subject. Sorry for the confusion. It wasn't the right time to get into that. I've known about it for years but haven't done that much study on it. I've read some articles though and can maybe try to make sense of it for you, even though I believe none of it seems to make sense given the results they are getting by using this technology; especially with all the reported side effects to the earth, water and plants apart from what it does to us. There are, however, at this point many who seem to have an interest in keeping this practice going while governments don't even acknowledge that it is going on at all. We did find some compounds and metals in the ocean water we tested up here that raised a flag though. For instance high levels of Aluminum and Barium and Strontium, which don't belong in there at all. They are all earth elements. I was a bit surprised at first and thought I'd bring it up at the Institute's next symposium but now that you guys discovered this aerosol spraying is going on out here, my question's kind of been answered. I wonder what's behind all that and why here?"

Lahni seemed even more confused at this point. She rubbed her eyes and ears and started to groom herself a little.

"Am I boring you already?" asked Dr.Morton.

"No, no, I'm just not sure I follow all this. It sounds like a big messy thing and no one seems to know or want to admit it's

going on. Why so mysterious; what is going on here?” she asked, finishing her self-wash.

“You pretty much hit the nail on head. As I said, according to the government the chemical trails are not even happening. If cloud seeding and weather manipulation or halting global warming is all they are supposedly doing, then why the hush, hush and the denial and refusal to come clean about what’s happening? The odd thing here is also that they are using chemicals and other things rather than silver iodide, which is the original cloud seeding compound and relatively harmless. I have a feeling something much more sinister is going on and when I think about the very beginnings of this technology and the people who invented it, that feeling I’m having doesn’t surprise me,” he continued.

“Who invented it then?” Lahni asked.

“The guy who came up with it was a member of the Manhattan Project, which was a group of scientists and engineers who developed the technology for the first hydrogen bomb for the U.S. government during the Second World War. Two of these bombs were later used to end World War II in an attack on the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands of people and animals and plants in one hit,” the prof said with a heavy sigh, “and destroying entire eco systems for decades to come, sickening everything for many generations! Anyway these were the very people, actually three of them who developed the technology for seeding metallic substances into the atmosphere. Edward Teller, the co-founder and director of the Livermore National Laboratory first proposed this geo-engineering technique together with Roderick Hyde and Lowell Wood. They came up with various combinations and mixtures for different purposes. They first tested this stuff in the stratosphere. They never took the effects on the environment into consideration. It was always only about saving their semi-conductor dependent military and other installations people have their modern lives attached to,” he continued. “Later, like with any technology, its use was widened and tested on other things. Now it is so widely used that some say we’re all getting sprayed with something from the sky on a daily basis especially in the US and some parts of Europe and I think Australia too. They are using it under the guise of halting global warming. That’s hogwash, if you want my opinion! I apologize for the language but there is no other way of putting it, really. It’s a bit scary to think about what the effects are going to be. Some say, they are testing biological weapons, bacteria, viruses and Nano technology on all of us without our knowledge,” he said, “but even we scientists have been silenced. There is definitely something sinister going on. And that is not just my opinion.”

“That sounds very scary, I can’t believe anyone would deliberately do such things. But then again I’ve heard so much from all my friends, animal and human about what has been done to them and I guess this is just one more thing,” Lahni said. “I just wonder now if we can really turn this around, ever?”

“You and everyone who is on the same path. But there is only one way forward and that is to never give up trying. That

would mean defeat and that would mean they win and we can't grant them that," the prof responded.

"I would love to know who 'They' are? I would go and tell them what I think about what they are doing to our earth, the only home we have," Lahni proclaimed.

Michael came back around the side of the ship walking into their conversation.

"Tell what to who?" he asked.

"Whom!" the prof corrected him.

"Oh, yeah, whom? But what are you talking about? Still on the chemtrail subject?" he asked.

"Yup, and it's taken on a whole new dimension. We are fully into the whole conspiracy of it by now," the prof exaggerated. "Wanna join us? Nah, just kidding! Trying to lighten the mood. I just explained some of the facts and theories around this to Lahni and some history as well but I have to get back to my work. I might however have a closer look into this whole thing now that you two troublemakers have sparked my interest," he said with a wry smile. "I hadn't thought about those things for years. Might be very timely though," he added and then left the two on their own.

Lahni filled in Michael on what she'd learned from the professor; then the two lay on their backs through Michael's lunch hour staring at the sky. It was all back to mostly blue again, much to their delight. Maybe a ho'oponopono would help here, Lahni thought. She decided to start one right now, right here. In her mind she lined up the people responsible, all the governments of the world that were involved, all the pilots and chemical companies and the military people and began the prayer and forgiveness ceremony in silence. She visualized all of them coming to the awareness that they were doing something very wrong and for all of them to wake up to a better worldview. With that she drifted off.

It was dark and windy when she woke up. Michael had gone. The smell of food motivated her to get up on her paws and lead her back down to the galley. Everyone was there having dinner.

"Why didn't you guys wake me? Man, am I hungry right now," she said, jumping up into the chair next to Daniel.

"We can help with that, here tuck in," Daniel said placing a shank in front of her on a plate. "You looked so peaceful we couldn't make ourselves wake you. But you were safe," he added.

"It's cooler tonight and it got really windy. Is there a storm coming?" Lahni asked.

"Maybe, we're close to a little storm but nothing bad," the professor promised. "Tomorrow we'll be in Cairns. We'll be stopping for a few days, so everyone will be getting a bit of time to explore and see the sights," he explained.

"Oh, great! I've been meaning to ask where we are and also wanted to thank you all for having me!" Lahni heard herself say all of a sudden.

"What do you mean, are you leaving the Aurora and all of us?" Daniel asked.

“I guess it’s time to move on guys. I didn’t really know it until just now when I woke up. I need to move north, but I’ll let my intuition take me where I’m meant to go next,” Lahni admitted.

“That will be a loss to all of us, Lahni, I hope you know that. We have very much enjoyed and valued your company and help of course. Let me know what you need on your journey and I’ll see what I can do. Also please stay in touch if you can,” the professor said.

“Will you come with me and Michael, to have a look at Cairns first before you take off?” Daniel asked.

“I can do that, that would be fun. You never know who we’ll run into,” she answered.

“It certainly won’t be the same without you around here,” the chef said, coming out of the galley with a bottle of champagne, “we need to drink to your successes so far though,” he said. “Who wants some?”

“Not me, thanks,” Lahni said.

“Oh, come on, just this once you can at least try some. It’s the good stuff. I know you’re a dog and all but you’re not just any dog,” he said while pouring some bubbly into her bowl.

“Woah, slow down, mate. You don’t wanna get her drunk, do you?” Daniel yelled out. “Give me some instead!”

“How old are you anyway?” the chef asked.

“He’s old enough to have a drink, my man. Go ahead! Give him a little! It’s not like we’ll all get drunk on one bottle of champagne anyway,” Dr. Morton said.

After all were served, the professor lifted his glass to make a toast. “Here’s to Lahni; to her courage, her energy, her conviction, her passion and love for her fellow animals and even us, although we don’t deserve it and here’s to the love she is carrying everywhere she goes!” he said, clinking his glass onto her bowl.

“Hear, hear, I’ll drink to that!” said the chef. “It’s been a pleasure feeding you, mate. You stay safe now, you promise,” he said with a tear welling up in his eye.

“You cryin’, mate?” laughed Michael.

“What’s wrong with a bit of feeling, eh?” he replied. Just wait until you have to say goodbye tomorrow, mate! You’ll see,” he added, taking another sip.

Lahni mustered up all her courage and licked up a little of the bubbly drink the chef had shared; then spat it all out again.

“Sorry, it’s yuck, can’t drink this stuff,” she said shaking it off.

“Give it here, then!” said the chef grabbing her bowl and pouring the whole thing into his almost empty glass. “Not gonna waste this drop!”

“Gross, man. Lahni already licked it and had it in her mouth,” Daniel commented.

“So what? It’s alcohol anyway. It won’t hurt. Besides, Lahni’s healthy. You’d take it from us too wouldn’t you?”

Michael said, defending the chef.

“Alright, everyone, calm down, no need to get stroppy! We are here to celebrate Lahni and all she has done so far, so let’s get back to that!”

The rest of the evening was spent sitting in the dining room listening to Lahni reminiscing about her travels and talking with the crew about future possibilities.

Chapter 18 The Top End

As promised, the next day the crew disbanded for the day to get some time off and away from the ship and all their duties. Some stuck together and others went off on their own exploring Cairns and the surrounding area. But before Lahni could leave, the prof sat her down to give her a last update about their findings on the reef.

“Things are unfortunately not looking good for the reef, mate. We seem to have lost half of all coral over the last three decades. That means half the Great Barrier Reef is already dead, gone and not replaceable. It’s a tragedy that was entirely avoidable. It’s alarming to say the least. If we keep this up, there won’t be any reef left in 30 years or less. We’ve seen enormous amounts of those nasty star fish that appeared out of nowhere about 20 years ago,” he told her.

“I saw some starfish when I went for the swim before the sharks and all. What are they exactly?” Lahni interrupted.

“Oh, crown-of-thorns star fish are imported from South East Asia, they come in on boats and then start multiplying here in the now much warmer waters. They live on coral and kill them. That, in conjunction with acidity levels getting worse and all the pollution we add... the latter getting a recent boost from the Queensland government with their increase in coal ships and dredging and you have what I call a disaster waiting to happen. Not even counting the artificial pollution that seems to come down from the sky now...if nothing is done right now we will not have any reef left very soon,” he explained.



“But why are there so many starfish and why is the government being so stubborn? Don’t they know what they are doing to it?” Lahni asked.

“That is what we are here to find out. We are taking measurements every day looking at ideal breeding conditions for the starfish. They are ferocious at the moment. But more on that when we have lab results, so stay in touch with me if you can and I’ll keep you informed. As to what the hell the government is thinking, I can’t answer that. I guess that they have dollar signs in their eyes, as usual. The fact is an entire five-and-a-half-billion dollar tourism economy will collapse if the reef goes. It’s an enormous loss already. I’ll keep you posted on that as well. Thank you again for coming along and helping us with our inter-species communication!” he answered.

Lahni said her quick good-byes to the crew and a very long one to the professor who was so special to her that it was probably the most difficult one yet.

“I don’t know how to thank you, Dr. Derek Morton! I have had such an amazing time with you; first in Samoa, then New Zealand and now in Australia! Where would I be without you? I will tell all about the work you do and I promise, since I still have your pager number, that I will be in touch, really I promise,” she said, hugging him closely.

Soon, after all the hugging, kissing and see ya later talk was done, Lahni, Daniel and Michael set off together for one last time to have a little adventure on their own exploring Cairns, a small town in the north of Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef.

Within a couple of hours they had pretty much seen the town and even a few outer areas without any particular incident to speak of. Daniel got onto his iPad to check if there was in fact anything of interest in the area to look at before he and Michael had to return to the Aurora and finally say goodbye to their canine friend.

He suddenly looked up with a smile. “Hey guys, I know what we’ll do. There’s a small Aboriginal community out of town we can go and visit. It looks cool. I’ve always wanted to know how these guys live. I’ve only ever seen our indigenous folk sitting around in the CBD drunk or something. I think it’s important for us as Aussies to see indigenous people in a different light for once,” he proclaimed. “You two in?”

“Sure, sounds interesting, how far is it?” asked Daniel.

“I’m in,” said Lahni, wagging her tail ready for some activity. “I did meet some nice aboriginal people in Sydney. They weren’t drunk at all. They took care of me and helped me lots. But it would be good to meet more. Let’s go, then.”

“How are we gonna get there, mate?” asked Daniel.

“Hitch a ride, what do you reckon?” said Michael, half asking and half suggesting.

“With Lahni?” Daniel asked, “It’s not gonna be easy but we don’t have a choice.”

“The main road I guess, it’s a start. Dunno how long it’s gonna take,” Michael added. “But we can only try,” he said, sticking his thumb out while walking on the side of the road in the direction they wanted to go in, just in case a generous driver would see them and stop. Lahni stopped for a moment, sat down at the edge of the road and looked back towards the city into oncoming traffic, which was very sporadic. A few minutes later a large off road vehicle was on approach. The driver was wearing sunglasses but somehow she connected with him and he stepped on his breaks. The truck came to a screeching halt after first sliding a few feet on the gravel beside the road.

The two young men had been moving along the road and were already about 50 meters ahead when they heard the truck skid across the soft edge. They turned back and ran towards Lahni as a tall, very dark man in a pair of khaki shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and a wide brim Akubra hat stepped out of his ride. He’d taken his sunglasses off his sweaty face and was walking towards Lahni.

“You lost, mate?” he asked, petting her head. “Whatcha doin’ out here on ya’re own?”

“She’s not alone, mate!” Daniel threw in quickly as he and Michael came up from behind. “She’s with us!” he added, stepping between the driver and Lahni.

“It’s OK, Daniel. He’s just being nice. I’m sure of it. He was going to give us a ride, right!” she said looking at Daniel and then the stranger nodding her head.

“Right?” asked Daniel again to repeat Lahni’s question. The guy shook his head in disbelief. “Did she just...?” he asked.

“Yup,” answered Michael. “She did! And she does a lot, so get used to it. Where are you going, mate?” he added.

“Yarrabah, I’m going to Yarrabah,” he answered still looking at Lahni in disbelief. “So, you guys wanna lift?”

“Yes, please,” said Lahni and jumped into the driver’s side of the truck settling on the back seat. “Come on guys, we haven’t got all day. It’s going be evening soon and you only have one more day here. Let’s go!”

“Well, get in then,” said the driver, “don’t be scared. She knows I’m alright. Dogs know!” he said, directing the two young men to take the front seat next to him.

“John ‘Mirri’ Jarrawa’s the name,” he said. “People call me me Mirri, it’s my nickname... It means dog, wild dog. It’s ‘cause I stop for dogs wherever I go and pick’em up and keep’em if I can’t find the owner. Got a half-dozen at home,” he said smiling at Lahni in the rear view mirror.

Lahni noticed he had deep blue eyes, set in a deep brown, almost black face with the whitest teeth she’d ever seen. His hair was thick and curly hanging down to his shoulders in wild formations under his grease-stained, worn-in hat.

“I’m not going to stay with you, mate, you know that, right?” she said with as much authority and conviction as she could muster. “I’m on a mission and I have to keep going north after this little side trip. My friends here came with me for the day from a ship anchored in the harbor, the Aurora. She’s a research ship I hitched a ride on from Samoa to New Zealand and then all the way here,” she went on to explain the reason for her journey and where she intended to go next.

“That’s some story, mate! My mob are gonna wanna know about that. You wanna come and meet’em?” John ‘Mirri’ Jarrawa asked, looking at Lahni in the rear view mirror again. “And your mates as well, if they wanna come,” he added.

Daniel remained quiet feeling a little uneasy about getting into a strangers car, which was all against the rules he had been imbued with in his childhood. Michael on the other hand was excited about meeting a bunch of native people, as he put it.

“Sure, we’ll come,” he said while using his elbow to bump Daniel in the side. “You OK with all that, mate?” he asked quietly.

Daniel nodded reluctantly.

“What’s wrong, mate, you worried about me?” Mirri asked Daniel. “I won’t bite ya. The meet is in an hour at the town council. I’m a ranger for the town. You guys are invited if you want but I’m not gonna force ya!” he promised. The boys nodded.

More than an hour’s bumpy ride later they arrived at the council building, which was nothing special. Yarrabah was a tiny town on the seaside in the middle of a nature reserve, with no tall buildings of any kind. In fact, most of the structures looked more like modern shacks that had a rather temporary feel to them. Weatherboard, ply and corrugated iron for roofing were the norm, with slightly elevated floors and small wooden steps leading up to the front doors. Some had verandahs and some were just plain rectangular houses.

The council building had a wide verandah around it with a wooden bench and swinging double doors as the entryway. The doors were open all the way with a curtain of beads hanging down to keep flies out but the air moving. Outside, above the bench, was a large notice board with community news and some space for residents to advertise their business or things for sale with flyers or cards. An old aboriginal man was sitting on the bench snoozing, flies buzzing around him, which he occasionally swished away from his face with a wave of a hand without opening his eyes.

“Don’t mind him, that’s just old Bill Narrawarre, he’s a local, lives down the road. But he doesn’t like being alone; hasn’t got’ny family left, so he comes and spends the day on that bench...all day. People bring him food and drinks and sometimes someone will sit with’im and have a chat. He’s alright!” Mirri explained.

Bill lifted one hand to greet the group as they went past him through to the front door reception.

“They’re already in there,” said the receptionist without looking up. “How’ve ya been?” asked Mirri, “Haven’t seen ya; haven’t been here for a bit.”

He kept on walking without waiting for an answer. The receptionist just smiled and kept on doing her work. Through the back was a large open space with a few tables and chairs around the edges and a large rug in the middle. “Pull up a chair, mate,” said one of the council members.

“And who’ve ya got there, mate. You’ll need more than one chair by the looks of it,” said another.

“They can use the floor if they like. But there’s more chairs in the corner,” the first council member added. “Picked up another one, eh. Haven’t ya got enough mutts already, mate?” he asked, laughing loudly. The others joined in the laughter.

“You tell’em,” Mirri said, looking at Lahni with a wink.

“Me? Oh, OK. I will,” she replied. She positioned herself so that she could see everyone and make eye contact. “Well, he did pick us up on the side of the road in Cairns but he didn’t collect another dog for keeping if that’s what you’re asking!” she said, looking at a few gobsmacked faces. “We are here to visit only! Tomorrow these friends of mine here, Daniel and Michael, will return to their ship in Cairns harbor and I’ll be on my way north; to Cape York in fact,” she told them. “I’ve been on a mission to save my world, traveling from far away around the Pacific and meeting lots of people doing great work and now I’m on my way back towards home but I have a few more stops on the way before I can return to my people!”

“Where’s home then?” asked the first councilor.

“Can we get started, mate? Gotta get back to my work afterwards. Got stuff to do today. You can have a chat later on about missions and travel an’ all that!” the second councilor suggested, rudely interrupting Lahni’s account.

“Sorry Lahni; let’s get started then. What’s the first order of business?” Mirri asked.

“There is some new development being proposed by the Cairns Harbor Authority with State funding and we’re not all too happy about it. It’s about dredging Trinity Inlet to allow much bigger ships in, like massive cruise liners with thousands of people on board. It’s a whole year’s project and we all reckon it’s gonna be trouble for the inlet and all the fishing that’s happening there. We’ve got a few weeks to put a complaint in against it. I’ll handle the details and we’ll discuss it at the next meet. But they are really pushin’ ahead for this thing, so we’re gonna have to have our say in the matter,” the chairman said.

“What about the environment. Are they conducting an environmental impact study or not?” Mirri asked. “You’d think they’d have to!”

“Yes, they are but you know how those things go. And most of the time it’s not in favor of nature, is it? Just look at

what they've done down in Gladstone. All the dredging's messed up the bay badly. They've been reporting about fish stocks not being all that good this year. It's gonna happen here too. Besides, too many people up here means trouble," the chairman explained.

"But it'll be good for us sellin' art and crafts and things here in Yarrabah. More tourists means more money," another council member said.

"That's a good point, mate. But if the environment suffers... I dunno, I think I'd rather catch good fish than have a lotta cash if you ask me. I've got enough money. I think we should all vote against it and write that letter to the Cairns Harbor people and the city and the state," Mirri replied.

"Alright, a letter it is. We'll have enough tourists come anyway, even without the big ships. If they're gonna destroy the reef and the inlet, no one is gonna wanna come up here anyways. Too many people also means they're gonna cull our crocs and that wouldn't be fair to the crocs, now would it," the chairman announced.

"Did ya hear about the dog that got taken the other day, mate, at Kewarra beach? A fisherman's dog and then yesterday they found a beheaded croc. What do ya reckon.... the fisherman got his revenge? Can you imagine if we get those meaty tourists hangin' out on our beaches. Sooner or later one of'em will get taken and then what? It's happening on Fraser Island as well, with the dingoes not gettin' a fair go. Too many people spells trouble, always does," the only woman council member added to the discussion.

"That's true about Fraser Island," Lahni commented. "We were all there recently and the dingoes told me about their problems with the pasty folk, as they call them."

"The fisherman didn't do it. So he says. I read the paper today and it said he was asked but he didn't do it. So who knows, a couple of punks thought it was fun to waste a good croc, 'n didn't even take it and use it for anything. That is a waste. Not a nice way to go either, I can imagine," Mirri answered. "So tell us what the Dingoes of Fraser Island think about humans then? You had a chat with'em, did ya?" he asked with a smile.

"Well, they are of two minds about humans. They do want to be friendly with them but it turns out humans are afraid of them and when humans are afraid they do stupid things, like culling dingoes and crocodiles! More and more of their habitat is taken and they are being pushed to the brink. I'm not sure how long they'll last. I fear for my friend Kal and his pack!" Lahni explained.

"Now, let's get back to the agenda here. The next thing on the list was about the rubbish problem down by the youth center, we've been getting some complaints that the young people aren't cleanin' up after themselves. Anyone got any ideas what to do about it?" the chairman asked.

“I do!” proclaimed Lahni. “Invite everyone for a Clean Up Yarrabah day and do it with them. If you punish them they won’t learn. Teach them by helping them see a better way!”

“Like a Clean Up Australia day kind of a thing but local? Hmm, good idea; we could do that. We’ll look into that and what it would take to organize. Any volunteers?” asked the chairman.

Two men raised their hands. “Alright, you two go ahead with that...let’s see what’s next.”

A mobile phone started ringing. Everyone looked around to see who’s it was. Daniel pulled out his phone, got up, excused himself and left for the door while answering the call.

Then another ringtone went off. This time it was Mirri’s phone. “Sorry guys, it’s me brother, gotta take it. Might be important,” he said and got up to follow Daniel outside for some privacy. Daniel came back in shortly to find Lahni and Michael.

“Michael, we gotta get back to the ship. The prof called, they’ve been called to a site in the reef a hundred miles south of here to check on some major fish kill that just happened. Most of the crew is already back. We have to find a fast way back to Cairns now. Sorry for so rudely interrupting your meeting but this is important,” he explained. “Is anyone driving into the city this afternoon?”

“Driving, no! But I can take ya on me boat; it’s probably gonna be faster as well,” offered one of the council guys who’d been quiet until now. “I’m Bob, by the way. I fish for a living around here. I was gonna go out later anyways so it’s no trouble,” he added.

“Lahni, what about you, will you stay?” Daniel asked. At that point Mirri had come back inside. His demeanor and face had changed from a happy relaxed one to a slightly tense and sad one.

“What happened?” asked the chairman.

“I got four weeks leave, don’t I ...still comin’ up? Is there a chance I can take it now? Gotta go north to see my dad ‘n’ my brother. Dad’s sick and they don’t know how long he’s got. I’m gonna drive up there to spend some time. Hope I make it before...” he said with his head down. “Lahni, you said somethin’ about wanting to go to Cape York. My family is up there. You wanna come for a ride with me?” Mirri asked.

Lahni was sad for him but happy about the proposal to join him on his trip. “Sure mate, I’ll come,” she said and then turned to Daniel. “I guess I’ll be staying until we leave to drive up there.”

“We’ll be leavin’ as soon as we’re ready with packin’ a few things for the road. I need to go home and give my housemate some instructions for the dogs and pack the truck with water, gas and provisions. It’s a bit of a drive. It’ll take

a few days. We'll have to sleep out," he told Lahni.

Michael and Daniel said their goodbyes to Lahni. The three friends had spent a considerable amount of time together in the past weeks.

"We'll miss you heaps, mate. You stay safe now, you promise and you stay in touch as well, OK? Don't you forget about us now, you promise?" Michael said wiping away tears.

Daniel had some big tears rolling down his face as well. He was kneeling on the ground hugging Lahni who was licking the tears off his face. "Don't you forget us, mate!" he repeated. "I'll keep in touch on our Facebook Ho'oponopono page. You can, too, if you can get Internet access somewhere on your travels, alright," Daniel went on. "The password and sign in info is in your vest."

"Come on you guys, if I'm gonna get you back in time to Cairns we have to go now. The boat's ready and waiting," the fisherman said. "Let's get going!"

"I love you guys! Daniel, thank you so much for all your help and chats and all of it, really. And you too, Michael and tell the prof what's happened and that I'm going to Cape York!" Lahni yelled after them.

"See you! Love you too!" they said. "We'll tell him!"

"Come on Lahni, time to take off for us as well. Sorry about leaving the meeting early, everyone. You can fill me in on what's new when I'm back. I'll send word about what's goin' on with me pop," John 'Mirri' Jarrawa said, grabbing his backpack and turning towards the entrance. They disappeared through the door.

Soon after, the truck was fully loaded with camping and fishing gear, spare petrol, a rifle, food supplies, lots of water in canisters and a battery operated radio. John said 'see ya' to his dog pack, who had completely ignored Lahni and left with her, driving north towards Cairns, Port Douglas and the Daintree.

"We'll be stoppin' up in the bush first, you know, the rainforest. I got a mate up in the Daintree who catches crocs for a living, not to kill, though. He takes them out of waterways that are too small for 'em and takes 'em over to bigger spaces," he explained.

Lahni just nodded but remained quiet. The day had been long, hot and sticky and a little overwhelming but nonetheless exciting. It had been very tiring and she could hardly stay awake. The soft rocking and humming of the motor made her very sleepy. Mirri noticed her head starting to nod and her eyes drifting downwards.

"Tired, mate? It's alright! I can shut up for a while. Sleep then, it's gonna take a few hours to get there yet, so relax, get comfy!" Mirri suggested. "I'll wake ya up when we get closer. It's gettin' dark soon too, so not much to see anyway."

Lahni obliged and fell asleep on the passenger's seat with a warm afternoon breeze in her face.

Hard bumps shook her awake. She sat up and looked around. All she could see in the window next to her was her mirror image. It had been rolled up during her sleep. The cabin light of the truck was dim. Mirri looked over at her but she could barely see his face except his very white, big smile.

“You awake mate? Been sleepin’ for hours. Makin’ me tired just lookin’ at ya. Wish you could drive. I’m getting a bit slow myself,” he said with a chuckle. “But not too tired to make it to Jimmy’s, I reckon. You hungry, mate?” he asked.

“A little, what do we have?” Lahni enquired.

Mirri threw a big piece of jerky towards Lahni. She caught it with her teeth and started chewing on it.

“It tastes like reindeer or caribou, not bad. Didn’t know how hungry I was. Thanks!” she said, still chewing.

“No worries, mate. It’s kangaroo. I guess you haven’t met any of them yet?” he said.

“There’re lots up at the Cape. You’ll see. We eat’em up there and so do the crocs if they can get’em. You’ll see! Water, you want some water?” he asked, pouring some into a metal bowl for her, all while driving.

She lapped it all up. She hadn’t noticed how thirsty she had gotten from the dried meat.

Suddenly the brakes screeched and the almost empty bowl between Lahni’s paws fell on the floor but Lahni held on. Mirri had made a hard stop after spotting a pair of glowing eyes in the headlights. He opened the sunroof of the truck to have a closer look. He had seen those eyes before and wasn’t willing to step out to confirm his suspicions just yet.

“What’s up, what is that?” Lahni asked after composing herself. “It looks big.”

“A croc, I reckon and a bloody big one too. We can’t drive over it. I don’t think they should be killed if it’s not for self-defense. People in the big city eat ‘em and make handbags ‘n’ shoes from the skins. It’s a big deal for some. These monsters have been around for a long time and can get really old too. They should be left alone. I mean, my mate who we’re gonna stay with is a croc hunter and all but they don’t kill’em, they just move’em to bigger billabongs if they can’t find enough food and get too big for it. So, we gotta wait ‘til it decides to move on. Don’t get out, whatever you do. It’ll eat ya. It’s on the hunt. There’s a billabong close by, where it must be off to,” he explained.

Mirri took a very large flashlight out of the toolbox on the little back seat and shone it down on the crocodile. It was at least five or more meters long and looked very menacing in the harsh light of the torch.

“Wow, that is big,” Lahni said, staring at this magnificent creature.

Suddenly, two men appeared out of the bushes with rope and tape in their hands stalking the crocodile. In less than a minute they were on top of the reptile tying it’s mouth with rope and soft tape and roping its body before it had a chance to engage in a death roll.



A death roll, Mirri explained, was a way for the croc to get control of its prey under water. One of the men looked up at Mirri and Lahni's heads sticking out of the sunroof, waving at them.

"Won't be long now. But it'd be much faster if you got off your butt 'n' helped, ya know!" the man said, laughing.

"Jimmy, is that you, mate, what the...? I thought you were home waitin' for us, mate," Mirri asked.

"Yeah, mate, was gonna be home but got a call out last minute for this big boy to be moved. He's been terrorizing the neighbors. Had to get it done tonight. He's gonna be taken up the road to a bigger billabong. He'll like it up there. There're a few girls around for him as well," he answered, smiling.

Mirri had jumped out of the car while Jimmy explained the situation and was now sitting on the back of the huge reptile, helping to hold him down. A truck was backed up from the other end of the road; the croc was loaded on, tied up securely

and covered with a blanket. It had taken but a few minutes to get the croc on the truck for transport.

“Mate, I’ll be at my house in a couple of hours so make yourselves comfortable; the door’s open. There’s grog in the fridge and some tucker still warm on the stove. I’ll be back as soon as this is done. See ya!” Jimmy yelled from the back of the truck as it took off and disappeared around the next bend. The path was rough and very dark. After a few more curves on the rugged trail, Mirri turned down a narrow lane lined with dense undergrowth of ferns and scrub.

At the end a clearing appeared with a small weatherboard house on stilts standing in the middle. He parked the truck, unloaded his overnight bag and opened the door for Lahni. The small house was unusually spacious inside with a separate bedroom, an extra bunk bed in the living space and a small but well equipped kitchen. Outside was a covered verandah, which was surrounded by a mosquito net, for sleeping out on very hot and humid nights.

After a little dinner they sat quietly outside, listening to the night noises of the Daintree.

Hours later Jimmy arrived back, dirty and wet. Lahni was curled up on the lower bunk bed and Mirri was outside smoking a rolled cigarette. The two friends sat talking briefly before retiring to bed.

“I’m knackered, mate, lets talk in the morning. ‘Night!” Jimmy said and walked off to his bedroom.

“G’Night, mate. See ya!” Mirri said climbing to the top bunk above Lahni.

Soon, a triple snoring sonata permeated the night air.

The kettle was boiling making a whistling noise, which woke Lahni and Mirri up at the same time. Jimmy was an early riser no matter what time he went to bed, so breakfast consisting of left over damper—otherwise called soda bread — topped with butter and vegemite were on the table. Lahni had a bowl of raw buffalo milk sitting on the floor with some broken up bread and some roo jerky in it. She was very hungry and ate it all in a flash.

“Mate, I reckon you oughta come with me and meet big Ed up at the billabong we left him at last night. You wanna come? Bring that one too,” he said pointing at Lahni. “Where’d ya find her? Not the road I guess, at least not around here then?” Jimmy inquired.

“Lahni, you wanna meet big Ed, the croc we watched getting caught yesterday? It’s not far from here and then afterwards we’ll take off north. How’s that sound?” Mirri asked.

Jimmy raised an eyebrow and looked at his friend with a big question mark on his face. “You askin’ your dog, mate?”

“Sure he’d ask because he’s a gentleman, and yes he did pick me up on the side of the road. But I wasn’t lost like the others he takes care of. You see, I’m a traveller and Mirri here is giving me a lift up there, that’s all,” Lahni explained.

Jim fell back into his chair after starting to get up to pour more coffee. His cup was still empty and his mouth a little open. “Magic, mate, what’d ya do to her, mate?” Jimmy uttered.

“Nothin’ I done, mate. She came that way, weird but good, huh?” Mirri answered.

“Wish I had one of those, it gets a bit lonely up here,” Jimmy said. “Alright then, talkin’ dog, come with us then. Maybe you can tell big Ed somethin’ for me as well. If you can talk to crocs that is?”

“Sure, I can try, never met a crocodile before but it shouldn’t make any difference. I already talked to sharks, whales, possums, dolphins and many other animals. I’m happy to go,” Lahni answered.

The drive to the billabong was short and again bumpy through thick bush on uneven soft ground. Mirri and Lahni were following Jimmy’s truck to the edge of the pond.

Jimmy pulled up and got out first. He walked over to Lahni’s side and opened her door. “Hey, just lettin’ you know that croc is a big’un and he’ll eat ya if ya get too close, so make sure you keep your distance from the water’s edge, alright?” he instructed her. “Same for you, mate but you know all that already!”

Mirri nodded and jumped out. He grabbed his rifle, just in case, he thought.

“Let’s hope we won’t have to use that, mate!” Jimmy said looking at him. “But better to have it. I reckon he’s busy with the sheilas already,” he added with a wink.

Lahni spotted him in the middle of the water, low just under the surface, his nose and eyes the only visible parts. He was gliding towards them, very slowly; his body appearing more and more on the surface as he approached the shallow edge. Lahni stood up and walked backwards up the embankment just in case the croc would suddenly charge at her but decided to start talking to Ed at the same time.

“Hello Ed! I’m Lahni, I’ve come a long way to speak to you and all the other animals. As many as possible! I was wondering if you would have a chat with me instead of making me your breakfast?”

The croc stopped short of getting out of the water, looked around for a minute and then laid eyes on Lahni, now only a few meters away.



His gaze tracked everyone around him. He wasn't quite sure who had spoken to him. "You talkin' to me, mate?" asked big Ed.

"Yup, I am. I was wondering how you feel about being roped and taped up by humans and taken from your home to another one by force?" she asked.

"Oh, that! I was a bit pissed off at first but now that I'm here, it's better really. Got some nice company too. See!" he said looking at the other side of the bank at one of the females he was sharing the billabong with. "So it's all good, thanks for asking. Why are you so interested in what I think?" Ed asked.

"Well, I'm on a mission around the Pacific to save our world from pollution and climate change and to find out what can be done and as it turns out to also help humans understand animals better since I can talk to both, you see. Jimmy here, who is one of the guys who brought you here last night, wanted to know how you feel about it, so I asked. What else can you tell me about your life here?" she asked.

"Alright, if they wanna know. We haven't got enough space anymore. I shouldn't really have to move, they are in my

rain forest, not theirs. We want our forest back. Is that clear enough, mate? They keep movin' us and sometimes kill me mates too. It's not fair, mate! That's what I think, anyway, if ya wanna know!" he answered.

"Thank you, for being honest. I kind of had a feeling about this already. I'll be telling them what you said."

"I heard him, Lahni, thanks!" Mirri said, looking at Jimmy who nodded with his mouth open again.

"Me too, mate! I heard him too. Bloody oath, can't believe it but I could swear I did. Thanks for doin' this! Have been wondering for a while how they feel about us dragging them around the place and he's right about the space issue as well. There's way too much tourist development, gettin' closer and closer to where they live. It's not lookin' good for'em. Been writin' letters to the Minister for a while but dunno if anyone's listenin'. I'll write another one now, for sure! This has to be changed for their sake!" Jimmy said, shaking his head in disbelief about what had just occurred.

"Thank you," big Ed said to Jimmy directly. "Thanks for moving me to a better billabong, mate, appreciate it. And thanks for the company too. Was gettin' a bit lonely over there and thanks for bringing her here!" he added looking at Lahni.

"It was nice to meet you and find out more about you. I wish I had more time with you but I'm sure I'll meet more crocodiles up at the Cape. See ya!" Lahni said, backing up a little more now.

Big Ed had slowly moved closer throughout their conversation and even though she had already talked to him, his size was a little intimidating to her. She was now sitting between Mirri and Jimmy. But Ed just turned around and, smoothly swishing his enormous tail, walked back into the water.

"See ya!" he said, taking a last glance over his shoulder before he went under.

"Man, that was out of this world. I'd have never thought ever that I'd be talkin' to a croc, mate. Magic, pure magic! You're a champ, Lahni. Thanks, mate!" Jimmy said. "You keep that one safe now, you hear me!" he added, putting his arm around Mirri's shoulder and squeezing it, before getting back in his truck.

"No, worries, mate, I didn't do nothin'. It was all her," Mirri said.

"You brought her here, mate. That was enough," Jimmy said. "See ya around mate, have a good trip up there. I hope your old man will be alright. And say hi to your brother, mate," he added, driving off towards home.

Mirri and Lahni got back in the truck and took off towards the highway north, when suddenly a thunderstorm rolled in with a blinding downpour so severe they had to stop on the side of the road. To pass the time Lahni decided to ask a few questions.

"Mirri, can I ask you a few things about your family?"

"Sure, ask away, mate; got no secrets!" Mirri said.

“Did your family always live up here or did you grow up somewhere else?” Lahni asked.

“Dad’s from up here, but when he was a young fellow he went to Cairns to find some work ‘n’ that’s where he met me mum. Then, when Mum died a few years ago, he came back up here to stay close to his cousins and some old friends who had never left. Last year my brother Ricky moved up to live with Dad ‘cause Dad got sick and couldn’t look after himself. I offered...but they didn’t want me to quit my job. So I send them money every month instead. But here we are, it’s maybe the last time I see the old bugger. I haven’t seen him in a year. Time flies!” Mirri explained.

“That’s sad for you. I hope you get to spend some time with him, before he leaves this world.”

“I hope so too,” Mirri answered. “My dad was a tribesman.... the chief even, for a while. He was tall then...shrunk a little in recent years after Mum went. He couldn’t hack it and started drinkin’ too much...now he’s paying for it but he’s had a good life. He’s 71, you know, ‘n’ I hope he’s got a few more good years; see what I can do up there. But it’s not lookin’ too good for ‘im, at least that’s what my bro thinks. We’ll be there soon, so I’ll find out.”

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started. Before they took off Lahni got out of the truck to take a last look at the magnificent forest they had spent the night in.



Afterwards they took off towards the northern end of the cape to a town called Bamaga, an isolated community of about 2000 people, most of whom had come there from the Torres Strait Islands north of Cape York.

Only about a third of the population was mainland Aboriginal. The rest was a mix of Torres Strait Islanders, a few people from Papua New Guinea and a few fishermen and miners of European descent from other cities in Australia as well as overseas.

When they arrived later that day, Mirri's father was sitting on the front porch a little hunched over on an old rocking chair. He rocked back and forth looking out at the road at anything or anyone who passed by. His gaze seemed a little vacant. But as Mirri's truck rolled into the driveway beside the house his eyes followed. He couldn't get up but seeing Mirri in the car his eyes lit up a little and a small smile grazed his face.

"Hey, Pop! How'ya doin', mate?" Mirri asked while jumping out of the truck in a hurry. He ran up to his father before he could answer.

"Alright," he said, "I'm still here, aren't I? That's something!" he said hugging his son for the first time in a year. "Good to see ya, mate!

"You too, Pop, glad I made it up here. Was a long drive but I had company," Mirri said. He was looking towards Lahni and waved her to come out of the truck. Since he hadn't opened the door for her before greeting his father, she opted to jump out of the driver's side window and ran up to them. She jumped up and licked Mirri's dad on the cheek. He laughed out loud at the boisterous hello and then used his sleeve to clean off the moisture her tongue had left behind.

"Who's this, then?" he asked with a scratchy, deep but weak voice.

"That's Lahni, my traveling companion. She's a special one! Picked her up in Cairns... the girl's on a mission. But I'll tell ya about it later.... where's Rick? Gotta talk to him...." he said, leaving his father and Lahni alone on the porch and entering the house.

"Out the back...I reckon...he's doin' somethin' in the shed!" his father tried to yell into the house but Mirri was already on the other side.

"So, Lahni, is it?" Pop asked. "You're a cute one. He's gonna keep you!" he said, stroking her coat with a wobbly hand.

"No, he won't!" came out of Lahni's mouth. "He just gave me a lift up here. Wanted to see the top end of Australia and go north from here towards home."

The old man's eyes rolled around once, then he shook himself awake, since he thought he was dreaming. "What the..." he said, now rubbing his eyes and ears.

"Yes, you heard right," she said. "Not dreaming! Not imagining. Let's just keep talking, you'll get used to it. You

know, you have a great son! Mirri is amazing. It was very nice of him to get me here,” Lahni said.

Meanwhile, behind the house, Rick was on his back underneath an old car in the shed doing some work on it when Mirri walked in and kicked him a little on one leg to let him know he was there.

“Hey, bro, I heard you pull up but had to finish this crappy oil changin’ job before I could get out of here. I’m tryin’ to fix this old thing... can’t afford a new one,” Rick said.

“What about the money I sent ya, what’s happened to that?” Mirri enquired.

“Ah, life, mate; everything’s gone through the roof, mate! It’s mad out there. Can’t afford to live in the sticks anymore. And no jobs here either,” Rick said while rolling himself out from under the car on what looked like a rusty skateboard covered in a worn, stained piece of foam.

He stood up, punching his brother playfully in the shoulder to say hello. Mirri pulled him in for a hug.

“I’m filthy mate, don’t get too close,” Rick said.

“So what, haven’t seen ya in a bloody year mate.” Mirri answered.

“So how’re things in the city?” Rick asked while walking towards the house.

“Time for a beer mate, you want one?” he added, not waiting for an answer to his first question.

“Can’t complain, mate. Plenty to do and good people around! A beer would be good, mate, thanks,” Mirri answered and followed his brother into the kitchen.

Lahni was still on the porch with Pop when Mirri went to check on them to see if they’d like a drink as well. He saw them through the front screen door. Lahni was sitting on the top step right next to the old man who had his hand on her back.

“You two made friends, I see...anyone want a drink...I mean I know you do, Pop, even though you probably shouldn’t,” Mirri said, handing his father an open stubby of beer. Water for you Lahni, I assume!”

“You got a weird one here,” said his dad. “Beer, yes thanks, I am thirsty. “She’s a keeper!” he added.

“Nuh, can’t do that. She’s a free spirit!” Mirri answered, winking at Lahni who was sitting next to him with a slight frown on her face. She was always a little weary of people suggesting ownership of her as a pet or working dog. Rick came through the screen door with a sandwich and his beer and sat down on the stairs next to them.

“So what’s this, another one, huh! Haven’t ya got enough mutts yet, mate? This one looks different!” he said taking a bite.

“I’m noone’s property!” protested Lahni. “Nuh, just said it, she’s not a keeper. She’s on a mission. Saving the planet. Not sure how she’s gonna do that but can’t fault ’er for trying” Mirri said.

His brother had stopped chewing and was now just staring at Lahni.

“Is he OK?” asked Lahni, “or should we call someone?”

Mirri laughed out loud. “That was me when I first met her, too. Not much to explain here, it is what it is. She’s a magic one. Already had us talkin’ to a big croc, if you can believe it,” he explained.

“Anyway let’s get down to business. What’s going on with you lot here that you rang and had me pack up and leave my mates?” he asked.

“Dad was in a bad way for a minute there. I thought he wasn’t gonna make it, for real, mate. And then all of a sudden when I told him you’re comin’ up, he got better overnight. Couldn’t catch ya though, you’d already left and were out of range. So, you don’t have to stay but now that you’re here you could hang out for a while. I missed ya! How about going bush with us for a bit? Would be good for the old fella,” Rick suggested.

“How about it, Lahni, do you wanna learn the ways of the bush fellas? Foragin’, huntin’, and stuff like that. We can go, if ya want!” Mirri asked.

“Ya gonna ask a dog, mate? What’s got into you? Let’s just pack ‘n’ go!” Rick said, shaking his head at Mirri.

“You don’t know the half of it, mate!” Mirri mumbled to himself. “I’m packed already, it’s all still on the truck. You’re gonna take your old bomb or what? Or you can ride with us. We’ll just fit,” he suggested.

“Give me half an hour, mate, gotta get some gear together first. We’ll come with you, though, I don’t trust that old thing in the shed for the bush anymore. Don’t wanna get stuck!” Rick said while helping his dad out of the rocking chair to get him dressed for the occasion.

Given that Bamaga was a fairly remote town already, the getting out of town part didn’t take very long. The road became dirt very quickly and stayed that way for the remainder of the trip. After an hour-and-a-half’s drive they got into a large clearing in a gum forest. Small structures made of bark and sticks rose from the ground, barely high enough to sit under.

A few women sat around a small fire making things. Lahni hadn’t gotten close enough to see what they were producing. All eyes were on them when they pulled into the area and stopped. Rick, Pop and Mirri got out of the cab first, then Lahni right behind.

When the kids saw her they rushed right over to inspect her and give her a hug. She ended up sitting in a circle with them talking. The adults remained around the small fire in conversation.

Further away from the main group sat three men, one of them elderly. He had spotted Lahni when they arrived but hadn’t engaged until now. He looked up towards her, caught her eye and held her gaze with piercing green eyes. Lahni couldn’t look away.

“Excuse me for a minute,” she said to the children, while walking slowly towards the old man who was still looking at her. She ended up right in front of him still holding his eyes with hers. They sat that way for some time before he broke the silence.

“Heard about you, mate! Stories from Sydney! Jagga told someone about you...traveled all the way here,” he said, smiling at her.

“Jagga, my friend Jagga!? How is he?” she asked.

“Don’t know that, just heard about you. Good news travels fast. Good you’re here,” he said and then just looked at her again. “Sit!” he commanded her. “I mean, come sit here next to me. Sorry, I’m used to dogs doing what I tell them to do.”

“Thanks,” she said obeying his command.

She was strangely drawn to this man, who knew about her from someone who had heard it from someone who had heard it from Jagga. Actually she didn’t know how many people had carried the story forward. She had learned that in Aboriginal culture stories were told from person to person rather than written and read, so she assumed this had been the case here.

“See, in the old days, we’d just tell each other stories and we still do but I got this news a different way,” he said pulling out a tablet device. “I got an email from a mate who knows Jagga in Sydney,” he said laughing. “It doesn’t work out here though; brought it for the games the little guys wanna play when they get bored with nature!”

Pop, Rick and Mirri were busy catching up with friends they hadn’t seen in some time, so Lahni decided to stick with the old guy for now.

“Ya didn’t think we’d have all that modern stuff out here, did ya! Just because we’re in the bush and we’re local fellas, doesn’t mean we can’t keep up with the times.”

Lahni was intrigued, given that the aboriginal culture was much older even than her own and her tribe didn’t use any such technologies. Although a lot of the younger people in Siberia had left their indigenous cultures behind in recent years to go to the cities and find work. Her tribe had never used anything electronic.

“Tell me, how do you combine the two very different worlds here. I mean, all this technology and then your very old culture that teaches people to be connected to nature and the earth and trust in her for everything?” she asked with much curiosity.

“That’s a good question, mate. As you can see it’s not all that easy to combine the two out here since these bloody things don’t work this far off the beaten track but in the city they are what people use now, so we like being part of whatever’s going on out there. We like being informed about who does what and that. It’s been useful having these to talk to the government about our land rights, ‘cause if you don’t have one you miss out on what they are up to. And it’s not

always a good thing...what they're up to I mean!" he answered, laughing out loud again.

"What do you mean?" Lahni asked.

"Ah, another good question. Those buggers haven't been straight with us and often they promise us stuff and don't deliver. We're still waitin' for promises to be kept from 200 years ago," he explained with an even louder laugh.

"Why do you laugh about this so much? Is it funny?" Lahni enquired.

"If you can't laugh about it you get depressed and it's so ridiculous sometimes what's going on so you laugh 'cause it feels better than the other options," he pointed out.

Mirri came over to see how she was doing but sat down next to them without interrupting the conversation.

"Mate, good to see ya, been a long while. Was just explaining something to your little friend here. We were talking about land and all the trouble with ownership and that," he said to Mirri who nodded but remained quiet.

"So, tell me then, what's happening up here?" Lahni asked.

"It's complicated business, mate. It's been goin' on for a couple of hundred years. Our way is so different to theirs, so even when they give us so-called land rights they still wanna be in charge of us. They don't understand our laws and our ways at all and nor do we truly understand theirs. The gap is so big that I'm not sure it will ever work properly. I reckon we need our own country!" he said.

"Are you on about that again? How do you propose that would work, mate!? It's crazy and frankly, they would never let you do it anyway," Mirri said to him.

"Don't you remember, we had our own country for fifty thousand years until a couple of hundred years ago? I wonder what makes white people think that we somehow aren't capable of runnin' one now! They treat us like children. That really gets me going, mate! It really does!"

"I guess you got a point there, mate! I never thought of it that way," Mirri said apologetically.

"They always give us a little bit back and say, here you go, have some land, it's yours, do what you want with it but it's never quite enough to really do anything with. It's like dishing out birthday cake a piece at a time when in fact you should be the baker."

"Yeah, mate. They give us little bits of responsibility but always have the upper hand when they want it. Look at the whole thing in the 60's when they moved a whole town because they wanted the land for themselves. I was there; I remember", the old man said.

"I thought that was given back later?" Mirri asked.

Lahni just sat there listening but wondering what all this had to do with her journey and why she was here. What did she

need to learn?

One of the women had approached her while the men were having their discussion on land rights and politics.

“Those two are at it again.... you wanna come sit with us?” she said as more of a suggestion than a question. Lahni obliged even though she hadn’t really gotten very far with the old man and was feeling dissatisfied leaving him already.

“Don’t worry,” the woman said to her, “he’s not goin’ anywhere.... and you’ll get to talk to him more later.”

They left to sit with the women and children. When they got to the fire Lahni saw what the women had been doing. Flat bits of bark were being hand painted with little landscapes and animals. A couple of them were sorting through berries, then crushing them and mixing them with a bit of fine clay to make colors. They used sticks to make the marks on the bark. The pictures looked like they were telling stories from the surrounding areas. There were kangaroos, fish, koalas, possums and lots of lines and dots on them.

Lahni had a close look at their handiwork. “We sell ’em in town to tourists mainly, it brings in good dollars. Somethin’ to do as well,” the woman said.

“What’s your name?” Lahni asked.

“My name is Kyeema; it means dawn. I was born early in the morning and I’m still a morning person. You are Lahni, right? Do you want to do some drawing and painting with us?” she asked.

Lahni was excited since she’d never been asked to take part in something like art, and she’d never even held a brush or in this case, a stick. Kyeema didn’t wait for an answer and set Lahni up with a piece of bark, some colors the children had mixed and a stick that had been flattened at the end to make marks on the bark. Being a dog she didn’t have a thumb of course and had to hold the drawing utensil in her mouth. A little clumsy at first, she was soon fully engaged making a picture in dots of herself sitting with a bunch of people by a fire! The children gathered around her watching her paint.

“You know what the problem really is in the world?” Lahni said to Kyeema, setting down her stick brush for a moment.

“What’s that?”

“The problem with the world and people is that they don’t sit still enough and stay in the moment and just enjoy the very present they have. They always fear forward and never get to really be here,” Lahni said.

“That’s very insightful of you and very true. In the old days we’d spend days on end in these kinds of situations just being and making things and hunting or fishing and enjoying each other’s company. Now we worry about our land rights and what the kids are up to in town and the environment. The worrying never ends!”

“And with the worrying you get more to worry about!” Lahni added.

“Exactly!” said Kyeema. “That was my next point. We never used to worry. My people always knew somehow that

everything they needed was being provided for them by mother earth. The day would bring what was required. Now we worry about everything; it's a dis-ease that white men brought with them. I sometimes long to be back where we once were. I don't care about land rights and all the politics involved; I just want my people and my children to have what they need and be happy and healthy. It's getting harder. The dreaming was always a way to be connected to the greater vision and it brought with it strength and a sense of belonging. The place in itself was a dreaming with everything in it belonging to the dream, including us. We believe that everything leaves energy behind, a mark like the ones you are making on the bark right now but our people have somehow stopped being in the dreaming. They got ripped out and sucked into white man's nightmares. They plan things, they make things happen, they rule on things and take things, but they don't dream and they don't have a dreaming in which they live together anymore. And without dreaming there is nothing! Everyone for themselves doesn't work! That's why everything seems so empty to them and they run around wanting to get more, only to find out at the end they have nothing!" Kyeema explained.

Lahni had interrupted the painting to have a look at her work for a minute when the thought had occurred to her. She was still sitting, just thinking about what Kyeema had said when one of the kids whispered in her ear to keep painting. Oh, yes, right; back to my masterpiece!" she said, picking up her brush. The kids laughed. Kyeema continued: "Without the dreaming these little ones won't know what to do or how to live. I try and teach as much as I can like my mum did for me, and her mum for her. We gotta keep it up otherwise it'll all be lost. Most humans are lost on this earth. There are very few who find their way. And it's always by connecting with the spirit of dreaming. You gotta have vision and be part of a vision. I fear that it's too late. My parents were conned by the whites; taken from the land to missions where they got told that there was a white God who was the ruler of everything, even us and that he had to be feared and if you didn't, you'd get severely punished. It didn't look like a good kind of a God to me when I was a child. They tried telling me about him and I didn't believe a word I heard. It seemed an unjust God who would give land to people who didn't belong and take it from people who did belong. So I found my way back to what my people were before all that."

"How did all this happen and when?" Lahni asked out of one side of her mouth with her paintbrush held on the other side like a cigar as she worked on her pictures.

"It started when Captain Cook arrived; a nasty English man who was out for a land grab and nothing else. He came in and started shooting my ancestors a couple of hundred years ago. You see, my people thought the men in the boats were ancestors who came to visit us over the sea but what they got was a lot of pain and misery. The ones that survived got shoved into small pieces of useless land or taken to work on farms and stations or missions. It wasn't pretty. It was violent and forceful and cruel," she explained.

“That sounds terrible, like what happened in New Zealand!” Lahni said.

“Well, as far as I know it was a little different there. Maoris were fighters; my people didn’t defend themselves. They thought it was a friendly visit and got the opposite instead!”

“I’m so sorry your people had to go through that! How do you feel about it now? You still seem angry about it all,” Lahni said.

“I’m not so much angry that it happened anymore but I’m angry that it’s not being talked about—at all! Kids don’t learn about it in school or talk about it with their parents and the insult continues to this day,” she explained.

“What do you mean, to this day?” Lahni asked.

“White Australians don’t mix well with us to this day! They don’t understand who we are, how we live on the land, our philosophy and beliefs. But I reckon they don’t wanna know. They are so stuck in their European ways that they can’t get out to see anything else.”

Mirri joined in as he walked up to the painting group. “She’s right, really. It’s just not talked about anywhere. Hey, mate! Haven’t seen you in years,” he said, giving Kyeema a big hug.

“I see you’ve been educatin’ the pup!” Mirri said, smiling and winking at Lahni, “and you’re makin’ an artist out of her as well.”

The kids held up her attempt at aboriginal art, laughed and shook their heads in response to Mirri’s comment.

“Nah, not so much!” he said laughing. They all chuckled.

“It looks like it was painted by a dog!” one of the little kids said, which drew an even bigger laugh.

“We have to learn to live together, it’s as simple as that!” Lahni said, with much conviction.

Kyeema responded, “You said it, girl! That’s exactly what I’m on about. All this talk of land rights this and sea rights that and mining leases and governments telling everyone what they can and can’t do isn’t working for me. We’ve only ever used what the land provided for us without destroying nature and obliterating our essential resources. What I’m saying is, why can’t they leave us be! Why don’t they let us be what we are and what we choose to be?”

“True! If it were only that easy! Except for the white fellas’ belief in lack and loss and ownership! They don’t think there’s enough for all of us and because they don’t have a true spiritual connection to the land, the Earth, the Sun and the Universe; they don’t trust it. Hence the grab for everything,” the old man said while sitting down with the main group.

“You got us going, Lahni, didn’t you?” Mirri said, winking at her again.

“She seems to do that wherever she goes!” Pop added.

“So, if I’m right, why don’t you guys just do what you want to do? Live on the land; do as you please, look after

yourselves! They don't seem to be disturbing you right now!" Lahni suggested.

"Right now, that is the truth! Maybe she's right and we ought to just stay present with right now and enjoy the peace in this moment. Nobody is wanting us to leave or change or do anything other than be here with each other, the way we used to be," Kyeema said.

"Let's get back to painting then!" Lahni said, picking up her stick between her teeth again and dipping it into the wet clay paint. "Where do you get all the color from?" she asked with a lisp the stick in her mouth created.

"I'd have to show you. Come for a little walkabout with me!" Kyeema said, getting up to lead Lahni into the bush. Lahni dropped her stick and asked one of the kids to watch out for her bark while she was gone.

The two disappeared into the scrub.

Kyeema picked up a piece of burned wood from an old campsite and showed Lahni. "This is what we use for black, we grind it and make a paste with water or you can just take a piece and draw with it. We also mix it into kaolin clay; a crumbly, white clay that is part of the landscape here to make gray tones. Here, see!" she said picking a small piece that looked like a stone on the side of the path. "That is also where white comes from, of course!"

"So everything you use comes from nature. That's beautiful; you will never pollute anything with the things you use," Lahni observed.

"Well, unfortunately, not everyone does anymore. More modern methods are used by a lot of our people as well now. Acrylic paints, for instance, don't break down very well because they are made from polyethylene, which is similar to plastic and if left in nature can make a big mess! But we up here only use these traditional things!" she answered kicking the red iron oxide filled dust into the air.

"That's the red and rusty colors. Then there is ochre, a more yellowish one and when mixed with the red can make orange!" she explained, crumbling a bit of yellow clay between her fingers and mixing it with iron oxide red earth. "It's nice, isn't it? Nature provides everything for us. We also use these leaves from eucalyptus trees, the dark green ones; we grind them up and mix them into the kaolin clay to get green or just use the juicy mix to paint. There are many methods; I like painting dots with the stick a lot. We sometimes use hair, animal or human, to make thin brushes for finer work."

"Oh, you can have some of mine if you like to make some brushes with, I've got plenty!" Lahni said, smiling broadly.

"If you want some especially shiny pigments, you gotta crush some shell to get the mother of pearl. We always collect some when we spend time on the beach but it's more rare these days." Kyeema said. "There aren't as many shells around anymore 'cause too many tourists collect them to take home!"

"It seems the same everywhere, people take indiscriminately without thinking at all what impact on the environment they

have!” Lahni commented.

“People just plainly do not think about their foot print, ever; at least not many do! It’s unconsciousness, pure and simple and until people wake up to themselves, it’s never going to change!” Kyeema added.

“Sooner or later they will have to and to be fair I have met a lot of aware and awake people already so maybe we are closer to a turnaround than you might think!” Lahni suggested.

“That would be wonderful if it’s true. You can see I don’t travel much and I do not watch TV, so I’m a bit isolated out here. We do have a place back in Bamaga but we hang out in the bush a lot, especially when the kids are on holidays. I can’t see any reason why they should miss out on their traditional life. What they do later I will have no control over but right now I think I’m doing the right thing bringing them out here! The alternative isn’t really an option!” Kyeema explained.

“Why, how do the other children live?” Lahni asked.

“There’s lots missing in towns when it comes to children and teenagers, they don’t have much to do outside of school; if they even turn up to classes that is. They get up to no good with other kids who are troublemakers. Drugs, alcohol, sniffing petrol and then they steal cars and go joy-riding and such. It’s not a good scene! I’m a schoolteacher and I see it all the time. It’s a tragic thing we’re doing to our kids in this society,” Kyeema said with a sigh. “Right now, mine are still little, so I have some control but I’m not looking forward to their teenage years!”

“Sounds like staying present and doing everything you can to make sure they are connected to nature is the best thing and you are doing that!” Lahni said. “It’s great you have the opportunity to do this for them.”

On their way back to camp they collected more burned charcoal sticks, some stones of clay and ochre and a few berries of a bright red color to mix into fresh paints.

Lahni stopped all of a sudden after hearing a noise behind the bushes, when she saw a strange looking creature with long ears, a long nose and giant hind legs and tail only a few meters away.

A smaller version had come out and was now directly in front of her, sniffing her fur.

“Come back here this instant!” Lahni heard from the large one. “This is a wild dog and they are dangerous,” the voice continued. The little one didn’t listen and was now looking straight at Lahni. “She’s alright, mum. I know she won’t hurt me....” she said looking back at her mother and then right at Lahni for confirmation. “Right? You won’t, will ya?”

“Are you a kangaroo, I haven’t met any kangaroos yet. But the way you look sounds like what people have told me about you,” Lahni said.

“Yeah, that’s right, I’m a roo. And that’s my mum over there ... always scared for my safety. That’s mums for ya. What are you, then?” the little one asked.

“Well, your mother was right in that I am a dog but not a dangerous one. I’m a working dog from far off lands and I’m here visiting the local humans and animals,” Lahni answered.

“Mum, she’s a dog alright but not a dangerous one, so you can relax. Come, say hi!” the young one said to its mother. The large kangaroo hobbled over to join her offspring.

At this point Kyeema had come closer as well and both ‘roos shied away from her a little. “They eat us,” whispered the mother kangaroo to her young and to Lahni, “we should go.”

“I won’t hurt you!” said Kyeema quickly, really, it’s OK,” she said, when she realized she was talking directly to the animals like she had been to Lahni, she chuckled.

“It happens to everyone around me”, Lahni explained. “I don’t know why!” she shrugged.

“I don’t think I ever could again,” Kyeema said, “you know...eat them”, into Lahni’s ear. “I know what you mean,” Lahni agreed.

Addressing the two kangaroos again, Lahni started asking some questions about their life in the bush and how the changes in climate and such were affecting them.

“We haven’t noticed the weather being so different but we don’t find as much to eat as we used to and we don’t have as much room anymore,” the large kangaroo noted.

“I don’t really know,” said the young one, “whatever mum says. There are more people around than there used to be...that’s what I heard the others say...t’s all I know,” he added.

“And there are more of them trying to kill us!” she added, glaring at Kyeema.

“I won’t hurt you, I promise!” Kyeema reiterated.

“You are safe with her, not to worry,” Lahni reassured them.

“Yeah Mum, stop worrying!” said the little one.

They sat for a while, getting into deep discussions about everything the kangaroos knew about and everything Lahni had experienced. The two marsupials sat with their eyes wide open and their ears firmly pointed towards their new friend, taking in all they could.



“I won’t hurt you, I promise!” Kyeema reiterated.

“You are safe with her, not to worry,” Lahni reassured them.

“Yeah Mum, stop worrying!” said the little one.

They sat for a while, getting into deep discussions about everything the kangaroos knew about and everything Lahni had experienced. The two marsupials sat with their eyes wide open and their ears firmly pointed towards their new friend, taking in all they could.

Kyeema invited the ‘roos back to camp to meet her children and the rest of her mob. The mother kangaroo was reluctant at first but finally agreed to join them after a pestering from her joey. Everyone turned around upon the return of Lahni and Kyeema to the camp, paint materials in hand and two kangaroos in tow.

“You brought us dinner, great!” Pop joked.

“He’s just kidding!” said Lahni, turning around to reassure her friends. “No one is going to do anything to you,” she added to make a statement to all, “you hear me, they are my new friends. You can eat what you brought with you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mirri, “don’t get your fur in a twist, he was just kidding. We won’t hurt anyone. We brought some fresh fish in the esky and some veg ‘n’ fruit to eat. We’re good for a couple of days, ‘n’ then its back to town anyways. I don’t like killin’ big things no more,” he explained.

All the kids had already surrounded the joey, who enjoyed the attention.

That evening the entire mob including the kangaroos sat around a fire and ate together. Lahni looked around with a big smile on her face thinking that this is how the world should be.

A day later after lengthy good-byes, Mirri, his brother Rick, Pop and Lahni were on their way back to town. The ‘roos had left after dinner the previous night and the rest of the mob stayed behind to enjoy nature some more.

“What do you wanna do now, mate?” asked Mirri on the way back.

“I need to go north towards Japan next.”

“Japan, why there? I know the whales are getting hammered again, and then I been readin’ about what they do to dolphins, too. Is that it?” he asked.

“Yup, that’s why. I have to try and stop them,” Lahni said.

“Stop them? How are you on your own gonna do that? People have tried, you know; look at the Rainbow Warrior. They keep interfering but it’s still goin’ on. What can you do about it?” Mirri asked.

“Not sure but I know I’ll find a way,” she answered.

“Best to go the harbor then, maybe there’s a ship goin’ north to New Guinea or the Philippines,” Pop suggested, yawning and closing his eyes for a nap.

“Don’t worry about a ship, mate...it takes too long,” Rick said. “I know a bloke who does mining surveillance work for a big company. He’ll be up here in Bamaga in a couple of days. He grew up here. He’s got a small job on and he mentioned somethin’ about going north; not sure where, though. He sent me an email a while back askin’ me to have a beer with him when he gets here,” Rick said. “He doesn’t drive though. He’s got a small plane – a Cessna if I remember correctly. He does scouting for international mining people all over the place... could well be a good way to get up there.”

“It’d be tough drivin’ to all those little islands up there, mate!” Mirri said, teasing Rick. Rick just threw him a daggered look.

“Thanks, that would be amazing, thanks so much!” Lahni said excitedly.

“Can’t promise nothin’, mate. Let’s wait ‘til we have that beer ‘n’ then I’ll ask him. You can come to the pub ‘n’ meet’ im if you like,” Rick said.

“I was going to ask you guys at the camp site but got into the painting and then went bush with Kyeema, so I never got around to it,” Lahni began. “What do you think about the whole global warming and climate change thing?”

“I reckon it’s all BS, if you ask me, mate!” answered Rick. “I reckon it’s all been made up by some high-up bastards trying to make money on everybody, like the carbon tax. It’s all lies.”

“Not sure if that’s true mate, but I do think there’s somethin’ fishy goin’ on,” Mirri said. The weather’s been crazy lately but I reckon it was pretty stable and normal until only a short while ago, so maybe Rick’s right, maybe they are messin’ with it on purpose, I never really looked into it. Maybe your friend knows more since he’s flyin’ all the time. What do you know about it, Lahni, can ya tell us?”

“Well, I know that pollution is killing the planet and a lot of the animals, too and if people don’t wake up it will all be poisoned to the point of no return. I also know that your governments are doing very little to help and even if they send out scientists to have a look and test the environment they seem to not want to know the result. Then they pat themselves on the back about a few small areas that are set aside for protection but at the same time allow heavy industry in. Makes no sense to me. In all honesty, I have a feeling they are trying to maybe get rid of a few people and animals. I don’t know why, though!” Lahni answered.

“Conspiracy theorist then?” Rick threw in.

“No! Realist, I think! I’m just pointing out what I see and that is what I see. We have such a beautiful planet and yet humans seem to be on a clear path of destruction. The pain humans inflict on the world, the animals and each other is

mindboggling. I haven't been able to get a straight answer from anyone as to why people behave this way!" Lahni answered.

"She's talking about the recent decision to protect the Coral Sea and some parts of the Bite as well. It was the feds who decided on it but then the local government handed out all the new mining licenses and expanded Gladstone harbor for container ships carrying coal and other mined material like iron ore. She's right; it doesn't make any sense. It makes dollars, that's it!" Mirri explained.

"They are not lookin' after the interests of Aussies at all now, it's all about what big industry wants," Rick threw in.

"Have you guys ever looked up and seen the weird lines in the sky up here made by planes?" Lahni asked. "You mean contrails, yeah we've seen 'em. Why? They've been around my whole life," Rick said.

"Nah, mate, she's talkin' about chemtrails. It's when they have something other than water vapors comin' out the back and they are spraying it for a reason," Mirri said.

Lahni perked up in an instant. "You know about those?" she said.

"Yup, seen them around in Cairns sometimes and when I've been other places down south...a lot more of it goin' on there than here. I looked into what they were a bit... there's a lot on the Net about it but nothin' really conclusive. There're a couple of docos out about it. It's happening a lot in the States and it's been goin' on here but nobody looks up anymore, they're all busy lookin' down at their 'phones and computers," Mirri said.

"My mate from down south who's comin' up on the plane, he'll know somethin'...he would've seen 'em in the sky when he's flyin' for sure. We'll ask him," Rick suggested.

"Comin' back to the warming thing though, it has been getting' a bit hotter lately but I think it's just the sun gettin' stronger really. She's been pretty intense, a lot more solar flares and storms apparently. Not sure if it's a bad thing though, they seem to all be so afraid of the sun!" Mirri said. "And maybe it's just a normal thing that's happening and that's why things are melting so fast up where you come from. I'm sure we haven't helped on this planet, pe ople have been messin' things up for a long time now and you can't ever look at anything happening on this round ball in isolation. It's all connected. It's all cycles. Humans have really only one enemy and that's humans."

"That's a bit strong, isn't it, mate!" Rick answered.

"I don't think so!" said Lahni, "not in my experience. But there are a lot of good people out there who are listening as well; like your family and many I've met. It does give me the strength to keep going," she sighed.

Mirri stopped abruptly on the side of the dirt road, got out and walked over to what looked like a dead animal on the side of the road.

It was a koala. Unfortunately many were killed that way in the bush. They are slow on their feet and get hit in the night when crossing the road. Mirri turned the animal to check if she was still alive but found her not breathing and already cold. Inside her pouch though sat a little koala baby still alive and breathing and big enough to survive, he thought. He pulled the little guy out, wrapped him in the shirt he'd taken off and brought him back to the car. The koala joey was small and frightened and no doubt hungry. Mirri handed him to Lahni instructing her to sit back and to let him sit on her. "You got fur, mate and you're warm, he'll be alright for another hour or so 'til we get back. I'll call the wildlife guys and they'll pick him up to take care of him."

The little koala clasped on to Lahni instantly and settled on her chest. He seemed content to be close to a beating heart for now.

"Koalas are on the endangered list but they're still cuttin' down trees and hitting them 'cause they're careless. I've been driving in the bush for decades; never hit a thing, ever. It's pure unconsciousness. If you're connected and you pay attention you can feel it when an animal is around. You slow the bloody hell down and stop for 'em and help out where you can. Hundreds get killed that way; 'roos, koalas, possums and birds too, not to forget crocs and snakes and wild dogs. It's a shame. Makes me hot under the collar!" Mirri said.

"Koalas already have a lack of food, habitat and diseases to deal with, they don't need this on top," Rick said. "Pop told us about all the koalas that used to be in the trees when he was a kid. Then one day the government up and decided there were too many and allowed open season on 'em. In just one month more than half a million of these little guys got shot for their fur coats to make bloody hats and gloves for ladies back in England. Would you believe it! They pretty much got wiped out down south. They only had a few left that got put on Flinders Island at the time but the gene pool wasn't big enough. They are still pretty in-bred now," he added.

"Who shoots slow little Koalas, it's a disgrace that it ever happened," Mirri commented.

As soon as they pulled into the driveway at Rick and his dad's place, Pop woke up. "Have I been sleepin' this whole time, mate?" he asked, slightly disoriented. "And what's that Lahni's got there? Where'd ya find that?"

"On the road an hour back; mum got killed. Gotta call the rangers up here right now. He needs food soon otherwise he won't make it. I haven't got what he eats here," Mirri said, running into the house to charge his phone, which had lost

battery power on the way back. He plugged in the phone and made the call. Within fifteen minutes the ranger arrived with a little box and formula and blankets for the baby koala. He was still holding onto Lahni who was sitting on the porch when the ranger arrived, who looked at Lahni and her tiny passenger with much surprise on his face. She quickly nuzzled the koala to say goodbye and then looked at the ranger. "He's a strong little guy. He'll be OK, I think. Look after him, please! Good luck, my friend!" she said, now talking to the koala who looked back at her blinking slowly.

The ranger was even more surprised now and just nodded while gently taking the animal from her. Mirri had a few words with him before he left. He then turned and smiled at Lahni. "I've never seen this guy speechless, mate, you got him there!" he said, chortling.

The evening was relaxed and spent with more talking about the world.

A day later, Rick loaded up Lahni to go meet his friend Jeff who was the pilot and mining scout, at the local pub. Mirri came jumping down the stairs running after the truck. "Hey wait for me guys, I wanna come meet this guy too." "Jeff's his name, right, think I met him once a long time ago," Mirri considered.

"Yup, Jeff Sandid is his name, but we all called him Jeff Sandpit, 'cause he was already into digging when he was a kid," Rick answered. "I guess the mining job makes sense, even if it's only from above now. He used to work in the mines though, when he was younger. Got jack of it after a couple of years and trained as a pilot instead but since he already knew everybody in the mining sector he got the gig as a scouter," Rick explained.

Just as he'd finished talking about Jeff and pulled into the parking lot of the local pub, Jeff walked up to the car window making a loud sound towards Rick, startling him a bit.

"Maaaate, how's things, mate! Good to see ya. Rick turned quickly and smiled wide, getting out of the truck saying, "Jeff! How long's it been, man... three...four years?"

"About that I reckon, maybe five, even. Been around a bit since, mate. You look alright! Being up here again with ya Pop is doin' ya good, mate!" Jeff said hugging Rick with a wide stance.

"Beer anyone?" Mirri asked, coming from the other side of the truck to shake Jeff's hand. "I'm the brother, met ya before, a few years back...."

Jeff spotted Lahni who was now out on the gravel parking lot next to Mirri.

"And who is this beautiful thing?" Jeff asked, kneeling down to say hi.

"I think we'll get along just fine as long as you don't call me a 'thing' again. Beautiful is OK, just not 'thing', please!" Lahni said. He jerked up and then knelt back down again.

“What the..?” Jeff uttered. “Are you for real?” he asked with a big-eyed look on his face and eyebrows raised.

“You haven’t heard anything yet, mate! Wait ‘til she gets goin’!” Rick laughed. “I had the same reaction...!”

“So did I!” Mirri cut in.

“I need a cold one now. Come on then, young lady!” he said, smiling at Lahni.

“So, tell me, how did this all come about, mate!” Jeff asked, addressing Rick and Mirri, as they settled into a booth but before they could answer Lahni jumped onto the bench next to him.

“Let me, please, guys; it is my story after all!” And with that she spent the next half hour or so talking about her adventures until Mirri interjected with some questions about mining and the job Jeff had ahead of him. Then he said, “Rick, weren’t you gonna ask your mate a question for our friend here?”

“What’s that, mate? Does she need a lift somewhere or somethin’?” Jeff asked, somewhat jokingly. “I’ll be going to New Guinea next, then north to Guam; got a meeting there with an American mining guy who’s got interests here but he’s already up there and doesn’t wanna come south this time. Bloody lazy, I reckon but he’s paying, so I’m not complainin’,” Jeff explained.

“Well, I was gonna ask. Lahni here is on her way to Japan to save some dolphins or somethin’. We were wondering if you’d take her north with you. She’s good company, even talks a bit too much, sometimes!” Rick said, laughing loudly at his own joke. “Just kiddin’ Lahni!” he added.

“Really, dolphins in Japan? They eat them don’t they? I’m not goin’ that far but I might be persuaded to take her as far as I’m goin’ if she’s keen,” he offered, looking at Lahni.

Lahni’s tail was wagging already. “Really? Sure, I’d love to. Thanks!” she said with the biggest smile a dog could muster. “When do we leave?” she added enthusiastically.

“Not so fast, Miss, I gotta do the job I came here for first. Just a short surveying thing but it’ll only be a couple of days. You can stay with these two and I’ll come and get ya when I’m done, alright!” Jeff said.

“Now that that’s settled, lets have another drink, then,” Rick said with relief.

For two days Lahni sat patiently on the front porch waiting for Jeff. Mirri was by her side waiting with her. “You know two days don’t go by any faster if you wait for them; if you stay present, however, the day will arrive a lot faster. It’s fact!” Mirri said to her. “I’ll miss ya, mate. Been good knowing you!” he added, a bit teary.

“Who’s not staying present now, huh?” Lahni joked. “Yeah, me too, it’s been great to meet you. Without you I wouldn’t be sitting here now. But it’s not just that. It was also a wonderful trip in the truck. I am a bit nervous now; I haven’t been

up in the air since Hawaii and that was a helicopter.”

“Nah, you’ll be right mate!” Rick said, on his way through the fly screen door, which fell back and screeched a little before closing again. “Jeff’s a good pilot and besides, planes are safer than helicopters, for sure. Pop’s takin’ a nap, mate; thought I’d say my good-byes to Lahni as well. Jeff called, he said he’ll be here in an hour and a bit.”

A little over an hour had passed when Jeff turned up in a cab with his backpack and dressed casually.

“Hi guys.... Rick or Mirri, could either of you please drive us to the airport; got the plane ready but your road is too narrow to land on to pick her up, so I thought I’d catch a cab but the driver won’t take a dog; go figure!”

Mirri nodded. Jeff paid the cab and told him to leave.

Lahni was packed and ready, her tail wagging as she said goodbye to Mirri, Rick and Pop. “Mirri, thank you so, so much for taking me this far and letting me meet your friends and family. I had such an adventure and thanks so much, Rick, for getting me the lift with Jeff. I wouldn’t be here without all of you. I so loved meeting Kyeema and her children and your wise friends. I was very honored to be in their midst,” Lahni added.

“Not so formal, we’re all family here, including you, mate!” Mirri said moving in to give Lahni a last hug. “I wish you’d stay and become part of my pack but I can see that you’ve evolved past the pack thing. You gotta do what you set out to do. I’m glad you were looking for a ride with your two friends that day outside Cairns, so we could meet,” he said, still holding her close.

Then Lahni kissed Pop on the cheek and said goodbye to Rick before getting in Mirri’s truck.

Chapter 19 New Guinea, Guam and the way to Japan

At a small airport outside Bamaga Jeff and Lahni got into his Cessna 150 and took off north over the Torres Strait Islands to New Guinea. Lahni was tired from all the running around and meeting new people, so she fell asleep for the first half hour of the flight. It was a relatively short trip and Jeff had already warned her about potential turbulence.

A big rattle and shake woke her up. The sky outside had turned a dark greyish-green and wild rain was pounding the windscreen. Thunder rolled through the clouds with the occasional lightning strike to the side of them. “Sorry!” Jeff said. “Hold on, couldn’t fly around this thing; it was coming at us fast. Not much I can do but go through it. It’s nothin’ though, done it many times, not to worry. It’ll pass. They said it was a small front.”

“It’s OK, I have sea legs; it feels a little like a storm at sea,” she replied while holding on at best as she could.

Not long after, the storm passed as Jeff had promised, much to Lahni’s relief.

“That wasn’t so bad, hey!” Jeff said. “We’re landing soon, in half an hour or so. I’ve got a meeting, and if it works out, a short job here then we’re off to Guam. You can stick with me...actually I recommend it, since this place is a bit dangerous for a lone animal. But it’s up to you.”

“I’ll think about it until we get there. So far I haven’t been in much danger except falling off the Plastiki once but a whale saved me. I believe I’ll be safe anywhere I go,” Lahni said.

“This day and age that is a high attitude to have, not many feel that way but when I think about it, I’ve always been safe too,” Jeff said. “I’ve been in some hairy situations but always got through them unscathed. Lucky, maybe but somehow I always just follow my intuition and it works out,” he said in a contemplative way as if he hadn’t ever considered it before.

“That’s all I do; listen to my gut!” Lahni said. “That is what brought me here.”

“True! Tell me again what this is all about. I mean, this whole trip is about saving the world? Rick mentioned it and frankly by the time you told me some of this in the pub the other day I’d already had a beer or two and can’t remember all the details.”

“Well, I’m not sure if I can save it...not anymore. And after all I’ve heard and seen I’m also not sure if it’s only what people are doing that’s causing climate change, at least not all of it. I actually think there is something bigger going on now. Not that people are helping the situation, though. Some say the sun is changing, getting stronger and more flares and solar radiation are hitting us and cosmic rays, which I don’t really understand fully, are also influencing the earth’s climate. However, I still think that a lot of things humans are doing are having a negative effect on the environment and animals,” Lahni explained.

“Wow, I had no idea you were so clued in as to what’s going on. You know, I’ve been thinking about this as well lately. Apart from all the weird stuff going on out there, like spraying the sky with chemistry for whatever strange and sick reasons; bankers taking over the world; aliens creating us and other stories floating around on the internet and the news, I think a lot of us are waking up and changing things with our actions, what we say to each other and what we choose to consume and of course what we produce ourselves. On this planet most decisions in the past 150 years have been based on the erroneous idea of money and what it does for people. There are many that would like to see this place destroyed and all for making a few extra dollars. Or maybe they simply don’t care because they have no emotional connection to their environment... I think things are turning around though. I see change everywhere I go. I’m actually on my last flight for the mining industry as well. Have to do something different; I can’t support what they are doing any more. I guess I’ve woken up,” Jeff answered.

“All this money isn’t going to clean up anything though, not unless they start using it that way, look at the ocean and all the plastic in it. It’s not cleanable anymore. What is being done about that?” Lahni added.

“I hope that’s not true, Lahni, I have many friends who are working on solutions and many who invent new things. So I put my money on those who put their heads together to come up with real life solutions and ways to make the world better. For instance: I’ve been offered to go in on a business in South Australia with a bunch of old mates. Growing food in the desert no less! It’s amazing really; they came up with a way to grow all kinds of vegetables using solar power and seawater that’s desalinated to feed thousands of people. You see, there are better ways of doing things already here. We all need to look at those more. There are people who help clean up the ocean and beaches in over 100 countries now.”

“I know. I was in Sydney for Clean up Australia day, we cleaned up Bondi Beach. I’m just worried that it’s too late,” Lahni sighed.

“It’s never too late. Most of us only make small ripples of change in their lives but look what you’ve already done and how you’ve been connecting people and animals. I’m still in awe about you talking to whales and people for that matter. In fact I’m in complete awe sitting here flying you around and having this very conversation,” he continued. “You have done so much. I’m a glass half full kind of a guy and I think you have overfilled yours already. You have to get a bigger glass, so to speak... we’re here mate, about to land. See the airstrip down there? Hold on, it may be bumpy!” he said, getting back to his controls to land the plane safely.

A few minutes later they touched down in a tiny rural town in New Guinea. The place was lush and green but also poor looking, with only a few people around. Lahni looked around and decided it was best to stay by Jeff’s side for now.

“We won’t be long here anyway, mate. We’ll be off after lunch. I wouldn’t want to come search for you if you got lost,

eh! The meeting is at a house down a track over there, there should be a car waiting for us...hmm, wonder where they are?"

Just as he'd finished talking, an old army Jeep flew around the bend on the dirt track and came to a stop in front of them throwing a bunch of mud their way. "Sorry, took the corner too fast 'cause I was running late. Sorry, really, I am," the young man said still breathing heavily from the excitement.

"No worries, we're on island time now," Jeff said, throwing his gear in the back and instructing Lahni to get in. The terrain got rougher once they'd passed the first turn out of the airport. The young driver stopped by a gate, jumped out to open it and then repeated the action on the other side. "Sorry, no electric anything out here."

"He sure does apologize a lot," Lahni said with a chuckle. The young man looked at her in the rearview mirror with a big question mark on his face. Lahni said nothing and just looked back at him with an almost smile. He frowned but remained quiet. She stayed behind in the car as Jeff went into the house for the meeting. It was a shack in the middle of nowhere, built mostly from corrugated iron, with lots of rust on the edges from the high humidity. But the number of fancy cars parked outside gave an indication of the big business deals going on inside.

Lahni had just settled down on the backseat for a snooze when she heard the door of the house slam shut and footsteps coming towards her just a few minutes after Jeff had gone inside. The car door opened, Jeff hopped back in and signaled the young driver who had been sitting on a log smoking a cigarette to get in and get going.

"Back to the airstrip, now, please! Get us out of here!" Jeff said, seemingly very angry at something. "I can't believe I flew all the way up here for this. It's high time I got out of this business; these people are not trustworthy human beings!"

"That bad?" asked Lahni.

"I'll tell you all about it when we're back in the air, mate," he said, shaking his head in disgust. The driver remained quiet and drove to the airstrip as fast as he could.

After a thank you to the young man, Jeff quickly topped off his gas tanks, ran his pre-flight checklist and made sure the runway was clear. The weather had calmed down but all the rain from the earlier storm had made the dirt wet and sticky.

"Get in, we'll take our chances, if we keep to the edges we'll be alright. There is a bit more solid stuff there," he said, telling Lahni to take her seat. She obliged while being strapped into her seatbelt.

After a bumpy take off, Lahni asked Jeff about the meeting. "So tell me, what happened down there?"

"These guys think I'm stupid. They seriously wanted me to go deep into the jungle and rip off indigenous people, who are sitting on billions of dollars of gold, which hasn't been tapped into yet because it's their land and Westerners need permission to go there. Do you believe it? Those bastards made up some story about me going there to make some

documentary to scout out the situation without telling these poor people that they intend to take their land without really asking. I don't really know what'll happen now but I'll be writing to the minister of mining and resources to stop this. It's outrageous! I mean, people need certain resources to live the way we do but pushing people off their land...well, I draw the line there! It's probably gonna happen with or without me sooner or later but I won't be part of it. Greenhouses and veggies... that'll be me next." Jeff fell quiet, but Lahni could tell he was doing some serious thinking and she looked out the window at the passing landscape to give him time to mull it over.

After a few minutes of silence Jeff started talking again. "You know what...come to think of it, we're gonna make this very simple. I do have to go to this next meeting in Guam, since the Yank is already waiting there and I can't call him to cancel. I'll be declining the job, though and I'll be telling him that I'm out of mining altogether. It's really time for me to make a choice and get off the fence all the way," Jeff added.

"Really? Isn't that a little drastic and sudden?" Lahni asked.

"Nah, I changed my mind a long while back but didn't know how to get out. Now's the right time, I can feel it. In fact, what I'm about to suggest to you will make you very happy," he said looking right at Lahni. "How about I fly you to Japan and help you get to this dolphin murderer town... what's it called? Taiji? Or at least as close as we can fly and then some...I'll even help you with your mission. I might as well start with something really useful with my newfound freedom," he said, almost giggling.

He then turned to her and said. "Let's save some dolphins then, huh? I'm already excited!"

Lahni was speechless for the first time in a long time; instead she did what any dog would do next to a happy, enthusiastic human. She leaned into him, kissed him on the cheek and wagged her bushy tail as furiously as physically possible, within the confines of her seatbelt. Jeff laughed out loud and leaned over to get something out of his briefcase below Lahni's seat. "Here, have a look at this!" he said, handing her a booklet about Guam. Lahni took it with her mouth and then just sat there looking at him, head tilted a little and eyebrows raised; the book still in her mouth and her paw held up.

"Oh", he said, "sorry, I keep forgetting that you probably can't read our language nor do you have hands to turn the pages with...hold on I'll put this thing on auto pilot and then I'll tell you all about it."

He went on to read bits from the brochure to her. "Guam, a small island in the western South Pacific had been an American Army base since the Second World War after the Japanese had taken the island from the U.S. in an invasion in 1941."

He went on to explain, that the Spanish, who had conquered Guam and declared it theirs in 1585, ceded the island to the U.S. in 1898 as a by-product of the Spanish-American War and that Guam is to this day an American outpost and military

base as well as a favorite Japanese tourist destination due to its proximity to Japan and that some people even call it a Japanese theme park because of how they have treated the place.

“We should stay a day or so, if you’re not in a hurry, that is? I already have a hotel reservation this mining guy paid for. Come to think of it, I’ll probably have to pick up the tab now that I’ll be saying no to him. Anyway, it’s an interesting place given its history; there is all the old architecture the Spanish built and of course the modern American pop culture and fast food but also a very beautiful indigenous culture that people are trying very hard to preserve,” Jeff explained.

The hotel resort was a quaint and comfortable Spanish style building with yellow and gray striped awnings with geraniums gracing the windowsills. A Bougainvillea vine was climbing its way up the side of the house onto the small south facing balconies. The whole place smelled like a bouquet of tropical flowers. Lahni’s nose was independently busy taking in all the different nuances of fragrance while she was inspecting the site.



She couldn't quite contain her excitement at the prospect of staying there and having a look around the village since it reminded her of her time in Hawaii and even New Zealand with cultures that seemed alike, at least on the surface, apart from the fact that she had scored the biggest offer yet. To be flown all the way to Japan by this lovely human was much more than she could have ever expected from anyone.

After settling into their room, Jeff left immediately for his meeting with the American mining man he was here to see. Lahni decided to go for a walk around the little neighborhood to get acquainted with her new surroundings. She again stopped near the entrance to sniff the Bougainvillea that was hugging the building but this time to get closer to it she stood on her hind legs and stretched up as far as she could.

"It's lovely, isn't it! It's called 'Puti Tai Nobio' in these parts and it's our national flower. Would you like some for your room?" a young woman in a flowing skirt and colorful flowers in her hair asked Lahni, not waiting for an answer for obvious reasons. Instead she started cutting small strands off the vine, placing them in a basket. "You are with the Australian gentleman, aren't you?" she asked, petting Lahni gently. "Come, I'll give you a tour if you like," she said with a smile, trying to guide her to come along for a walk.

"It's OK, I can understand what you are saying and yes, I'd love a tour. You can maybe tell me about your culture and this land," Lahni said, smiling at her companion who seemed unperturbed by the situation and just kept walking and talking.

"It's a long history to tell. Do you have time?" she asked quietly.

"Sure, I have time. How long do you need to tell it? We'll be leaving day after tomorrow if I remember correctly. My friend Jeff is in a meeting but I am sure he would love to hear this as well," Lahni explained.

"In that case, I'm done here with my shift at three o'clock. How about you meet me at Pika's, a café on the other side of the airport on Marine Corp Drive at 3:30 p.m.? I live close to it. You can meet some of my friends as well," she suggested.

"I'm Ina, by the way. And you are?" she asked.

"My name is Lahni. It's nice to meet you. Thanks for the invitation. I'll have to wait for Jeff to return and then ask him if he wants to come; if not, I'll try to come on my own," Lahni said, while sniffing at more flowering trees.

"You know, I'll check in with you before I leave when I sign off work this afternoon. If he won't come and you don't have a ride I'll just take you with me!" Ina said with a big smile.

They had come to a stop in front of the main entrance after walking through the compound of the hotel. Lahni yawned involuntarily.



“Sooooorry, I’m so tired right now. Long trip, I guess. I may go a take a nap in our room. Could you help me with the door please,” she asked Ina, who took her to the room.

“I’ll knock just after three, alright? See you then, sleep well.”

“Thanks!” Came out of Lahni’s mouth barely audibly.

She had already reclined on the floor rug to rest and was almost asleep before Ina had closed the door behind her.

Jeff returned shortly after and fell into bed without Lahni even noticing.

As promised at three in the afternoon Ina knocked on the door to see if Lahni was coming by herself.

“Hey Lahni, are you there?” she asked, gently trying to open the door. It was locked. Jeff startled awake and jumped up to get to the door. “Who’s there?” he asked in a rather rough voice. Lahni woke up in an instant.

“Jeff, it’s Ina, she’s picking me up!”

He opened the door while looking at Lahni. “Who’s Ina?” he asked and then saw her standing at the door, beautiful and smiling from ear to ear. She was a mixture of Chamorro and Spanish, with long black hair past her shoulders and large brown, very kind eyes.

“Ina,” he said, immediately softening his tone while stretching his hand out to say hello. “I’m Jeff, Lahni’s friend and pilot! And who might you be and where might you be taking my companion?”

“Lahni didn’t tell you? I am picking her up and you if you’d like to come to meet some friends at Pika’s for afternoon tea and a chat about the island and its history,” Ina explained.

“Sorry, I was asleep until now and didn’t hear you come in at all, Jeff,” Lahni apologized.

“We were both sleeping until now it seems,” Jeff said. “She must’ve been very tired not to hear me come in!” he said to Ina while shrugging his shoulders. “Does the invitation still stand?”

Ina lifted her arm showing Jeff her helmet! “I only have a Vespa and I was going to put Lahni in the front, holding her. Sadly, I can’t take both of you.”

“No problem. We can all go together; I rented a Jeep. You can go ahead and we’ll follow you for directions!” Jeff said with excitement. “I’m a free man as of this afternoon; I can do as I please!” he said while leading the way to the car. Lahni just looked at him in admiration.

A very short drive later they walked into Pika’s Café to a table in the corner occupied by three other people.

“I invited some good friends if you don’t mind,” Ina said, beginning introductions. “Jeff and Lahni, meet Juan, Petra and Émil. We are all locals and all from different backgrounds, very eclectic. But we love each other and I thought it would be nice to get different stories and perspectives for you,” she explained. “Juan is of Spanish decent but his great, great, great Grandfather was the one who came here, so he’s very much a local even though he keeps apologizing for the Spanish invasion which happened in 1585. I’m sure he’ll tell you.”

Juan nodded and laughed at the introduction.

“Petra is American, ex-Navy; she fell in love while living on the base here with a local Chamorro man who was contracting for them and stayed after her service was done. She is always saying sorry for the US government,” Ina explained.

“Don’t get me started!” Petra interrupted.

“And last but not least, Emil is half Filipino, half French, he never apologizes for anything!” she announced with huge laugh.

“Haha,” answered Emil, “It’s not my fault the French are arrogant bastards. Besides, I’ve never hurt anyone. Why should I feel sorry?”

“Just kidding, you know that,” Ina said to Emil. “So, now you’ve met my friends. Jeff here I know nothing about yet. We just met, I only heard that he’s Australian and was a mining scout until this afternoon and he’s Lahni’s pilot. Lahni’s story is too big to tell. I’ll let her synopsise it for you. You will hardly believe it,” Ina added.

“Drink anyone, snacks?” Juan asked. “Since this might take a while!”

Lahni told her story briefly while everyone around her listened with intent and awe on their faces. She kept the account of her travel fairly short as Ina had announced.

“Wow, I don’t think anyone can compete with this Lahni. Thanks for filling us in. You are quite the spirit to embark on such a mission. I hope we can be of service to you in some way?” Juan said, to start the conversation.

“Thank you Juan, but enough about me,” Lahni said, “I want to know about your culture and backgrounds and also the problems you might be having environmentally and socially on this island! And of course what’s being done to change them.”

“Who wants to start?”, Juan asked, looking around the table. “No one? ... I will, then. As Ina already told you I’m from

a Spanish background, at least as Spanish as you can be when you've been here 5 generations or more already," he said, pondering the thought for a minute. "I'm sure there was some hanky-panky with the natives somewhere along the way," he added, laughing out loud. "Anyway, my great, great, great grandfather married a Spanish maid who was here working for a fine gentleman who was a landowner and kind of a slave driver, really. But to my knowledge my family treated the locals with respect, I mean as much as you can, given that they were on the ruling side of the equation. It's always easy to say, I suppose but I'm not sure if any of them ever asked the natives if they enjoyed having their island taken from them and being governed by the Spanish Crown first and then by the Yanks and then the Japanese and then the Americans again...hmmm. Now I'm ranting," Juan said, shrugging his shoulders. "These days, we're all supposed to be one big melting pot and we kind of are when it comes to us here and many other groups of friends you see around the island but the indigenous population is getting their act together to be stronger again, to preserve their language and traditions. I do feel more like an islander these days, since I also live more in the traditional way and mix with the Chamorro culture a lot. My grandparents are gone; my parents went back to Spain a while ago, maybe for good; so, after 170 years or so of my family here I'm the only one left except a couple of cousins. I do feel at home here though...wow, I'm still ranting. Sorry guys, I haven't talked about this stuff for years, let alone thought about it," Juan said, trying to give the floor to the next person.

"What do you spend your days doing here, Juan?" Lahni asked.

"Oh, I'm an engineer. I work for the water supply company, Guam Waterworks. At the moment we're trying to figure out how to accommodate thousands of extra U.S. soldiers who are coming to be stationed on the base here with their families and also deal with all the development that comes with it. Then there is the growing number of tourists who have to have fresh water and the hotels and resorts that spring up everywhere to house them. It's a huge task on a small island with limited water resources. So far the U.S. military is the biggest user of resources and the increase of troops will make the disparity of usage even bigger. The locals already have a lesser standard of living compared to them. It's not a sustainable situation, to say the least. We aren't happy about it," Juan explained.

"Tell me about it!" Petra threw in. "That's my biggest pet peeve! Sometimes, I can't believe that I was part of the problem when I was with the Navy. They don't seem to care about anyone else but their own agenda," she said, sighing heavily. "Not sure if it'll ever change. I hope it will though, given the massive issues it's causing. The sewage alone!" Petra said.

"What do you mean by sewage?" Lahni asked.

"I mean all the refuse, you know— from the toilets the military uses," Petra explained.

"Poo?" Lahni asked.

“Yes, poo!” Petra answered. Everyone laughed a little.

“I know everyone thinks poo is a laughing matter and maybe it is when you’re 12 years old but in this case it isn’t. The treatment plants we have can’t handle all of it and it goes straight out into the ocean causing all kinds of problems for the ecosystem. We are currently working... well, trying to, with the Navy to assess their DEIS, or Draft Environmental Impact Study they sent preceding the influx of troops. The EPA is on our backs already saying that our water treatment plant is running inefficiently and can’t cope with the load of you know what! There have been a few spills of raw sewage into the ocean recently when too much rain overflowed the plant. We are well below standards when it comes to safe drinking water on Guam. This whole troop expansion thing is a huge headache for us!” Juan explained.

“What about the reef, the beautiful coral reef we have outside the harbor?” Ina asked rhetorically. “They are going to expand the wharf for huge aircraft carriers to come in which means dredging the reef and killing more than 70% of it.”

“Yeah, I heard about that too,” Petra said. “As I mentioned, they don’t care. I think they said that they may reduce the number of troops from 8000 down to 5000 but I think there are already too many here, so that is not going to help. The other issue with this whole thing is that they’ll be importing construction workers for the duration of the expansion of the harbor and bases, which means thousands of extra people who are going to need water but because they aren’t military they put it to Guam Waterworks to deal with the supply, which is impossible at the moment. We are already stretched to the limit.”

“Shouldn’t they at least be paying for all this if they want and need it?” Jeff asked.

“Good point and that is where the entire thing is sitting right now. A solution has not been found. But the soldiers are already arriving from Japan. They just had the same happen on Okinawa, the Japanese island that has had U.S. troops on it in large numbers since the end of World War II. The locals don’t want them and they had recently been promised a downsizing of troops but the opposite happened,” Petra explained. “I still have friends who are stationed there and here in the Navy; I get updates from them all the time. Of course, it’s not classified, you can get all this on the Internet as well. It’s just that I like my information as direct as possible.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what are all those soldiers for? Is there a war in this area that I don’t know about?” Lahni asked.

“Another excellent point, Lahni,” Petra answered. No wars yet but plenty of tension and paranoia with China, Taiwan and the Koreas. It’s been there for a long time; the tension, I mean. After World War II the U.S. started policing the entire planet and by now they have military bases in 150 countries. I don’t really know how they afford it?”

“They don’t, by the looks of their economy!” Jeff commented, with a half chuckle.

“My grandfather was in the French Foreign Legion in the last big war in Europe,” Émil began. “He fought side by side with the Americans against the bad guys. Then, it was a good thing that the Yanks interfered but now it’s all gone too far. Even my grand-père would agree with that statement now. He passed away only a year ago; he was 94. He was always talking about the war and how useless it was. A waste of life and money, he called it. I think the problem with military when it gets really out of hand big, like in this case, it becomes an entity of its own and very self serving.”

“I just hope that one day the people of this earth can come together and have a conversation like we are instead of fighting and bombing each other. I really do hope so. I’m honestly embarrassed that I was part of all this but I guess you can only know what you know at any given time in your development, right?” Petra sighed.

“At least you woke up!” Ina pointed out.

“And you now spend your time doing something about it,” Juan added.

“Frankly, I believe the only thing that will change how this world is run is love and forgiveness and that is the truth!” Lahni said. “Without those two ingredients any kind of peace won’t last and any solution is half finished. When people wake up they realize what’s important and those two things are always part of the realization. I’ve seen it so many times now,” she added.

“Funny you should say that, our culture is based on those things,” Ina replied. “But let me start with the basics. In Chamorro culture the land belongs to everyone. We like to share but it has to be balanced and equal. We have a word for it. Inafa’maolek, which means interdependence, which in turn depends on the cooperation of all. It’s at the heart of every interaction for us. We are concerned with everyone’s happiness and welfare rather than ownership, land rights and such,” Ina explained.

“Well, that doesn’t work when another culture sends their military in. At first for a good cause—to save us from the Japanese invasion but now...” Juan interrupted.

“I know, Juan, it’s blatantly obvious to all of us but that’s not what I’m trying to tell Lahni about. I’m attempting to capture, in not too lengthy a way, the basis of our way of living; occupations, current issues and politics aside. Inafa’maolek is about sharing and caring and accepting one another with an open heart and mind. If we lose that because of what is happening here, we will have truly lost. I see the solution to all our problems in this very way of being! Getting on the barricades and complaining and activism against our perceived enemies only goes so far. If we hold ourselves together with this glue of compassion and caring we will have more strength to turn things around, don’t you think?” Ina said, addressing Juan.

“I tend to agree!” Petra proclaimed.

“I do too!” said Émil, “You can’t fight fire with fire without burning everything down!”

“This all sounds very similar to what the Hawaiians have with Aloha and Ho’oponopono!” Lahni suggested.

“It is very similar! I am very familiar with their culture as well and it is similar, you are quite right, Lahni!” Ina answered.

“We have a ceremony where we ‘atone for our sins’, for lack of a better phrase,” Juan added. “I guess that snuck in via all the Spanish Catholic indoctrination over the years. It’s an ancient ritual in a way to ask for forgiveness from our ancestors. But it’s also about appeasing all the poor lost souls of our ancestors who were killed by these invasions many times in a very violent way. To this day no Chamorro man, woman or child will venture into the forest alone without first asking the ancient ones for permission especially during sun up or sundown and at night. They can get really nasty I hear,” he proclaimed.

“I take it that means you don’t go into the forest ever, since this is hearsay?” Petra laughed. “Scared of some ghosts?”

“Don’t make fun of that Petra. You didn’t grow up with these beliefs. It’s very ingrained for people like Juan and me and frankly it’s kind of true or at least in my experience it has been. I had some freaky stuff happening to me as a kid when I ventured into the jungle with friends early in the morning one Sunday,” Ina explained.

“Like what?” asked Lahni.

“Well, it was really hot early that day...I was eleven years old and my friends insisted on testing the spirits in the woods behind our house. I reluctantly agreed to go because my mother had always warned me to stay away from there. I figured I wasn’t alone so it would be safe. However, I didn’t count on my stupid friends disrespecting whoever is in there. They carried on, hitting trees with sticks, yelling loudly...most likely because they were scared. They were laughing and saying nasty things to the spirits. At first nothing happened and then all of a sudden we heard footsteps behind us but didn’t see anyone, then they shifted to the side and then to the front. It was as if we were surrounded but we couldn’t see anyone. I started feeling my skin crawl and I had goose bumps all over me. All I wanted to do was leave. I felt myself backing up and then one of the boys tripped badly and split his knee wide open, which was strange because there was nothing to trip over, no logs or stones, just soft mossy ground to walk on. He was bleeding badly. I think he was toppled by one of the spirits because of his behavior. We all got so scared and started running back to my house and never talked about it again. We told my mother that he fell off his bike. She treated his wound and sent him home but I think she knew something ‘cause she looked at me with that look that she had on her face when I did something wrong but didn’t want to admit it. It didn’t seem like much happened that day but it didn’t stop there. The kid who got injured that day kept on getting hurt on the same leg for a long time. He had a scooter accident, then a motorcycle accident where he broke his leg and so on. It

didn't stop until he was told to go back into the forest by a medicine man. He had to go where it happened the first time and ask for forgiveness. It's weird but true," Ina asserted.

"That would be the Taotaomona!" Émil explained. "They are also called the living ancestral spirits of Guahan, which is the old name of Guam. Also referred to as the people before recorded time. The Spanish–Chamorro war from 1671 to 1695 wiped out most of the local population. Thousands died from communicable diseases their conquerors brought with them," Émil added. "My grandfather used to tell me stories. But he also knew about all this from local friends. He told me to always ask permission before going into the forest but to also never be scared, to stand up straight and speak with a good and strong voice when addressing them... the spirits that is. He said that they didn't like anyone weak and scared and that they would respect and protect me if I showed them my strength and respect for them. I believed him and I always felt safe on my way around here. I spent a lot of time in the jungle as a kid on my own."

"There is a plaque in the woods honoring the ancient ones, you know, the one at Tomhum! I've been there but can't remember what it says," Petra added.

"I know it, I think I remember..." Émil said, clearing his throat. "Here lie the remains of Chamorus from times past, ancestors who have bequeathed life and spirit to those who have followed them. We carry that spirit within us now, and into the future. At this place let us remember those who were before, honor their remains and resolve to honor their spirit by our action now and through the challenges of our future... something like that anyway. I hope I got it right."

"You almost got it right. A word here and there is different," said Ina. "I know it in our language...Este na mangaige i tataotao i Guelota yan Guelata siha ni' muna'i hit ni' lana'la' yan espiritu para i manatatatte na tataogue. Ta katga i espiriton-niha gi ya hita pa'go yan i Manmamailai' na tiempo. Nihi ta onra guine na lugat i espiriton-niha ginen i che'cho'ta pa'gu yan para todú i tiempo."

"Can we go into the jungle and do one of those forgiveness rituals today? Please?" Lahni asked Ina.

"Do we have time?" Lahni asked Jeff before Ina could answer.

"Sure we do. It's already dark outside though, is this a good idea at night?" Jeff asked Ina.

"Well, I can't see why not. If you want to talk to the wolf you have to go and talk to him when he's awake," she answered. "Anyone else interested?"

"I'll come!" Émil said. "Me too!" said Petra.

"Pass..." said Huan, "Sorry, not my favorite thing to do but I also have some work on, so I couldn't even if I wanted to. As a matter of fact I have to be on my way right now. Drinks and cake are on me guys. It was lovely meeting you Jeff and of course, you Lahni as well. It's not every day of the week I meet a Siberian dog for afternoon tea and conversation," he

said laughing, giving Lahni a kiss on the forehead. After shaking Jeff's hand and kissing his friends good-bye he left for his work commitments.

"Thanks for picking up the tab, we'll get you next time. Love you!" Ina called out after him. He looked back one more time with a smile before getting into his car.

"Well, let's go, I think we should all follow Émil since he knows where this plaque is, if that's where you had in mind to go," Petra suggested. "It's been a while for me, not sure if I'd find it in the dark.

"Sure, that is a brilliant idea. Follow me. I'm in the old white VW campervan. I'll drive slowly so Ina can follow on her Vespa and you guys in the rental," he answered.

20 minutes later they found themselves under the before quoted inscription to the ancestors. It was pitch dark and a bit cool. The wind was howling through the trees in an unusual way. With only a small flash light Émil had brought with him they could barely see each other standing close. He tilted the light up under his face creating a scary look, making silly noises to lighten the mood when Ina interrupted him.

"Stop that, you should know better than to make fun. We're not at school camp. This is serious. Hold hands everyone! We'll have to ask permission first to be here, so I'll do that for all of us now and then we'll go around the circle and everyone can say what they want to say and ask for atonement!" Ina suggested. "Guella yan Guello, dispensa ham lão Kảo siña ham manmaloffan yan manmanbisita gi tano miyu sa' yanggen un bisita i tano'mả mi faloffan-ha' sin un famaisin...now in English for you guys! Grandmother and grandfather, excuse us. May we walk through and visit your land and when you come to our land we will welcome you to do the same," Ina said loudly and with a clear and smooth voice into the night.

Afterwards all they could hear was a soft wind in the trees and the nightly concert of the nocturnal creatures of the jungle. Émil pointed the small light onto the plaque to read it again but then turned the light off since it seemed the spirits had granted their wish. The surrounding area seemed more lit all of a sudden. "Let's let everyone say something then. I think they heard us and are OK with us being here," he suggested.

"Thanks Lahni!" Petra said stroking her coat.

"What for?" Lahni asked. "For getting us here to do this, I need to ask for forgiveness for my people and the mess they make. I don't think the Navy has ever asked for permission to come here, at least not after the initial war with the Japanese. They sort of came as protectors but now..."

"You need to forgive yourself as well, Petra!" Ina said, interrupting her friend. "You can't expect atonement from only

one end. You have to let go of your anger towards your tribe in order for them to change. It always starts with whatever is going on within you. If you have a problem with something, it's your responsibility to shift it, no matter who started it. If you are the only awake person in your lot then the burden is on you. So I suggest you start right here."

"You know, I never thought of it that way. Thanks Ina, I will take the opportunity to do that now," Petra answered. "I have been really angry at them for too long and at myself for being part of it. It's time to let it go."

Lahni was already sitting by the bushes talking to the spirits. It only took a minute until she felt done. "I'm good!" she said, sitting down next to Petra. "You look like you could use some help! Don't be sad about what happened in your life... be happy where it brought you. All paths are good ones, as long as you wake up along the way and you haven't hurt too many creatures including yourself to make amends with!" Lahni said, leaning into Petra's legs, who was standing facing the plaque and not sure where to start.

"She's right you know, it doesn't matter where you've been but you have to forgive yourself and the people who are still where you were a couple of years ago. You were so young and innocent when you joined up," Ina said putting her hand on Petra's back.

Just then a wind came up as if to say, give it all to me, I'll take it away. Petra started crying, then fell to her knees and started praying.

"You don't have to go to your knees to appease the spirits here, Petra. They want you to be strong and they want you to be OK with your choices and they want you to change from strength rather than regret. So get up, hold your head high and forgive yourself. You've always done your best and so do most people," Ina said, lifting her friend up off the ground.

"Stand up for what you are now!"

"Forgiveness heals all, regret just keeps you stuck in the past," Lahni said.

"How'd you get so wise?" Petra said, laughing under her tears.

Émil came out of the woods where he'd been sitting and talking to the spirits on his own. "I'm done if you are...oh what's wrong?" he asked, noticing the big tears rolling down Petra's face. "Regret, is it? Regret is like old bread, my friend. You have to make something really tasty out of it like bread and butter pudding to make it worthwhile. On it's own it's tasteless!" he said smiling at her.

"Only the French would talk about food right now!" Petra said, laughing. "You always make me laugh no matter how I feel, you know."

"I'm hungry all of a sudden!" added Lahni. They all laughed and hugged each other.

"We ask that all is forgiven and we forgive all!" Ina said out loud. Petra repeated it a few times getting louder every time.

The last time was so loud that the forest got quiet for a moment.

“See, even all the animals are listening,” Lahni said. “How about some dinner now?”

“Where’s Jeff by the way,” Ina asked. “I haven’t seen him since we got here,” she said, looking around. Searching around with the flash light Émil spotted him in a tree high up in the canopy sitting on a branch. He winked at them and then climbed down the trunk so fast they could hardly believe it. “Had some business to take care of up there!” he said with another wink.

Petra looked at him with a question mark on her face and Émil chuckled at the comment.

“I hate to ask,” Ina said. “But now I’m so curious. Will you tell us what you mean by that?”

“Oh, of course, there was a spirit in that big tree I needed to talk to, so he invited me up. I’m not that good at climbing usually, not in the dark anyway but this felt easy... I just followed his voice up and all of a sudden I was sitting on the next to the last branch dangling my feet. I said what I had to say and then you lit my way back down. I just followed instructions,” Jeff said in wonder.

“Fascinating!” Émil said. “It is a magic forest, I’ve known that since I was a small child.”

“Can we go get some food now?” Lahni asked.

Later that evening Lahni and Jeff returned to the hotel tired and content with their day. Dinner had been a pleasant affair and after lengthy hugs and good-byes with Ina, Petra and Émil, the two drove the short distance to their accommodation with Jeff almost falling asleep at the wheel.

They said a quick good night before a long and deep rest.

Lahni was up early and had just returned from a morning stroll when Jeff woke up. “Ah, man I had no idea I was this tired!” he said, stretching his long limbs and yawning wide. “What time is it? I was wondering what you want to do next? Are we ready to go on?” he asked.

“To Japan? Yes, I think so.”

Only a couple of hours later they took off due north toward Japan. Lahni was nervous thinking about the task ahead. She had heard many stories from the professor, David on the *Plastiki* and the Sea Shepard’s Captain Watson about the plight of the dolphins in this small but very populated country. The Japanese were a stubborn and stoic people, Watson had said. They don’t like to be told what to do by anyone. And even a violent history had taught them nothing much, the professor had told her. They love their fish and whale and dolphin despite the fact that it was unhealthy to eat with all the pollution and heavy metals like mercury, which accumulate in their bodies during their long lives, as the chef on the *Aurora* had pointed out.

“I wonder why the Japanese insist on killing these beautiful animals for food when in fact they are not healthy to eat?” Lahni pondered out loud.

“Money, my dear Lahni, nothing but cash!” Jeff said in response. “You have to look at what the actual practice is, they only eat the ones they can’t sell as live animals to aquariums and marine parks, you know the ones that end up in captivity for life to entertain people. It’s nasty stuff, that. I could never understand how you can take a wild animal and force it to perform tricks for the amusement of children. It makes millions of dollars for them though. Eating the rest of them is just a bad habit. They could just let them go as well.”

“Captain Watson told me that this practice isn’t really a long tradition at all. It apparently only started in the 1960s, so they can’t claim tribal tradition here,” Lahni added. “I hope we can stop this somehow,” she sighed.

The tiny landing strip outside Taiji was almost deserted. The small building next to the runway with a small tower and radar on top seemed empty as well, until a small figure emerged from the door below the tower. A man dressed in a blue uniform was walking along the side of the plane towards them. Lahni had decided that hiding from customs was the best option here so as not to attract too much attention. Jeff had a status that allowed him in practically anywhere, so he would be OK. She hid on the plane in a rather tight secret compartment that Jeff had installed to keep his valuables in, depending on the country he was flying to.

The customs official was a small man, even by Japanese standards. He was very short, pale and with jet-black hair tightly cropped. He spoke no English but Jeff knew enough Japanese to say yes or no in the right places to the man’s lengthy questionnaire. Lahni could only hear the odd word. An hour later she climbed out of her hiding place and onto the front seat and stretched her limbs out. “That took forever, man. I thought he’d never leave. He sounded very unpleasant.”

“I know, I thought so too. But it’s all clear now. I think he was a bit freaked out by a big, tall aboriginal man with a diplomatic passport. Not sure if he quite knew what to do with that. We do have to be careful though. I just have a feeling. Let’s find some accommodation and food first though and then we can plot out our mission,” Jeff suggested.

“Good idea. By the way I just wanted to say thanks again for all this. I am incredibly grateful to you, I hope you know that,” Lahni said, moving in to give Jeff a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank me when this is over. Wish us luck,” he winked. He packed his gear out of the little cargo hold and opened an empty duffle bag. “I think you should get in here for a little while. I have a feeling that the fella who inspected us was a bit suspicious and is waiting for me at the exit in his car. Just a feeling but I think we should listen to it,” Jeff suggested. Lahni jumped in and curled up as small as possible.

“You are right to listen to that, intuition has been my strongest guide on my journey. I have always listened to it,” Lahni said before he closed the bag leaving just a little opening in the middle for air. He placed a shirt over the top to hide the bit of her coat peeking through. The road wasn’t busy just yet. It was very early in the morning. A few people peddled their bikes towards town. A low fog hung about ready to be devoured by the rising sun. The airstrip was so small that a car rental wasn’t part of the services here, so they had to walk a few miles into town to get anything.

“Not sure if we need a car, really!” Jeff said when he saw a rusty old bicycle with a basket on the front lying in a ditch. He inspected it and decided it looked fit enough to at least give it a try. Since he wasn’t sure if it belonged to anyone, he had a good look around first, to make sure no one was watching. He then placed his gear and the bag with Lahni in it onto the basket and took off haphazardly in the direction of the little seaside town. The seat was too low for his long legs and the pedals old and rusty from exposure, which made the journey creaky and bumpy for both of them.

A small black car overtook them and slowed as it passed the bicycle. Jeff’s heart started beating a little faster. “Don’t move in there and stay quiet!” he whispered to Lahni. The window rolled down. It was the small customs officer who had inspected the plane and Jeff earlier at the airport. “Would you like a lift? You do not look comfortable.” Lahni heard him saying in Japanese.

“No, thank you! It’s very kind of you to ask! I’m fine, though. I like a bit of fresh air,” Jeff said, miming a deep breath to make himself understood.

The window rolled back up and he drove on. Jeff saw him looking into the rear view mirror for some time before he disappeared ahead. “Damn, that was close! I thought he was going to stop us. See, I told you we had to be careful...the same counts for town... it’s a tiny place,” he said, stopping for a minute to catch his breath. “You’ll have to stay in there for a little while longer, sorry, Lahni,” he said opening the bag for a minute.

“It’s OK, Jeff. I’ve been a stowaway before. I understand,” she said, taking a breath of fresh air and then curling up again. See you in town.”

Only a few minutes later they reached the outskirts of their destination. Jeff stopped in front of a small house with a sign in the window. ‘Room for rent.’

“Hmm, I wonder if this is going to be better than a big hotel with too many people seeing us. A local with local knowledge and a small out of the way place may be just the thing for us. Lahni peeked out of her duffle bag, looking around and getting a feel for the place. “OK, this will be fine,” she said jumping out of the bag. We do have to be honest here. You can’t smuggle me in here. I need to be able to move around now. It feels safe.”

As they approached the door Lahni saw a little wrinkly old lady fold back the curtain to see who was there. They locked

eyes for a moment. Then the door opened. She motioned for her visitors to come inside with haste. “Come!” she said. They followed.

She brewed some green tea for Jeff and gave Lahni some water and a pet on the head. “Now,” she said in perfect English, “how long are you staying?”

“Where did you learn English?” Jeff asked.

“From my husband, he was an American soldier in the Second World War and was stationed on Okinawa for years afterwards. I was working there as a secretary, long story really, another time. More about you...I expected her...but not you. You weren’t in my dream,” the old lady said, sitting down to sip the tea she had made.

Lahni perked up. “Dream? You had a dream about me?” she asked.

“Yes, I did, I knew you were coming, so I put the sign outside and hoped you would see it. I don’t normally rent out rooms to strangers. Oh, that reminds me—I have to take the sign down...excuse me for just a moment,” the lady said and left to go to the front window.

While she was gone a young woman came down the stairs into the kitchen.

“Oh hello, I’m Frankie! You are?” she asked stretching out her hand to Jeff who was sitting there flabbergasted. “Jeff, I’m Jeff and this is Lahni... You live here as well?”

“Staying for a few weeks, that’s all. It’s all anyone can bear, so we take turns,” she said sitting down pouring some tea for herself.

“What do you mean by ‘bear’?” Lahni asked.

“Oh, of course you don’t know, I’m a Cove Monitor, we keep watch over the cove where all the dolphins are being kept and slaughtered. We write about it, film it, photograph it and spread it online...we want the world to know about these atrocities,” Frankie explained.

“I see you have made acquaintance with my niece then. Frankie is my nephew’s daughter on my husband’s side. That makes me her great aunt. She came to stay with me a few years back and then got involved with Ric O’Barry’s quest for the dolphins and the Cove. Now she is here for a few weeks every few months,” the old lady explained on her way through the kitchen door.

“And what is your name? Oh, wait I haven’t introduced us yet. This is Jeff and I’m...!” “Lahni, right?” the old lady interrupted. “It came to me in my dream. I’m Yuko Johnson, here they pronounce it Yonson.”

“Frankie, I have a question for you I have been thinking about since I was told about the Cove and the dolphin slaughter. Why do you just watch, observe and document rather than interfere and rescue them?” Lahni asked.

“The police watch our every move here, they practically follow us from the day we arrive ‘til the day we leave. We can’t go anywhere without being followed. I wish we could just let them all go. It breaks my heart every time I see them suffer, dead or alive. It’s a horrible thing to watch and I wish sometimes that I never started but now that I know what happens here I can’t not try to help even if it’s only by observing and telling the rest of the world about it,” Frankie explained with a sad look on her face.

“Are they watching you here as well? Do they know we are here?” Jeff asked a little frantically, since he was still worried about the customs man who had followed them on the road.

“I don’t think so,” Frankie said while pulling back a curtain underneath the kitchen cupboards. “See, I never use the front door!” she said smiling. “It’s a secret passage away from the house. I use a disguise as well. They don’t know what I really look like and I always manage to lose them when I leave the Cove or come in at the airport or train station. I’m going this afternoon. You can come if you like. The boats have gone out this morning, so you may see things you’ll wish you hadn’t. But if you want to help you have to see what they do to believe it.”

“We’ll come. This is what I came here for,” Lahni pronounced.

“Me too,” said Jeff. “I don’t care if they arrest me either, all they can do is throw me out of the country,” he added. “They can do a lot more than that here, Jeff. Jail is where they put people and for a while before any help arrives from the consulates,” Frankie explained.

“Not me, I have diplomatic status. My passport says so! At least, they can’t hold me. But I guess I won’t be of much use to any of you if I’m back in Australia and you are here,” he said, contemplating the idea.

“Let me show you where you’ll sleep first before you go to get arrested,” Yuko said jokingly trying to lighten the mood. “It’s upstairs; I’ll have to add an extra futon. Jeff, please remove your shoes and put on these slippers, then follow me.”

Up a narrow flight of stairs were three bedrooms divided by bamboo sliding walls. The floors in each room were covered in tatami mats with small lamps and a low chest of drawers along the side of the walls. Futon mattresses were rolled up against the edge and pillows stacked up next to them.

Yuko opened a wall cupboard to get another one for Jeff. “You don’t mind sharing a room, I hope. I only have three bedrooms,” she said placing the mat on the floor. “Here are some towels for you and the bathroom is down the hall to the left. Except for you of course, Lahni. I have a little private garden out back you can use. Just let me know where, so I can clean it up. And please let me know if you need anything,” she added.

Frankie came rushing up the stairs, disappeared into her room and then re-emerged looking like someone else. Her hair was now a short dark brown crop instead of long and blond. She was wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. Her jacket

was oversized and long enough to cover her knees. Underneath she wore loose jeans, a hoody and a light scarf around her neck.

“Are you wearing enough? You look like a boy!” Yuko asked.

“That’s the idea aunty; I’m trying not to be recognized. Gotta run, the ships are on their way in. I just got the call. You guys want to come? You’ll have to hurry. Jeff, I recommend you change into some different clothes and wear a hat and glasses too. Not that it’s going to be easy disguising a tall dark man like you in this country,” Frankie instructed.

“I’ll pass on the disguise. I’m not worried about them. Let’s have a look what’s going on there first and then we’ll see. Now, Yuko and Lahni, if I get caught and thrown out just keep my stuff. I have my passport and money on me. There is more in my bag in our room, Lahni, if you need to take some. I won’t be able to pick it up since I don’t want anyone to know about your place here. I have alternate clothing and everything I need in my plane. I’m sure they’ll let me use my own plane to get out if they deport me. It’s in fact all they can do anyway, so let’s get going,” Jeff reassured Lahni and everyone else.

“Also, just in case Lahni, it’s been a pleasure travelling with you and I hope you get to do all you want to do and I hope you’ll find your people again. My address is in my bag as well in case you come back to Australia one day...” Jeff added.

“Stop it already, we are still here together, aren’t we!” Lahni said. “Don’t fast forward creating a reality you don’t want. Stop seeing it in your mind.”

“I’m just being prepared for all possibilities. I’m not trying to be negative. My intuition is to be ready, that’s all. I hate not being able to say my good-byes, so I say them beforehand. That’s all,” Jeff said.

“In that case, it’s been amazing knowing you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you’ve done,” Lahni said.

“Thank you too, you helped me make a decision that needed to be made....” Jeff said. “And I love you for that and more.”

“I love you too,” Lahni said.

“Well, now that you’ve declared your love for each other...can we go?” Frankie urged.

“Careful, you hear me. I don’t want to bail you out of jail this afternoon. It’s expensive,” Yuko said, wryly.

“OK, Aunty, I’ll try my best,” Frankie said, kissing Yuko on the cheek.

“Thanks for everything,” Lahni added. “We’ll see you a bit later!”

Frankie led them through the secret exit in the kitchen into a small tunnel barely big enough for Jeff, which led onto a path

approximately 100 meters from the house on the edge of a communal garden. The exit was inside an old shed in the corner. A peephole in the door allowed for reconnaissance before exiting. The coast was clear. The three of them walked as fast as they could down the hill to the water and the Cove. On the horizon three boats approached slowly as the sun rose higher, dissolving the last of the morning fog.

Chapter 20 The Cove

The boats had almost entered the cove when the three arrived above the jetty at the spot that was at the legal distance for observers. Frankie had been sitting there for many hours in recent weeks watching over the horrid proceedings below. Lahni could see in the distance that a few dolphins had been captured and were struggling with the nets around them. She counted at least five but wasn't sure how many had been imprisoned exactly. A group of policemen were gathered at the entrance to the harbor to keep any demonstrators or protestors at bay.

"We have to get in there somehow. I will not stand by to watch one more of these beautiful creatures being murdered for nothing," Lahni said with conviction.

"Good luck!" said Frankie. "Believe me we've all tried and been arrested."

"Let's wait until the boats get here guys, then we'll see what they do with the dolphins and if need be, I'll create a commotion so that you guys can go and set them free or something like that," Jeff suggested.

"You will be arrested, you know that, right? Is that what the good-byes this morning were about? You already had this planned?" Frankie asked.

"Not sure what I was thinking but now that we're here... I might as well do something. I really don't want to watch them being butchered. I've seen enough of that in the world already," Jeff said.

"Agreed," Lahni said.

Six dolphins jumped around in a small, netted circle between two boats, desperately trying to find a way out. The stressed animals were being dragged along into the holding pen inside the cove. The fishermen released them into the pen, then moored the boats and came onto the jetty to talk to a few men who had been waiting for their arrival. A few words were exchanged and the men who had been waiting left the cove with their equipment.

"It looks like they won't be killing them...at least not today...that is something. I think they are all earmarked for possible sale to marine parks, which means they'll keep them for a few days in the pens to see how they do in captivity and how they play with each other!" Frankie explained.

"Which gives us more time to do something about this, right?" Lahni asked.

They settled into their observation spot for now; with other cove monitors arriving as the day went on to give each other breaks.

Late morning everyone who worked in and around the cove went for an early lunch except one lonely policeman who was

standing guard.

“This is our chance!” Lahni whispered to Jeff. “You go and distract the guy while I go and talk to the dolphins, OK!” Frankie had gone to get lunch for everyone when Lahni and Jeff decided to approach the cove from the road. The policeman was positioned at the entry to the jetty leading down to the holding pen. Jeff closed in on the cop and started asking him questions about the area in broken Japanese as if he was a lost tourist. The young officer, wanting to be helpful, missed Lahni slipping past him down to the waters edge. She dropped into a small wooden boat tied up on the edge of the dolphin holding pen, which made her invisible from the road and from the jetty where Jeff was still playing the confused traveller. Lahni leaned over the side as far as possible without falling overboard, calling out as quietly as possible to attract the attention of the dolphins.

Two of the animals approached her carefully sensing that she was safe to be close to.

“Hey you guys, you need to get out of here. It’s not safe!” she said.

“But how?” asked one of the dolphins.

“Can’t you jump? It’s just over there. The ocean is so close; your family must be waiting.”

“We’re scared and exhausted. We thought we’d be OK because they didn’t kill us. Last week my brother and sister were taken, we were looking for them when they got us. We didn’t say good-bye to our family. Can you help us?” he asked.

“I can try. If I swim out there I may be able to open the gate to the ocean for you. If you make it back please tell all the other dolphins to get out of this area for good. It’s not safe; you will be captured to live a miserable life in marine parks or otherwise you will be killed and eaten. I know you want to be friends with humans but this is the wrong country to try that in at the moment. I know it’s your place and your home as well but you must take everyone and leave. Promise?” Lahni said about to jump in.



A young fisherman was on his way back to the jetty and his boat. As he was walking down the jetty he saw a white dog leaning over a wooden boat edge having what looked like a conversation with two dolphins. At first he turned to look around for the guard but then decided to investigate for himself. He very quietly stepped closer and closer until he was within earshot of Lahni and the cetaceans. She hadn't noticed the young man approaching but felt him standing just a few feet away behind her now. Without looking back one of her ears turned back towards him just in case there was any movement and she had to leave quickly. For now she decided it was OK to stay on the boat a bit longer.

The young man listened intently to what the dolphins had to say and to Lahni's response. They went into detail about their pain and anguish about losing their friends and family and about being captured while trying to find them. He had only been doing this work for a short time. His father was a dolphin hunter and so was his grandfather, who had recently retired from the trade, passing the torch to his grandson. Tradition was a strong component of Japanese culture and rarely would any youngster ever question what was expected of him or her.

He seemed confused about the situation but despite his training and indoctrination he stayed and listened some more. Tears started rolling down his face. Surprised about his reaction to the situation, he wiped them away but more followed. He was standing there, frozen and crying for the first time since he was a young boy.

Lahni had still been leaning over the side of the boat talking when she heard the sobs coming from the young man. The dolphins perked up as well and looked in his direction now. He had gone down to his knees and had big tears rolling down his face. "Sorry, sorry, so sorry..." came out of his mouth.

"It's OK!" said Lahni, turning directly towards him. "Just do something about it, help them get out of here now. We can do it together if you like. They have families and miss them terribly. Will you help?" Lahni asked.

The man stood there for a while just crying and shaking his head in disbelief and anguish. "I will, I will. I can't believe I can hear them and you. What's going on?" he said, clearly in distress about it. "I have to tell the others!" he said, about to run off.

"Stop! Please, don't say anything just yet. The others may not understand and may not allow us to free them," Lahni said, jumping into the water next to the dolphins, who came right up to greet her.

The young man turned back to see what had happened and decided to join her. He jumped into the little wooden boat she'd been sitting in, untied it and rowed out to the gate of the pen. Lahni was already there, waiting with her six friends when he arrived. The dolphins appeared from below the waterline ready to go. Jeff had been observing the entire scene while still talking to the officer who had his back to the cove. The policeman turned when he heard the splash Lahni made and started down the jetty to investigate the commotion, closely followed by Jeff. In less than a minute the gate was open

and the six dolphins were swimming back towards the open ocean and their families. They jumped a few times making loud chirping noises and then disappeared below the surface.

The young fisherman pulled Lahni into the boat and rowed back to the jetty. Meanwhile, the crew of the fishing fleet was alerted to the incident by the guard as they came back from their mid-day meal. Jeff helped Lahni out of the boat. He dried her off with his coat and then ran up to join the cove monitors further up the ravine on the rocks. Lahni remained on the jetty next to the young man who'd helped free the animals.

"He and that dog let our dolphins go. This will be a massive loss in profits. Arrest them now!" yelled one of the fishermen pointing at them.

"What do you mean, your dolphins?" Lahni asked.

"Who asked that question?" he said, looking around.

"I did!" said Lahni, now sitting in front of the man who had made the accusation and demand for their arrest. "Here, down here, mister! I asked the question because, frankly, I think it's rather rude and uncalled for to take wild and free animals away from their family and then claim them as your possessions. What right do you have to do such a thing? Apart from all the ones you have murdered? What do you have to say for yourself?"

The men just stood there staring now, unable to speak, including the officer who'd been standing watch and was ready to arrest someone. "Well, instead of staring at me, you guys could start thinking about what you do here day in and day out. Do you really need to eat these amazing animals? Have you ever talked to one of them? You might learn something from them..." Lahni said when she heard a loud splash behind her. Everyone turned around.

The gate to the cove's dolphin holding pen had been open since the young fisherman had helped Lahni free them earlier. Without anyone noticing, one of the brothers had returned being concerned about his rescuers' welfare. He swam up to the jetty and lifted himself out of the water as far as he could.

"Don't hurt them please! Leave them alone! They helped us be free. Let them be free," he said to the men standing around her. And with that he lifted off out of the water with just his tail fin below the surface, moving backwards towards the gate dancing on the water. "See you later my friends. Thanks for helping us. I'll be telling everyone," he added and then splashed back into the water and came up again for a leap through the open gate.

The men one by one dropped to the jetty's wooden planks onto their behinds, literally falling off their feet in astonishment. Some had tears in their eyes; some had just a look of confusion on their faces; only one of them, an older man, looked angry.



“Are you going to just sit there and do nothing? This is outrageous, it’s our right to take what’s in there!” he proclaimed, pointing at the ocean. “It’s all ours, always has been. Why should we stop doing what we’ve always done?” he protested.

“Because it’s time to grow up and change what isn’t working anymore,” Lahni asserted.

“It’s called evolution and growth. Tradition isn’t enough to rest on anymore. Much pain has been dished out in the name of tradition. You have to start doing something different, maybe something that doesn’t hurt anyone,” Lahni said, addressing the men, many of whom were still stoic and silent.

“I really want you to think about this and make the right decisions. And then ask for their forgiveness,” she said while looking at them and then out towards the ocean. Then she saw Jeff in the corner of her eye waving at her and she decided to take this opportunity to run up to the rocks where the rest of the cove monitors had been filming and observing the scene.

“Are you alright?” Jeff asked as she joined him. “You are one gutsy girl,” he added. “I thought for sure they’d arrest you and take you to the pound or jail or a museum to show off the talking dog,” he said, laughing nervously.

Frankie, who had returned with lunch while Lahni was releasing the dolphins, was still sitting down next to one of the other volunteer monitors. “I can’t believe you guys pulled this off!” she said half smiling, half shaking her head in amazement. We have it all on camera as well. This will be going to all the websites and news agencies,” she sighed with relief and continued. “They can’t cover this one up. I just hope they will now do something different. I’m not sure if they’ll really stop but you rattled them and I think they’ll be thinking about it forever.”

“I think it will stop even if it takes a little while,” Lahni said. “You see, they can hear and understand dolphin now that I’ve been here talking to them. They could all hear the dolphin speak earlier. So I hope this will stop them in their tracks next time,” she explained.

“I hope so too,” added Frankie. “Let’s get out of here while we can. I have to get this footage to a computer as soon as possible. They might change their mind about arresting you guys and maybe us as well. I’m sure they’ll think that we all had something to do with this,” Frankie suggested.

“I agree, let’s go,” Jeff said, helping Frankie pack up the food they hadn’t had a chance to eat. “Let’s take a different way back though just in case,” Frankie suggested and lead the way.

They disappeared into the bushes.

An hour later they were drinking tea and chatting about the day in Yuko’s kitchen when Frankie’s phone rang. “Hello... yeah...uh-huh...uh-huh...wow, really, ...thanks. OK, see you all tomorrow,” she said, putting the phone down.

“So?” Asked Yuko. “Tell us!”

“Well, one of the other monitors from the Cove just called and said that some of the fishermen are still sitting there in the same spot. He said that one of them, the angry one, ran off with the cop to lodge a complaint and a report. But the others all stayed. One of them went completely nuts and started destroying his boat. He apparently started ripping everything off that could be ripped off on deck but the others stopped him. Then he collapsed in a heap and just sobbed. Two guys sat by the water praying...would you believe it? The others just sat there for the last hour staring into the water. He also said that word had spread throughout town and that everybody dropped what they were doing and came down to the cove to have a look at the scene. People just stood there looking at the fishermen not knowing what to do,” Frankie told them.

“We surely changed something here!” Lahni said. “I wonder if I should go back there and talk to people?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. They might still arrest you just to save face. They don’t like outsiders and especially not the activist kind. You are trouble to them; you just cost them their livelihoods, at least that’s what they seem to believe,” Frankie answered.

“I agree with Frankie here, Lahni, it’s too risky now,” Yuko concurred. “Let them work it out, I’m sure this will be

having a lasting effect, at least for some. Maybe they'll get the idea to start dolphin watching tours instead. It might take a while for the ripples of this event to reach them all. You've done your job for now. You opened their eyes. That's more than any of us expected."

"True, Auntie, I never thought this would happen after watching them kill and take for so many years," Frankie said with tears in her eyes. "It was so amazing watching you today. You are fearless."

"Fearfulness never changes anything, in fact, it makes things worse. I made up my mind when I left my comfortable existence back home that I mustn't be afraid of anything otherwise I wouldn't be able to change anything," Lahni explained.

"You are truly a brave but kind soul. I'm glad I had that dream and that we connected. You should get some rest now, though," Yuko said.

Jeff woke in the early hours of the next morning with a feeling in his stomach that it was time to leave. It was still dark but the feeling was so strong that he woke Lahni who was sleeping on the mat next to him. She was snoring and in such a deep slumber that it took him a minute to get her to wake up. "Lahni, hey, wake up, mate. I think we should get out of here. I have a bad feeling in my gut. Something's going to happen."

"Really, I don't feel bad. I think it's safe to stay," she said, yawning. "It's early, sleep some more...we'll talk about it later," she answered, going back into a slumber.

Jeff, still feeling uneasy, got up and gathered his gear, leaving some money and a note for Lahni.

Just then, a loud knock on the front door woke everyone. Frankie jumped into her clothes and ran to get Jeff and Lahni out of their bedroom. "Pick up all your things; don't leave anything behind," she said very quietly.

Yuko was already on top of the stairs with her fingers over her mouth. "Shshh! Go!" she whispered. "I'll deal with them. Somehow they found out where you went after the incident at the Cove yesterday. Lovely meeting you Jeff and Lahni—if I don't see you again," Yuko added with haste.

"Oh, I'm not leaving," said Lahni calmly. "I'll see you in a bit."

Frankie lead them back through the secret pathway in the kitchen into the garden shed but this time to hide out. The floor in the shed had a wooden crate sitting in the middle. Frankie pushed it aside to get to a door in the dirt, which lead to a tiny basement room adorned with a rug, a small futon, some chocolate, water and a few books.

"My hiding place when they are after us. Come quickly! Let's hang out here until the coast is clear. Then Yuko will take you back to the airstrip if you want."

Meanwhile Yuko had gone to the door dressed in a morning kimono, her hair a bit disheveled and yawning while opening it just a few inches to see who was there. “What do you want, it’s so early. Why do you disturb an old lady’s sleep?”

A police badge appeared close to her face. “Open up, ma’am. We have reason to believe you are harboring criminals,” one of the officers said.

“Really, me? Why do you think that? I am on my own and don’t like to open my door to strangers, including police. It’s not safe. Do you have a search warrant?” she said, mustering as old and frail a voice as she could.

“No, no warrant. Can we just have a look and then we’ll leave you be,” he promised.

She decided to let them in to reassure them there was really no one else around. They went through the house twice looking into all the cupboards and corners and found nothing.

“Well, didn’t I tell you? It’s not nice to disturb the elderly in the middle of their sleep. It’s hard enough to get good rest these days. Would you please leave my house now before I make a complaint to the commissioner,” she said, sounding even more weak and raspy.

“So sorry, ma’am, sorry to disturb you. We must have had a false report about someone being here with you,” they said, trying to appease Yuko. “Please don’t file a report, we are leaving you alone now,” they said in unison, bowing repeatedly at her on their way out.

Yuko closed the door with a smile on her face but still a little shaken from the experience. “Wow, that was close,” she whispered to herself sitting down on the stairs for a minute.

Jeff spoke first in the hiding place. “I think it’s time for me to return to Australia, Lahni. Sorry but I need to start my new thing there. I think I’ll take off tonight if I make it to the airport in one piece,” he said, with sad eyes.

“That’s OK, Jeff, I never expected you to take me this far in the first place and it was so great to meet you and have this time together. So it’s fine, really! Go home!” Lahni said, kissing him on the cheek.

“Sorry to leave you here. I hope you make it back home as well,” he added.

“Not sure when I’ll be getting home. I think I have some more to do here. But you never really know until it happens anyway. I’m staying present for now. I just hope I’ve done enough here to get some lasting positive change happening,” Lahni said, contemplating the day before.

“You sure changed something, at least in a few people. It only takes a few to change the next person’s mind. It’ll have a lasting effect for sure,” Frankie said. “Thanks for coming all the way here. You’ve inspired me... and all the other

monitors as well! We won't be just watching anymore. I kind of hope there won't be anything to see anymore anyway but that may be too much to ask for. People are slow to change. We'll see."

"I told the dolphins to stay out of these waters so they can't get them anymore. If they pass it on it will work. I hope at least they won't get as many," Lahni said. "I can't bear the idea of any of them getting hurt ever again."

"Hey, the sun's coming up, we should get back to the house. But before you go, I'll check if it's safe first. Stay here until I get you!" Frankie said, climbing out of the hideaway. She snuck back into the house staying low along the fence so not even the neighbors could see her. Under the kitchen cupboard she pulled the curtain back just a little to see if anyone was still in the house. Yuko was sitting at the table with a cup of tea. "It's safe. They've gone. Come have some tea," Yuko said, turning around. "Oh, it's just you. Where are Jeff and Lahni?" she asked. "I hope they didn't leave already!"

"No, no...they are still in the back...you know...my cave," Frankie said while getting up off her knees and dusting them a little.

"We'll wait just a little bit longer before you go get them, just in case someone is still out there. A couple of policemen came to the door and had a look around the house...found nothing of course, apologized and left," Yuko told Frankie.

"You let them in? Did they have a search warrant?"

"No, no warrant. But I thought I'd better let them in for a quick look rather than arouse suspicion by saying no to them and then they'll actually go and get permission to ransack my house, which may result in them finding your secret path and the hiding place. I'd like to avoid that at all cost," Yuko said. "They were just local cops and they felt bad. They also said they must have had a false report about people being seen here. One of my neighbors is watching. We have to be extra careful when I take Jeff to the airport later. Best to wait until it's dark."

Jeff and Lahni were still hanging out under the dirt floor in a rather tight space given Jeff's height and size. He wasn't a big man by girth, just tall with wide shoulders. All that digging as a young miner had left him with a healthy lot of muscles around his chest and back as well. He was getting uncomfortable and decided to open the door above and check why Frankie was taking so long. Just then Frankie opened the door from the other side almost getting hit in the face by the push from Jeff against it.

"Sorry, mate, was getting' a bit tight in there. Can we come out now? We need some air and some breakfast. Chocolate only does so much and Lahni can't eat that stuff," Jeff said.

"Sure, I was just coming to get you but we have to be ultra quiet and careful. Cops came to the house. They're gone now. I don't think they'll be back," Frankie explained.

Back in the kitchen breakfast was waiting. They sat and ate for a while without talking until Yuko broke the silence.

“Tonight, after dark I’ll take you to the airport, Jeff; it’s not safe during the day, I think,” Yuko said, looking contemplative.

“That’ll be good,” Jeff said. “I’m sorry to leave but I gotta go, I reckon.”

“Oh, did I say that out loud?” Yuko asked. “I must be tired as well. It’s been a big day already and it’s only 7 a.m. They came at four o’clock this morning, do you believe it. I think I need to lie down again. This time I won’t be answering any doors if anyone comes,” she said, getting up and walking out of the kitchen.

“I think I need a nap as well!” Lahni said, getting up off the bench she had been sitting on. “We got up way too early!” she added, yawning.

“Me too!” Jeff said. “I don’t think I can sleep right now,” Frankie said. “I’ll keep watch while you guys rest. I’ll be loading my footage and photos from yesterday onto the rest of the websites before I forget.”

“G’Night!” Jeff said, leaving the kitchen with Lahni.

Only about forty minutes later Lahni woke up. Jeff was in a deep slumber, snoring loudly. Yuko was audibly sleeping next door. She went to the kitchen to find Frankie, only no one was there. She checked the rest of the house and the shed. Frankie was gone.

“Maybe she went to the Cove. I might go have a look!” Lahni mumbled to herself on her way out of the cupboard.

“You will do no such thing on your own, mate!” Jeff said, entering the kitchen. “Come, we’ll go and have a look together. We’ll go the back way down through the scrub and bushes. No one will notice us.”

Jeff was wearing a long coat and a wide brim hat pulled into his face. “You look funny!” Lahni noticed.

“Borrowed, from the hall cupboard. Must’ve been Yuko’s husband’s stuff, it fits alright. He was a tall fella, like me.” He wrapped a scarf around Lahni to fashion a leash, just in case they would encounter anyone on their way. “Lets!” Jeff said pulling her along on the leash.

“Hey, quit that. I know how to move forward on my own, thanks.”

“Sorry!” Jeff uttered in front of her in the secret tunnel. “Almost out.”

“And what exactly are you two doing here and without me?” a voice said through the window. It was Frankie.

“We wanted to go and find you!” Lahni answered, looking a little brown and dusty by now. “I was just coming to get you, you have to see this!” Frankie said.

“By the way, today is the last day of the official dolphin hunt for the year, so hopefully no more bloodshed. Only one boat went out this morning. Remember the angry guy from yesterday? He’s the only one and he’s only got his boy with

him. I don't think he'll get any. But anyway...you have to see what's happened down there. Come quickly!" she said, leading the way down the back path.

"What? Tell us already!" Lahni said. "You've got to see it for yourself. Really!" Frankie answered, not wanting to give away too much.

A few minutes later they stood on top of the rocks at the usual observation spot for cove monitors. Below was an unprecedented sight. Dozens of people, villagers, tourists, protesters and fishermen alike sat quietly along the jetty's edge with candles lit in front of them mumbling prayers and apologies to the dolphins who had suffered and lost their lives at the hands of the locals. It was a beautifully moving thing to see. Lahni wagged her tail high and made her way down to the crowd.

"Are you sure?" Jeff called out after her.

"Yup, no fear, mate, remember! This is wonderful!"

Jeff followed and then the rest of the observers including Frankie came down the ravine.

They sat down behind the people already there. Lahni went through the crowd, kissing people on the cheek saying words of forgiveness to everyone. Just as she had finished saying a ho'oponopono for the dolphins, the lonely fishing boat that had left the harbor before daybreak came back into the cove empty-handed. The crowd applauded and then went silent again.

A small car stopped near the entry of the jetty, a little old lady inside with a big smile on her face. Lahni ran over to greet her. "I had to see for myself!"

"I know. You've done well!" Yuko answered.

Later that day Lahni stayed behind at Yuko's house with Frankie while Yuko took Jeff to the airstrip. Since she had been smuggled in, she had to be careful not to sabotage an easy exit for her friend. The good-byes were difficult for Lahni in particular since Jeff had been such a godsend and an ally for her for some time now. It would take some effort not to miss him terribly.

"You'll be OK. Yuko is still here to help. She is well connected in Japan," Frankie said, stroking Lahni.

"I know I will miss him though. He's a great human!" Lahni said.

At the airstrip the same small man who had greeted their arrival came back out of his little office walking across the runway with a flashlight in his hand. He had long strides for a person of his stature, Jeff thought while continuing to check the engine. "I hope he leaves me alone!" he whispered to himself.

“Papers, please!” he heard the official say with a stern voice right behind him. Jeff turned and handed him his passport and papers for the plane. “Here you go, Sir!”

“Don’t you Sir me, Mr Sandid! I know what you did!” he said, almost sounding angry.

“Did?” Jeff asked. “I visited the town and had a good look around. I don’t know what you mean, Sir!”

The customs officer was so annoyed by the fact that he couldn’t do anything about Jeff’s diplomatic status, he was fuming now. “All in order!” he said reluctantly, almost coughing the words. “Here, now please leave!” he added, returning the documents. “And don’t come back unless you have to!”

“I’m sorry you feel this way. Thanks for your services!” Jeff said with a smile and got into his plane. “See you next time!” he added, before starting the engine, which made the officer turn around and give him a stark look.

Once in the air Jeff let out a huge sigh and a big laugh, then he started crying. “Bloody oath, I miss that damn dog so much already. What am I gonna do!” he said to himself, wiping away the tears.

After awhile, thinking of what had been accomplished and the new project he was going to be involved with, he began singing to himself as he flew homewards.

Chapter 21 Zen and the way home

The next morning, Lahni found Yuko at the kitchen table sewing something. She looked tired and yawned while saying good morning.

“Have you been up all night?” Lahni asked.

“No, I just woke up very early thinking about our next move. So I got up to prepare, that’s all.” Yuko answered. “Have some breakfast!” she said, continuing her project.

“Our next move?” Lahni asked.

“Yes, dear, I thought it be good for you to meet a friend on the other side of the island; a dear old friend who is very wise. Since my car is a bit clunky and may not make the journey in one piece I thought we’d take the bullet train, you know the really fast one. The problem is, large dogs aren’t allowed since they don’t fit into a carrier bag, unless of course they are guide dogs for the blind or handicapped. I think this will work...!” she said, making the last adjustments to the garment. “Come try it on!” she said, pulling Lahni close and placing the coat and harness on her.

“I’m not sure what you are doing yet but OK,” Lahni said, obliging her host. “You’ll be my guide dog, I’ll be the mostly blind lady who needs you with me at all times. Frankie came up with the idea. We leave tonight,” Yuko said excitedly. “I haven’t been out of town for a while. I’m looking forward to travelling a bit,” she added before leaving the room.

Frankie had been sitting on the other end of the table sipping tea and nodding at Yuko’s words. “You’ll like it up there, Lahni. You’ll see, it’s on the other side of the country by the sea and it’s lovely, trust me!” Frankie reassured Lahni.

“I trust Yuko. I’m sure it’s perfect whatever it is she has in mind.”

“Ah, that’s better!” Yuko said, coming back into the kitchen drying her face. “You’ll love it, Lahni, I know it. I haven’t seen him in years. I wonder how he looks now,” she said.

“Who?” asked Lahni.

“My friend, the one we’ll be visiting. I’ll have to pack some more warm clothes. It’s higher up, so it’ll be a bit colder than here,” she mumbled to herself as she dried her hair with a towel. “Do you remember Mitsuo Wakahisa, you met him briefly... but maybe you were too young. It’s been quite a few years!” she asked Frankie, not expecting an answer.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the trip.

That night, Frankie drove Yuko and Lahni to the next station to catch the late train. The trip was uneventful with only a

few passengers onboard the overnight train. They settled into their seats and fell asleep. The train pulled into Fukui, a small town on the north west coast, most famous for its ancient Zen temple. It was early the next morning. The air was crisp and cold but refreshing. Lahni took long deep breaths while they walked from the station to a bus stop to get to Yuko's friend's house. "I haven't smelled really cold, fresh air for a while now; it's nice, reminds me of home," Lahni commented.

The bus ride was short and bumpy along curved, hilly roads. Mitsuo's house was part of Fukui prefecture but was a little more isolated and closer to the coast. After getting off the bus the path to his place was a little rough and unfinished. The tiny bungalow was situated on top of a hill surrounded by trees and a rock garden. The door was leaning open when they arrived. "Come in," a deep clear voice said from inside.

Mr. Wakahisa was in his 90th year, yet looked more like a spritely and healthy 55. He was short and of slight build with strong muscles on his arms and shoulders. His skin was devoid of wrinkles, his black hair cropped within a millimeter of his head with only the occasional grey showing.

"You look amazing Mitsuo, how do you do it? I have all of these!" Yuko said, giving her friend a hug and then pointing at all the lines around her eyes.

"Ah, love, laughter and life will do that and you've had all these, my friend, whereas I have been here on my own contemplating life and love. You have been living it. I have youth and no one to share it with. The curse of the Zen master," he said, laughing loudly. "And this must be Lahni, your dream dog," he added, getting down on his knees to greet her.

Lahni looked deeply into his eyes and said nothing. She just nodded and kissed him on the nose.

"We'll get along just fine," he said, smiling while going to the kitchen where he proceeded to make some tea, after placing a bowl of fresh water down for Lahni. "Have you had anything to eat? I made some breakfast."

Lahni lapped up some water, then turned to address Mitsuo. "I have been waiting to ask you something since Yuko told me about you yesterday.

"What's that?" Mitsuo inquired.

"Well Yuko said you are a Zen master. What exactly does a Zen master do?" Lahni asked shyly, trying not to make him uncomfortable. He laughed out loud then got back on his knees to be close to her for his answer. "Absolutely nothing, my dear!" he said, still laughing. "A Zen master just is!"

"What do you mean? I'm a bit confused. How does anyone become something without doing something first? How did you become a...?" Lahni asked.

“You didn’t do anything to become a dog, did you?” he interrupted, smiling and raising one eyebrow.

“You have a point there. All I had to do was push a little to get out. That’s all I guess. I was already a dog,” Lahni admitted.

“Well, and so it is with a Zen master but without the pushing. We all have one in us! We just have to let him out. No pushing required. It’s more of a letting or allowing, if you will.” Mitsuo explained.

“So what is Zen, then?” Lahni asked, looking a little less confused.

“Zen is being in the emptiness of just being. Most people in our world seek success, money, status, wealth and fame and yet inside they feel empty. They strive for all of these things, so they don’t have to feel that emptiness. They try and fill their time with work and other activity, so they don’t have to ever be still. There is too much noise in their lives to ever become quiet! They are afraid of silence. Zen is about being with that emptiness, with that silence that is in all of us; feeling one with all, being one with all that is,” Mitsuo continued.

“I understand. I used to live there. In that silence, I mean... until I had this dream about impending doom. After that I left my home in search of the truth about what I had seen,” Lahni said.

“The silence is always there, Lahni, you can visit any time. It is part of you. That is what meditation is about. All you have to do is be still and listen. I heard about your adventures. Yuko told me and it seems to me that you are still very much connected to the silence within. You are quite the little Zen master, given the way you have travelled this world so far. It is a big accomplishment and very brave of you,” Mitsuo answered.

“I’m not sure if I accomplished much given that there are so many people and even more animals and I have only been able to reach a few along the way. I fear that I haven’t done enough and that I am too late to save the earth,” Lahni said.

“Saving the earth?” Mitsuo chuckled. “Believe me, the earth does not need saving by anyone. She is fine, as long as humans stop interfering in her evolution. People have to allow help before anyone can do anything for them but they really only need to be reminded of their own power. The fear of free will rules us and as long as people avoid taking responsibility for this gift they will never be free. People hide behind religious doctrine with a master of sorts at the helm, telling them what to believe and how to live when in fact we weren’t meant to do that, ever. We are meant to be masters of our universe and of our futures and destinies. You have started many ripples along the way. You may have only met a few people and a few animals but they will all meet people and animals along the way and pass on what they have learned from you,” Mitsuo reassured her.

“I’ve been told that by a couple of friends on my journey,” Lahni answered.

“Well then, you should listen to your friends, they are right!” Mitsuo said. “Come now. We will take a walk down to the

sea and sit for a while,” he said, looking at Yuko and Lahni. Yuko had remained silent just nodding now and then in agreement.

“That’ll be lovely. I’d better take my jacket though, it’s much colder here than at home,” Yuko said getting off the bench and fetching her warm coat.

“Would you please take the guide dog thingy off me now before we go. I don’t think I’ll be needing that anymore and I don’t think I’ll be cold,” Lahni requested.

Yuko obliged and freed her from the confines of the harness. Lahni shook herself briskly, fluffing out her fur. “Thanks, now we can go!”

The walk was lengthy but pleasant. The path was smooth enough, winding itself slowly and evenly down to the waters edge, onto a rocky outcrop by the Sea of Japan.

Lahni sat down on a flat rock thinking about everything that had happened to her. Still deep in thought she hardly noticed Yuko sitting down next to her after a stroll over the rocks. Mitsuo followed suit. “So, tell us what’s going around in your head Lahni?” she asked.

“I’m almost at my journey’s end and I don’t know what’s coming and whether I’ve done enough,” Lahni said.

“End? There is no end to anyone’s journey, least of all yours,” Mitsuo replied. “You may not understand that yet but you will in time. We are all on a never-ending journey. Most just don’t know it. We are evolving and growing all the time. The key is to enjoy it.”

“Though that’s not always easy!” Yuko threw in.

“You are right there; growing and evolving consciously takes concerted effort. The majority of humans have to be forced in one way or another to grow. It’s so much easier to choose to become aware and awake and also choose to do so without all the angst and pain involved,” Mitsuo answered.

“Why do people insist on painful experiences then?” Lahni asked.

“Ah, the question of the millennium. I have been contemplating this one for a long, long time now. The only conclusion I have come to is this: humans don’t trust their own guidance and judgment. Instead, they keep giving their power away to people or beliefs or the people who teach these beliefs, who are in effect no more advanced or evolved than they are. In many cases, even most cases, less. They are told of angry violent Gods of sorts, depending on the religion and culture and told what to do. They are allowing themselves to be controlled when in fact they are free to do and be what they want. There is no such thing as a force greater than you, which is malevolent and punishing in any way. It’s impossible. These pretenders vibrate at much too low a level to be in charge. The ones that step up to try fail miserably because they

approach their leadership with a flawed belief that they are in control. What people call God in their belief systems on this planet is much too small compared to what it really is. It is so much bigger and more powerful than anyone can imagine. It is so loving in fact and pure that most humans wouldn't be able to handle its presence for long. Human squabbles and wars are purely ego driven affairs, based in fear and greed. They have nothing to do with what the Universe really has in mind for us. All anyone has to do is align with the Universe and it will be so," Mitsuo continued.

"How do you know this is so?" Lahni inquired.

Mitsuo put his hand on her heart. "Here, it's all here. You just have to trust and listen," he said smiling at her. Lahni nodded.

"You cannot save anyone who does not want to be saved. You can only learn and evolve yourself. If you bring a few people with you onto the path, you have already done all you can do. Be still in your heart and you will always be on the right path for you," Mitsuo added.

They sat for a while in silence.

"I have to get to the other side of this beautiful sea soon," Lahni said, splashing some water on her face with her nose.

"It's cold, swimming is out of the question," Mitsuo said laughing. "Maybe we can go talk to the fishermen or wharf people to get you passage. Vladivostok, I assume?"

"Yes, Vladivostok. I feel the need to find my people. And soon," Lahni answered.

"You can have many aspirations and desires and wishes but don't make the mistake of being attached to them. You may yet get what you need, which may or may not be what you had in mind. Remember to stay open. Align yourself with ease and grace," Mitsuo said.

"OK," Lahni said, not quite sure how to take what he'd just said. She thought to leave it in the mystery and go with the flow like she was used to.

After a few more days of talks, silent contemplation, meditation and a visit to the Eihei-ji Buddhist temple nearby Lahni felt ready to seek passage towards home. One morning Yuko, Mitsuo and Lahni took his little car down to the wharf in the nearest township of Tsuruga. Many Russian and Korean cargo ships frequented this harbor and would be the best option for her. Tsuruga port was busy with ships being loaded and unloaded. Mostly cargo ships, with only a few fishing boats moored here.

"Now what do you want to do? Do you want me to go speak to anyone or do you want to find your own way?" Mitsuo asked.

"I'd rather know she is safely on her way!" Yuko interjected. "Let's stick with her until then, please."

“Such unease, why?” Mitsuo noted. “What is it that you fear for Lahni?”

“Just a feeling, nothing concrete. Not sure, I just want to see her on a ship sailing out,” Yuko admitted.

“Well, if you wish that to be so then that’s what we will do. There is a little bar down by the water across from the wharf where we can sit and be for a bit and feel our way in. You never know, we may meet someone there who can help. How about it?” Mitsuo suggested.

Lahni nodded, barely listening to her chaperones. She was still thinking about the journey behind her so much that she hadn’t even begun to contemplate what lay ahead.

As they approached the bar, Lahni spotted a large cargo vessel called the ‘Gorbachev’.

“Look!” Mitsuo pointed out, “This one is going to Russia for sure. Maybe we’ll meet some sailors in the bar from that ship. It’s named after a Russian politician. The last one before the iron curtain came down in the late 80’s.”

“Wasn’t he instrumental in that?” Yuko asked.

“Yes, that is correct, he was because he allowed it to fall,” Mitsuo continued. “Not that relations with Japan and Russia have improved much since! The current administration of Putin and our Prime Minister here have only just gotten together to sign a peace treaty that was never signed after the Second World War. Can you believe that? They’ve technically been at war since, without fighting of course, but still an oddity,” Mitsuo pondered.

“At war with my country? Wow, I had no idea, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope they fix that quickly,” Lahni said, still looking miles away in her thoughts.

They entered the bar and sat down. Lahni looked around to get a feel for the place and the people. Ceilings were low and the lights fairly dim. The man behind the bar was staring at her. She nodded at him with a small smile. He looked away a little confused at such a direct greeting from a canine. He came around the side of the bar toward the table. First he asked Yuko what she wanted to drink and then Mitsuo, ignoring Lahni. Then he addressed Mitsuo. “Sir, dogs aren’t really allowed inside here,” he whispered, trying not to cause a scene.

“I know!” Mitsuo answered nodding at the man and then turning back to his companions.

“Excuse me, sir, this dog is not allowed in here. You have to sit outside with this one, please, I’ll get into trouble if you stay in here,” he pleaded.

“It’s OK Mister, I’ll go outside and wait for my friends. If you would be so kind as to bring me a bowl of water...I’m very thirsty,” Lahni said loudly to the bar man.

“We won’t be staying either if she can’t...!” Yuko added, getting up off the bench.

“No, no Yuko, you stay and have your drinks, I’ll be fine, really. Not to worry!” Lahni interrupted Yuko.

The barkeep stood there in silence completely confused about what had just happened. Lahni left for the outside. She sat down on the mat at the bar's entrance closing her eyes towards the bright sun to get some warm rays onto her face. The barman brought water and placed it next to her. A few minutes later a hand stroked her head from behind. She opened her eyes. A sailor who had been sitting in the back of the establishment had come out to smoke a cigarette.

He lit the cigarette, took a drag from it and then said. "I heard you in there."

"And?" Lahni asked.

"Nothing really, the guy behind the bar is still not talking. I think you shocked the life out of him. He is still serving drinks but he looks like he's seen a ghost," he answered, laughing.

"You look different. Where are you from?", Lahni asked.

"Mother Russia...I've been gone for too long again! That ship over there is home for the moment!" he said, pointing at the 'Gorbachev'. "We're leaving later today when all the unloading is done. Can't wait...! What about you, you don't look like a local either. Siberia is my guess?"

"How'd you know? Is it that obvious? East Siberia, near the top end, to be exact... I'm trying to get back there. Is there a way for me to get on that ship of yours to get to Vladivostok?"

"Sure, I can get you on. I'll have to talk with the captain first, though. Can you catch rats and mice? We might have a job for you," he suggested.

"Absolutely I can!" she proclaimed, not really thinking about that fact that it was mice who had helped her onto the first ship at the very start of her journey.

"I'm Lahni, by the way. What's your name?"

"I'm Ivan, nice to meet you. Who are your friends in there? Do they need to get over there as well?"

"No, they just helped me get here. Yuko lives down South in Taiji and Mitsuo is close by, just up the hill a little."

"OK, you wait here with your friends and I'll go and sort this out for you," Ivan promised, "I'll be back soon."

But instead of going towards the ship as Lahni had expected, he went to the building next door, which looked more like a private residence than a restaurant. It had a doublewide front door, one large window to street level with the curtains drawn and a low awning overhanging a bench in the front. A shingle with writing on it hung above the bench. Ivan rang the bell then disappeared through the doorway.

In the meantime, Mitsuo and Yuko had come out of the bar to see about Lahni's wellbeing. She was back to sunning herself on the mat in the front.

"Oh, good, you're still here," Yuko said with relief in her voice. "I was worried you'd leave after the treatment you got

in there.”

“No, of course not, I would never leave without saying goodbye and I was quite comfortable out here.”

The door in the house next to the bar opened and Ivan rushed out. “Lahni come, quickly, you must meet her, come!” Ivan pronounced while waving at her to follow him.

“Who is this and what is he on about?” Mitsuo asked.

“That’s Ivan, I just met him while waiting out here...he is a sailor on that ship there. He had gone into this house to ask his captain about a job for me and passage to Vladivostok.”

“Wow, you move fast. All this time we’ve been racking our brains in there about how to get you on there,” Yuko said.

“Well, I’m not there yet. I don’t know if I got the job yet. But I better go and meet whoever he is speaking about,”

Lahni answered while moving towards Ivan and the door that he was still holding open for her. They vanished behind it.

Yuko and Mitsuo decided to sit down and wait since they had no idea what this was all about.

The inside of the house didn’t look very traditional Japanese at all. It had all the usual tatami mats on the upstairs floors and sliding walls but the décor was rather different. Candles were flickering everywhere; red curtains hung from the top of all the windows; ornate cushions with gold and silver threads were strewn about on the floor around a low table in the middle. A middle-aged woman with long black hair and a colorful robe sat on one side with a deck of large cards in front of her. She looked a bit like Lahni’s people. Round faced, dark almond shaped eyes. She must be Russian as well, Lahni thought. The captain, a medium-sized man in his sixties sat in a window seat by an open pane smoking a pipe. The pipe was hanging to the side anchored by his gold tooth. His beard was almost white and cleanly groomed to about half an inch. He had blue eyes, a big rounded nose and thick eyebrows. He smiled at Lahni and nodded. The woman pointed to the cushion on the opposite side of her. “Please have a seat!” she said with a deep, pleasant voice.

“Thanks,” Lahni said sitting down.

Ivan joined his captain for a smoke.

“I really wanted to meet you,” she said. “I’m Irina. The captain here is my brother. He comes to see me when he’s on this coast. I left Russia long ago and settled here. I have a lot of business from all the sailors who come into the harbor. I like it here.”

“What exactly is it that you do?” Lahni asked curiously.

“I read cards, tarot. I am what some people call a fortuneteller. I call myself an intuitive and a seer. It’s not always fortunes I see though. You’ve heard of it?” Irina asked.

“No, I haven’t but please educate me!” Lahni said.



“I saw you in my cards last night. I knew you were coming. So let’s begin. Are you ready?” Irina explained while shuffling the cards. “Here, touch them please, one paw is enough...it’s important to get your energy in there.”

“OK,” Lahni said now even more curious as to what this was all about.

Irina began pulling cards from the top of the deck and laying them out in a grid, which looked a bit like a cross, with three cards down and four across. They had colorful figures and pictures on them in various configurations.

Lahni saw one with a sword and another with a rider on a horse but didn’t know what any of it meant. “You miss your family very much, right! I can see that from the Two of Cups, which is about bonding and togetherness. You also carry a lot of sadness about having to say good-bye a lot,” Irina said, beginning the reading. “But it’s also about a new bond with someone you will meet shortly,” she continued. “Here is where you are! Right here, in the middle, is who you are at your core. The Ace of Swords is about clarity of mind and a singularity of purpose. You move with intent and focus and you usually get to your goals quickly. But the card below should be a warning to you. It’s the Tower of Ambition. If you push your agenda on the wrong people in the wrong way you’ll get into trouble. Be aware and awake, always feel your way forward rather than think. There are those in the world who don’t want you to succeed even if that’s hard to believe,” Irina said, looking at Lahni sternly. “Be careful! You have been grappling with the idea of going home but I see you aren’t sure of yourself. You don’t know if you’re done with your journey, right?” Irina exclaimed. Lahni nodded strongly.

“Well, let me tell you that you are not done. You will continue on but remember to keep yourself well in your spirit. Take enough time for your soul to recoup on a daily basis. Be still a lot and listen. You are at one with the world, which

has been shown to you on your travels. Trust that! The Hierophant is telling you to stick to your inner cycle, which is connected to nature. Nature has strict rules, which may never be broken without consequence. You just have to look at our relationship with nature to know that is true. Adhere to them, always! Believe in your gut,” Irina said reading the cards.

Lahni nodded. “I always do.”

“You are on your right path, you are supported wherever you go. That is true of the past and in what lays ahead for you. The Ace of Coin is a beautiful card to have. It means you will be successful in your ventures and many opportunities will come your way. Your path is clear. Listen to your guidance! You are a strong spirit with a mission to fulfill,” Irina said, smiling. “That is it...oh and you will be on their ship tonight by the way,” she added, pointing at the two sailors in the window seat who had their heads turned towards the street in conversation. They turned around in an instant and smiled at Lahni.

“You want the job?” asked Ivan. “Yuri, our captain here agreed to take you to Vladivostok as long as you keep the vermin at bay. Whatever that may take. Are you up to the task?”

“Sure, thank you and nice to meet you, Captain Yuri. And thank you, Irina for the reading of the cards. That was new and helpful. I must go now to see about my friends who are waiting for me next door. I have to say good-bye,” Lahni said, giving Irina a kiss on the cheek. “I will see you guys later.”

“5 p.m. sharp at the wharf. We’ll be leaving shortly after, so don’t be late!” Yuri demanded in a firm voice.

“Aye-aye, Captain!” Lahni said on her way out.

Outside she ran to embrace Yuko who was sitting on a low wall by the bar; Mitsuo wasn’t in sight. “You look happy! What happened in there?” Yuko asked.

“Where is Mitsuo? I have to tell him as well. He didn’t leave without a goodbye?” Lahni asked.

“No, no. He had to go run an errand, something that couldn’t wait. But he will be back soon. So tell me, what happened?”

“There was this lady called Irina, a Russian woman, who is a Tarot card reader. She said she knew that I was coming to see her...and that I wouldn’t be going home just yet. She said that I would meet someone who would help me a lot. And also I have the job on the ship as a rat catcher! I have to be on the ship by five o’clock.”

“That is great news about the job. And the rest is very interesting. Maybe I should go see her as well but a rat catcher, really? Are you comfortable with killing rats and mice?” Yuko enquired.

“Killing, no one said anything about killing. They said catching and controlling but they didn’t mention killing anyone,” Lahni said with a wink.

“Understood!” Yuko said. “You’ve obviously got it all worked out, that is wonderful.”

Mitsuo's little car pulled up and stopped where they stood. "Hey Yuko, I have to go again. Some issues at the temple I have to deal with. As you know, even as a Zen master, it's chop wood, carry water!" he said, laughing. Are you going to stay with Lahni until she goes on the ship?"

"Yes I will. Can you fetch me later? I'd like to stay with you a few more days if that suits you? They leave at around 5 p.m., I heard," Yuko said.

"How did you know that they are taking me?" Lahni asked.

"Do you have to ask?" Mitsuo answered and left it at that. Lahni nodded in agreement. She knew what he meant by his question.

Being a Zen master he was connected and clued in on most things that were going on and didn't need to be told about much of anything.

"So, dear Lahni, I may or may not see you later if you're already on board before I get back," Mitsuo said, while getting out of the car. "Come, let's say our farewells right here, so I can be on my way. I wish I could stay but those darn monks are squabbling over something again. I have to sort it out as usual."

Lahni came in for a hug. She landed a huge wet kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for all your help and it was an absolute pleasure to meet you. I hope we'll see each other again," Lahni said into his ear.

"Ah, I wish but I have a feeling that you'll have better and bigger things to do. You've been told that already, haven't you?" he added, looking her in the eyes.

"How'd you know?" Lahni said, not expecting an answer.

"I'll fill in the details for him later on. We'll have a few days to chat," Yuko promised.

"See you!" Mitsuo said while getting back into the car and driving off.

They stood there waving at him for a moment.

"Let's go and find a place for a nap, I'm tired after all this," Lahni said, yawning widely. We have hours before the ship leaves. Are you really happy to stay here with me for all that time?" she asked.

"Of course and besides what else am I going to do? And I love hanging out with you!" Yuko said. "Look, over there is a rest area for the sailors in that little park. Let's go there and find a protected spot to lie down."

Just before five o'clock, Lahni sat before the 'Gorbachev' saying her good-byes to Yuko. Mitsuo hadn't returned yet.

She then proceeded up the gangway. She took every step very slowly just in case Mitsuo would arrive. Just as she approached the last few steps his car screeched around the corner stopping right by the ramp. He jumped out and jogged

up the incline. “Perfect timing. I haven’t stepped onto the ship yet,” Lahni said. Ivan had arrived at the gate to fetch Lahni and was waiting to show her around. “Won’t be long,” Lahni said.

They hugged one last time. “We did see each other again. Thanks so much for your help and wisdom! I loved meeting you,” Lahni said kissing him on the cheek again.

“Second good-byes are the hardest,” Mitsuo said. “Good luck with everything. Godspeed! Love and blessings on your journey!” he added while climbing back down to the dock. Two sailors pulled up the gangplank and locked the gate. Lahni waved one more time from the railing. “See you!”

“Good-bye...love you!” Yuko said. The ship’s horn blared out twice.

“Time to go!” Lahni yelled towards them.

Yuko and Mitsuo stood there watching the ship depart. They waved as long as they could still see it.

Chapter 22 Home or not

The captain had asked Lahni to keep her conversational skills under wraps, since he thought it would be a bit of a distraction for his crew, which he didn't need.

"You know the drill, Lahni. No talking to anyone other than the captain or myself and maybe the two who heard us at the gate. They've been told and are OK. I will get you your food every day at seven o'clock in the morning, noon and five o'clock in the evening. There'll be snacks in your little cabin if you get hungry in between. There's always fresh water in the kitchen and on deck. If you need anything you come to me. Yuri already told you about the rats and mice and hopefully there won't be too many to deal with. I am not expecting you to eat them, just keep them out of the kitchen and storeroom. You can dispose of any you find overboard. There are plenty of sharks out there who would appreciate a meal they don't have to hunt for," Ivan explained. "Best to stay out of the way of most of the crew. Some of them are rough around the edges and may not be too friendly," he added.

"Aye, Aye, Ivan!" Lahni said very amused about all of this for some reason. She was positively giddy about going to Russia. After settling in, Lahni went for a reconnaissance walk around the entire ship. While in the galley she saw movement in the corner. Not sure about what she'd seen she sat there quietly. A familiar rustling noise came from that same corner. Mice! It must be, she thought. She looked around to make sure there was no one else around. All the kitchen staff was having dinner before the crew was to be served. They were sitting in the dining room next door. "Ok, guys, listen up!" she whispered into the corner. "Meet me tonight when most of the crew is asleep. My cabin is room 4, next to the galley. Midnight! Be there or beware! I have been hired to catch you! If you want to live, come and see me! Spread the word! Don't let anyone see you."

"We'll see if this works," she mumbled to herself when the cook came in with his kitchen helpers carrying dirty plates.

"Let's get this show on the road, everyone. The crew is hungry. And we're already off scheduled meal times," he yelled. "Oh, the vermin catcher is already on the job. Out of my kitchen while we cook for the crew, though!" he commanded pointing Lahni toward the door.

"Well, this is going to be interesting. I'm being treated like a normal dog again!" she mumbled while leaving the galley.

She went to her cabin where Ivan had left a large platter of food for her. "Well, this is more like it!" she uttered and dug in. Must leave some of this cheese for my furry friends to get them to listen to me. That cook isn't going to let me in the kitchen much to steal things for them. Luckily there is plenty here," she said talking to herself. Or so she thought.

“Heard on the grape vine what you said in the kitchen. So what’s the deal? Are you going to come after us?” a small voice asked from behind the armchair leg.

“Who’s that?” Lahni enquired. “Mouse?”

The rat came out from behind the chair leg and sat right in front of Lahni. “Let me tell you something, you...what are you anyway? We were here first and you can’t get rid of us. We live here. We were just happy to get rid of the last of those pesky cats and then you have to come along and threaten us. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“What happened to the last cat?” Lahni asked without answering the rat’s question.

“Died... old age I think. Answer my question, please!” the rat said.

“Well, I needed passage to Vladivostok, you see and this was the only way to get there that I could manage to find quickly. I met Ivan, one of the sailors who hired me with permission from the captain of this vessel as a rat and mice catcher. I know it’s a pretty lame job but it’s important to them...but here’s the thing. I don’t really want to kill you guys or the mice for that matter, so I would really appreciate your co-operation. Can you please inform everyone to come to this cabin at midnight for the meeting I spoke of in the galley! I’m sure they heard me, well obviously they did. You’re here,” Lahni explained.

“Oh, that sounds like something I can do. My name is Rasputin, or better Raspy, that’s what everyone calls me. See you at midnight,” he said.

“Lahni is my name!” she said as the rat disappeared under her bed. She smiled, feeling satisfied with her first rodent encounter on the ship.

At midnight Lahni got up from her bed and turned a small light on. She looked down beside the bed and found about a dozen mice and five rats sitting under the armchair in the corner.

“Oh, hello! You can come out from under there. It’s safe!” she said with a calm, soft voice. “I’ve met mice before, in fact they helped me a lot when I first began travelling,” she added.

The mice and rats obliged her and came closer. She quickly explained the situation at hand.

“So, please don’t go in the kitchen or dining room and stay away during the day completely if you can. Not only will you be in danger if you are seen by anyone but me but I will be in trouble as well. My instructions were to get rid of you — which at sea means, to throw you guys overboard when I catch you but that is obviously not going to happen. I will have my food brought into this cabin and I will share it with you. But we’ll have to ration it. And I highly recommend that you get off this vessel when we get to our destination. The next dog or cat won’t be so friendly if you know what I mean,” Lahni explained.

“We’ll take our chances, thanks for the warning though,” said one of the mice. “We will, however, do what you ask of us during your stay. Thank you for allowing us to be safe and fed. It’s very kind of you.”

Two of the rats weren’t as happy about the arrangement. They walked off grumbling about it to each other not even noticing the platter of food Lahni had left from her dinner. They disappeared below her bed. The mice tucked into the food with the remaining rats joining in.

“Is this all of you by the way?” Lahni asked, sitting next to the feast.

“Yes, or at least I think so”, replied another mouse. “We had a few more a few weeks ago but the cat got them.”

This should be manageable, she thought and jumped back onto her bed. “Do you mind if I turn the light off, I need a little more sleep? Tomorrow when you come for your breakfast make it after seven o’clock, since Ivan delivers my food then. Lunch is at midday and dinner at around sunset. So always show up a little after that and this should work out well. I will tell you my story then as well, if you like.”

The mice nodded while still munching on the cheese and bread Lahni wasn’t partial to.

As planned, the next morning all the mice from the night before turned up for breakfast but only three of the rats. “Where are the others?” Lahni asked.

“Not sure, we haven’t seen them since last night, they seemed to be unhappy with this deal of yours”, answered the largest of the rats.

“I don’t know why, I think it’s pretty sweet. Don’t worry about them! They have a stash of food down below in the engine room where their hideaway is. You won’t see them for a few days at least,” he explained. “I’ll make sure those two trouble makers don’t cause any problems for you.”

Ivan arrived at seven the next morning with breakfast and two dead rats wrapped in newsprint in his hand.

“I guess you have two less to worry about. The engineer found them this morning in the boiler room. It looks like they got too close to the heaters overnight, fell into the hot water and died. Strange, really!” he said.

“Oh, I know those two, I saw them yesterday; they weren’t happy about it, either. They ran away from me in the kitchen,” Lahni admitted.

“Here, you can throw them overboard. It is your job after all,” Ivan suggested and left breakfast and the two rat bodies next to her.

“Thanks,” She said closing the door behind him.

“I saw that!” said Raspy from under the bed. “I know it wasn’t you. They never listened. They were both into taking risks. You can bury them at sea! They liked it at sea! Let’s do that tonight after dark, together if you like.”

That evening all the remaining rats and mice gathered at the stern of the ship. “Who wants to say something?” asked Lahni.

“Say anything, just do it!” The mice said. “They were never nice to us.”

“I will,” said a smaller rat. “They were alright to me. I liked them. Here we go. See you later guys, it was nice knowing you. Have a good trip wherever you go next...ah that’s it,” he said.

“They had a nice life!” Raspy said, shrugging his shoulders. “Would you mind doing the honors?” he asked Lahni, indicating the ship’s railing.

“Of course!” Lahni said, picking up the deceased rodents one by one and lifting them over the railing and letting them go. “That’s that, I guess. Keep safe everyone. I don’t like funerals,” she said, leaving the rodents to go to bed.

The next days were spent as planned, feeding her travel companions and keeping them out of sight of the crew and captain. They arrived in Vladivostok harbor late in the afternoon. It was almost dark. Lahni gathered her small friends and reiterated again how important it was for them to get off the ship and find other housing and food. “It’s up to you but it won’t be safe on here anymore once I depart. It was a pleasure, happy travels to you all,” she said, gathering her few things. “It’s time to go!”

Outside on the wharf she said her good-byes to Ivan and a big thank you when she saw a group of mice leave the Gorbachev along the rope lines that tied the ship to the dock. She nodded at them one last time. “Smart!” she whispered.

“Who is smart?” Ivan asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking out loud. That’s all. Nothing important,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. “Thanks a bunch for the passage, the food and the job,” she said.

“No problem, it was a pleasure. The captain and the cook were happy since they didn’t see any rodents around. You did a good job. Good luck finding your family!” Ivan said.

A couple of hours later Lahni found herself sitting on a lonely road in the dark trying to look towards home. In front of her lay thousands of miles of forest and tundra and wild terrain. 3000 miles north of here her family was moving from camp to camp depending on the weather and food stocks. Being springtime, they were more likely to be in the one place she remembered and would surely be able to find them, although the track north would be long and arduous. Her heart was longing for home and her people and her siblings. Her head, however, was mulling over the fact that she was still feeling dissatisfied with the results of her mission so far. Irina had told her that she wouldn’t be going home at all, at least not in the foreseeable future and that her work wasn’t done. But should she trust in a deck of cards? In the end it would still be

up to her to decide which way to go. But the feeling that her mission was far from over, made her question her desire to return home just yet.

“Did I do enough to warrant going home? Surely my people would know about all this by now. People are talking about it everywhere,” she mumbled to herself. But despite all the pep talks by friends and people she’d met along the way about how well she’d done, that niggling feeling wasn’t going anywhere. She decided to stay on the spot where she was for a while and rest. If in doubt...sleep, she thought. Somehow, something would happen to help her to make a decision.

The next morning she arose very early; it was barely daylight. A truck had rumbled past her, waking her up. She shook herself and then without even thinking for a moment she started trotting back into the city center of Vladivostok. Maybe I can get a ride from someone there, she thought and kept on moving.

After cruising through the city she ended up in the city center. She came around a street corner and saw that she had come out at the main train station. The street was busy with traffic and the road still covered in slushy snow. It was spring elsewhere but this end of Siberia took its time to defrost. A break in traffic allowed her to cross quickly. In front of the station a group of people stood on the sidewalk hugging and kissing each other, saying their good-byes.

Behind them, on the side of the entrance to the station was a small coffee shop with high tables and stools. Hot coffee was steaming in the still cold morning air.

Men dressed in coats and thick fur hats stood around sipping their warm drinks. One of the men looked Lahni’s way and winked at her. She turned around to see if there was someone behind her his greeting was meant for. No one was there.

She sat down and just looked at him for a minute. He waved at her to come closer. She did.

“Are you hungry, pretty one?” he asked, petting her on the head. “Here have some of my breakfast!” he said, handing her a bite of his snack.

She took it with her mouth, as gently as possible. “Thank you!” she said not looking at him. He bent down towards her. “Did you say something?” he asked, whispering.

She nodded. He indicated to her to come to the other end of the café. “Come with me over here, it’s less crowded,” he suggested. Lahni followed him. “Now tell me again, did you say something?” he asked again.

“Yes, I said thank you, as you do when someone offers you some food!” she answered nonchalantly.

“OK!” said the man. “This is very interesting. I want to know more now but my train is leaving in half an hour.”

“Where are you off to?” Lahni asked.

“Oh, sorry, let me start from the beginning. “Sir William Rutherford. How do you do?” he said, extending his hand towards Lahni. She gave him her paw.

“It’s nice to meet you Sir Rutherford! My name is Lahni and I’ve just returned to Russia from a really long trip around the Pacific to research climate change and help my animal friends in the ocean.”

“Call me Will, please! I travel a lot as well. What better way to meet people and animals, right? I’m an adventurer and I like talking. And in half an hour I’m taking the Trans-Siberia Express to Moscow where I’ll be getting off the train for a few days and then I continue back aboard to Paris in France. It’s a long trip but it’s so much fun and you meet the most interesting sorts and see lots of the country. Now you know everything about me. What about you?”

“How much time do you have again?” Lahni asked.

He looked at his pocket watch. “Now, 23 minutes, exactly! What are your plans? Wait, I have an idea. If you have nothing on right now, why don’t you join me?” he said with excitement in his eyes.

“Join you? What, on the train to Moscow and Paris?”

“Yes, isn’t it a marvelous idea. I can show you everything. You’ll be in my cabin, of course and hotels! How about it? I just simply must hear your story,” he added.

“Maybe that’s what Irina was talking about?” she mumbled.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing, long story. I was going to head home to the Northeast to find my tribe....” she said, pondering the invitation for a minute.

“You have exactly 20 minutes to make up your mind. Maybe a little less since I’ll have to buy a ticket for you and get to the platform,” he explained.

“Well, I guess... I will. Thanks for asking!”

“Good, I need to collect my luggage quickly and get you that ticket. Come quickly! We don’t want to miss it!” he said with urgency.



So, after about one year and three months of traversing the Pacific in search of answers and solutions to climate change, pollution and more, Lahni was walking towards platform 1 with a stranger from England named Will Rutherford, who had purchased a ticket and some extra snacks for his new companion, to board the first class carriage on the Trans-Siberian Express.

They settled into their luxurious seats as the train slowly pulled out of Vladivostok station heading northwest towards Moscow. Will had already been served a cup of tea and had a newspaper in hand. “Well, here’s some good news! You might like this one, my dear!” he said reading the headline on the front page out loud: ‘Australian Government to take Japan to International Court for Illegal Whaling Activities in Australian Waters!’

Lahni was overjoyed to hear such news, which made her think about Kohola and Dr.Morton.

“So, now I am ready to hear all about it! Start from the very beginning!” Will said.

“OK,” she said, “here we go...one morning over a year ago I woke up from a very vivid dream...”



Appendix

— Resources, organization, websites and info to live clean and help the earth:

<http://dolphinproject.org/blog/post/japan-report-on-the-beach-in-taiji>

<http://www.seashepherd.org>

<http://theplastiki.com>

http://opensourceecology.org/wiki/Open_Source_Ecology

<http://www.oceandefenderhawaii.com>

<http://www.oceanconservancy.org/support-us/trash-lab.html#.UNNz3hsTlvU.facebook>

<http://www.sundropfarms.com/farms2/>

<http://thisgreenblog.com/2011/05/raising-environmentally-aware-kids.html>

<http://www.plant-for-the-planet.org/en/>

<http://www.habitatadvocate.com.au/?tag=fraser-island-dingo&paged=2>

<http://www.geoengineeringwatch.org>

<http://www.reef.crc.org.au>

<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/>

<http://championsforcetaceans.com/>

<http://mission-blue.org>

<http://www.farmfoodfreedom.org>

<http://www.savethearctic.org>

<http://www.opsociety.org>

<http://www.ndrc.org>

http://www.wildearthguardians.org/site/PageServer#.UiadWBZPI_s

<http://pacificenvironment.org>

<http://www.oceanoutfallgroup.com>

<http://www.ifaw.org/australia>

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