



Global Cooling

David Reiter



Global Cooling

Also by David P Reiter

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Global Cooling

David Reiter



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1

*in which Tiger, Wanda and Tark
make tracks for the Coast*



It was only a few days since Tiger had left Canberra for the Coast with Wanda the blue-tongued lizard and Tark the magical frog. His tummy began to grumble again though it was only mid-morning.

I wonder if I've packed enough Cat Gourmet, he thought, trembling at the sight of yet another steep climb on the trail ahead.

But he only said: 'If anyone's hungry, we

could stop up there in the clearing.'

Tark spun around on the track. 'We've only been walking for a little while!'

Wanda smiled. 'I told you he wouldn't be up to it, Tark. Introduced species have very little staying power.'

Tiger felt the fur on the back of his neck rise. 'I *wish* you'd give that Introduced Species stuff a rest,' he snapped.

'Touchy, touchy!' said Wanda. 'I'm just trying to keep you moving. It'll take *months* for us to make it to the Coast if we have to stop every three hours for a snack.'

'Not necessarily,' winked Tark. 'If you'd only let me use my special powers, we could be there in a nano-second.'

'No cheating,' said Wanda, shaking a disapproving claw at him. 'If we're going to do our part in Project Earthmend, we have to do it the *natural* way. Otherwise, the natives will never take us seriously!'

'OK, OK!' grumbled Tiger, leading the way up the hill. 'A cat is only as good as his promise, and I told Alexander I would lead the way for our species.'

‘Alexander’s got it pretty easy,’ Tark sniffed. ‘All he has to do is write it up on the Project Earthmend blog when I text him what we’ve done for the day.’

‘But you must admit it’s pretty cool,’ said Tiger. ‘For us to *do* it one day and then see ourselves on YouTube the next.’

‘Except we *don’t* see ourselves,’ Wanda pointed out. ‘My mobile phone’s useless out here.’

Tark shook his head. ‘Microwave transmission is *so* last century. I wish humans would let us use holographic broadcasts.’

‘What’s that again?’ Tiger asked. ‘I know you’ve explained it before, but —’

‘Griffins have had holography for eons,’ Tark explained. ‘First you creatively visualise your show, then magnetise it to photo receptors that encrypt the audio and video to the master channel, and —’

‘Of course,’ Tiger winced. ‘I remember now.’

‘*Do you?*’ Tark snapped. ‘Alexander got it the first time.’

‘He’s a human,’ Tiger muttered. ‘They’re supposed to know such things.’

They'd reached the top of the rise now, and Tiger's heart was thumping wildly. If only they could stop so he could have a can of Cat Gourmet, that would lighten his load a bit.

'Hey, look,' he pointed. 'There's a town down there. Is that Sydney?'

Wanda laughed. 'You've got to be kidding. Sydney's a *city*, fur-ball.'

'I...knew that,' Tiger said, quickly. 'I was just testing you!'

Tark pointed a glowing toe at the town. 'Goulburn,' he declared.

'Is that anywhere near Sydney?' Tiger asked, hopefully.

'Not really,' said Wanda. 'As you can see, it's a country town. I've heard they worship the sheep in Goulburn. No one in a big city like Sydney would be fond of such a stupid animal.'

'Ah, yes,' Tark agreed. 'When Eudora and our crew flew over the Big Merino, we thought it must be a god to the humans. Then we saw all these tourists coming out with bags of cheap souvenirs.'

'Thank goodness no one has thought of building a Big Blue-tongue,' Wanda snorted.

‘What would you do if they did?’ Tark asked.

‘I’d dare a herd of snails to slime it up!’ Wanda laughed. ‘That would make the tourists think twice!’

‘Bleah!’ said Tiger, sticking out his tongue. ‘How can you eat them – the snails, I mean?’

‘Call it Blue-Tongue Gourmet, if you like,’ said Wanda. ‘Even humans have learned to like them – with a bit of garlic butter, of course!’

‘This isn’t getting us to The Coast,’ Tark grumbled. ‘Why don’t you let me...pick up the pace?’

‘Come on, Wanda,’ Tiger urged. ‘No one’s looking!’

Wanda sighed. ‘Well, all right. At this rate it’ll be winter before we get to Bondi. Wave your magic wand, Tark – or whatever you have to do.’

The last thing Tiger remembered was Tark pointing his toe at them. It glowed bright green, and a sizzling sort of mist rose from it.

They came down in a little park. The grass and trees were very green, and there was a playground with kids swinging, and climbing up these taut ropes in the shape of a dome.

‘Welcome to Sydney!’ Tark smiled. ‘It’s just a hop, skip and a jump to the Opera House – over a bit of harbour, of course.’

‘Hey, neat!’ said Tiger. ‘They should put in an adventure playground like this in the park near my house.’

‘You mean *Alexander’s* house,’ Wanda corrected, rubbing her eyes to be sure she wasn’t imagining all this. ‘You’re on the road, remember? No going back until Project Earthmend succeeds!’

Tiger blinked. ‘OK, so I’m just a *little* homesick. Don’t you miss your drainpipe, Wanda?’

‘One drainpipe’s much the same as the next,’ Wanda said. ‘If you get too attached to one, you can be sure that some human will destroy it with a backhoe to put in microsprinklers or some such thing!’

Suddenly a pair of pitbull terriers appeared at the park’s edge and spotted Tiger. ‘A cat!’ one of them cried. ‘Let’s rip it to shreds, Martha!’

Seeing them tear across the grass, Tiger’s first instinct was to bolt for the nearest tree, but Tark brought them to a quick stop with a icy beam of light from his toe.

‘Thanks, Tark,’ said Tiger, thumbing a paw at the now-frozen dogs. ‘But you *said* you’d teach me how to do that myself – now that I’m a Member of the Sacred Few.’

‘I will – in time,’ Tark promised. ‘It’s not as easy as it looks. Watch this.’

Another gesture from the magic toe and the dogs unfroze just from the neck up. They could growl and grit their teeth, but their feet were still fused to the ground.

‘No fair!’ Martha complained. ‘You’re supposed to *run*, cat, not play tricks.’ She turned to the other dog. ‘Isn’t that right, Herbie?’

Tiger sidled up to them till he was no more than a whisker’s length from the first dog’s yellowed teeth. ‘Better dogs than you have tried to get me,’ he grinned, ‘and ended up specimens for ETs.’

‘Extra-terrestrials,’ Wanda explained to them. ‘Frog-like creatures from the Planet Griffin.’

‘Don’t pull their leg,’ Tark piped in, with slit eyes. ‘And Prince would not approve of you calling us *creatures*!’

‘We know about Tony!’ Herbie snarled. ‘How you sold him into slavery!’

'How'd you hear about that?' Tiger asked, amazed. 'Is there a doggy grape vine?'

'Wouldn't *you* like to know, cat!' Martha said.

'In any case, you got it wrong,' said Tiger. 'He's *very* happy on Planet Griffin! He's young again, and he gets minced steak every night.'

Tark thrust his toe at the dogs again and they were silent. 'You stupid feline!' he cried. 'That's classified information – about our specimens. I'll have to exterminate these two now.'

Tiger was horrified. 'Oh, please, don't kill them. I didn't mean –'

'You can't resist a good gossip, Tiger,' said Tark, as his toe began to throb bright red. 'And now they'll have to pay the price.'

'Ease up,' said Wanda, stepping into the line of fire. 'They're only silly pooches. Can't you just wipe their short term memory, or something?'

Tark considered his options. 'You must be getting soft, Wanda, speaking up for a pair of *dogs*.'

Wanda stood her ground. 'I thought the idea was to teach the lesser species about Project Earthmend. If you're just going to exterminate

them all, then I might as well have stayed in Canberra!

‘OK, OK!’ Tark relented. ‘We’ll...re-educate them.’

With a warming beam from his toe, the dogs came to life from the neck up again.

‘I’ll give you full movement,’ Tark said, ‘if you promise to listen to what we have to say.’

The dogs looked at each other and then shrugged. ‘What have we got to lose?’ they said in unison.

After Tark unfroze them, they were so grateful that they just stayed where they were, licking their paws.

‘Now pay attention,’ Wanda said. ‘You are the first of your species in Sydney to hear this, so we need you to help us spread the word about Project Earthmend.’

The dogs shrugged. ‘No one’s said anything about *that* in the dog-free. Go on.’

‘The Earth’s in grave danger,’ Tiger said. ‘Haven’t you heard of Global Warming?’

‘Yeah, yeah!’ Martha said. ‘Melting ice-caps, and all that. Islands slipping under water. But our mistress says there’s nothing she can do.’

'That's where she's wrong,' Tark said. 'She lets you run free, without a lead, doesn't she?'

'Not her fault,' Herbie said. 'She wasn't to know. Herbie here is an escape artist, and once he gets out of our yard, well, I need to look after him – on the roads, and all.'

'And when you go for these runs,' Tark continued. 'Do you...clean up after yourselves?'

'Of course not,' Herbie said. 'That's up to our human!'

'Who doesn't know where you've pooped, right?' Tiger said, going for the jugular.

'Umm,' Herbie said. 'Ummmm.'

'Exactly,' said Tiger. 'And each poo breaks down into methane gas and other unsightly things, contributing to greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.'

'I'll...take your word for it,' Herbie said. 'But what do you expect us to do – stop pooping?'

'That *could* be arranged,' Tark said, circling his toe menacingly. 'If you don't take this seriously.'

Both dogs raised their paws in surrender. 'We promise!' they cried. 'Just tell us what need to be done!'

Tark lowered his toe. 'For starters, before you escape, you must poo in your yard where your human will find it.'

'Fair enough,' Herbie said. 'Then what?'

'She'll then need to worm-farm the poo.'

Even Tiger and Wanda had to look at each other over that one.

'What do *worms* have to do with it?' Tiger asked, sticking out his tongue with disgust.

'Worms break down the poo into compost,' Tark went on. 'Great stuff for growing shrubs, which in turn absorbs lots of CO₂—before it's lost to the atmosphere.'

'That's no fun,' Herbie growled. 'The whole idea of escaping is so that she won't know where we went!'

It was Wanda's turn to give him a threatening look. 'If we don't do something quickly about Global Warming, there won't be any place to escape to!'

The dogs hesitated then nodded at each other.

'I think I speak for both of us,' Martha said. 'Where do we sign up?'

'Oh, *there* you are,' said a voice behind them.

It was a young woman, with long blond hair, wearing a track suit and holding two leads. 'Do you want me to get fined again? Let me get these leads on you!'

Then she spotted Tiger, Wanda and Tark and rubbed her eyes.

'You're making friends with a *cat*?' she said, snapping the leads on the dogs' collars. 'And a blue-tongue...and a funny looking frog? Will wonders never cease!'

'Who's funny looking?' Tark grumbled, his eyes glowing red and his enforcer toe getting very itchy.

The woman staggered back. 'I *knew* I shouldn't have had so much red wine last night. I'm sure I heard you talk, froggie!'

'The name's Tark,' Tark snapped. 'And I'll have you know my vocabulary's ten times the size of yours. And that's just in English!'

'Uh, right,' the woman said. 'You speak other languages, too. Such as?'

'Russian, Spanish, French... and ones you've never heard of.'

'He's...from out of town,' Wanda nodded, trying to cool things down.

‘And what about you, pussy?’ she asked. ‘Are you from out of town, too?’

‘Too right,’ Tiger replied. ‘My home base is Greenhouse Place—in Canberra. We’re all from Canberra, except for Tark, who is from—’

A harsh glance from Tark made Tiger reconsider mentioning the Planet Griffon.

‘A faraway place,’ he said, leaving it at that.

‘That’s it,’ the woman said. ‘Nothing but green tea for me on Friday nights from now on!’

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ Tiger said, thinking she was rather cute—for a human. ‘My human Alexander needs someone to look after him while I’m away.’

‘The pack of you have run away—from Canberra? A frog, a blue-tongue and a cute pussy cat! I don’t suppose you’d let me interview you on air?’

‘Interview?’ said Tiger.

‘Just because he can talk doesn’t mean he’s very bright,’ Wanda said, shaking her head at Tiger. ‘You must work at a radio station.’

The woman nodded. ‘I’m the Drive Show host. And I’m *sure* my listeners would be blown away to hear you. Just the sort of thing to take

their mind off peak time traffic!’

‘Project Earthmend isn’t about blowing people away,’ Tiger explained. ‘It’s about saving the Earth.’

‘You’re Greenies, too?’ the woman exclaimed. ‘Then you absolutely *must* come on!’

Tiger had never worn earphones before. He’d asked Alexander if he could have a go at his iPod more than once, but Alexander always said no.

‘Sorry, mate,’ Alexander had said. ‘Your ears are too small to fit in the buds.’

Remembering that brought Tiger’s homesickness back in a flood. But here they were in the studio, ready to tell everyone in Sydney about Project Earthmend. He’d just have to get on with it.

Tark and Wanda were perched up on Shiela’s (that was her name) desk on either side of the microphone. They were listening to a news story about how The Drought was affecting Queensland, forcing some farmers off the land.

‘Ummm,’ Shiela said, switching on the mic. ‘An all too-familiar story about the effects of Global Warming in our corner of the world.’

Something really needs to be done.’ She winked at the crew. ‘Well, as it happens, here in the studio I have three representatives from an organisation that calls itself Project Earthmend—a cute frog named Tark, a cuddly cat named Tiger, and a sleek blue-tongue lizard called Wanda. And they talk. Yes, listeners, they actually *talk*. So forget the road-rage; you’re in for a treat, as they tell us all about Project Earthmend, and what we can all do to save the Planet. Good afternoon, Tark, Tiger and Wanda!’

‘Good afternoon, Shiela,’ the trio said in unison.

The console in front of Shiela began to pulse with excitement.

‘We’ve got heaps of callers lining up,’ Shiela said, pointing at it. ‘But you’ll just have to be patient because the first question is mine. Tiger, I understand that you’ve met the Prime Minister, and that one of your mates sold him a ginger cheesecake to raise money for Project Earthmend?’

‘That would be Myrtle,’ Tiger explained. ‘She lives next door to Alexander, my human. She’s really into Project Earthmend, and she bakes

these cheesecakes that are...well, *otherworldly*, and she's donating all the money to saving the Earth.'

The console was going absolutely beserk now.

Shiela laughed. 'So *that's* why the Prime Minister suddenly went Green. All of us broadcasters just thought he was playing politics.'

'There's no place for politics when it comes to Global Warming,' Tark said. 'You humans are all in the same sinking boat—unless you change your lifestyle.'

'Agreed,' said Shiela. 'But I'm sure my listeners are dying to know how you guys learned to speak.'

'We've always known how,' Wanda said. 'But you humans haven't learned how to *listen*. So we're here to help you out!'

Just then a red-faced man appeared at the window outside the studio. He made a quick slicing gesture with his finger across his throat, meaning that Shiela should cut short the interview.

'And now a quick preview of our Sunday

Concerts program,’ she said, quickly switching over to a pre-recorded tape.

Once she took off her earphones, the man burst in. ‘This isn’t a comedy hour, Shiela. What are you on about?’ Then he saw the trio. ‘What the—’

‘Meet Tiger, Wanda and Tark,’ Shiela smiled. ‘They’re reps from Project Earthmend.’

The man hesitated. ‘I’ve heard of that. But I don’t know about using animals to sell their message. Where’s the ventriloquist?’

‘This is *radio*, Larry,’ Shiela reminded him. ‘My listeners can’t see them speaking.’ She pointed at the console. ‘But they’re certainly keen to ask questions. That can’t hurt our ratings, Mr Producer! Just one more bracket, OK?’

She’d said the magic word; Larry paused. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘But if one of those callers is from the RSPCA, I don’t want to know about it!’

Shiela was right. The classical music station had an unheard of spike in ratings across Sydney that day, and the caller console almost went into meltdown when she finally had to sign off for the news at the end of her program.

'I don't suppose you'd like to come back tomorrow,' she said, as they left the studio. 'This could be my ticket onto the 7:30 Report!'

'Sorry,' said Tark. 'We've got to make it to Bondi before dark.'

'Well, thanks heaps, and best of luck,' Shiela said, extending a hand to them.

Tiger stuck out his paw for the shake, but Tark and Wanda just stared at her hand when she offered it to them.

'Oh, sorry,' she said. 'No offence intended!'

'None taken,' said Tark. 'I'll put a note in my log about how helpful you've been, and if a tsunami ever comes this way, we'll give you first warning. That'll send your ratings through the roof – if anyone's left to ring in.'

'And say good-bye to Martha and Herbie for us,' said Tiger. 'They're not so bad – for dogs.'

As they left the radio station, Tark kicked up his heels. 'So this is Sydney,' he said. 'I could get used to living here – if Eudora would let me shift. Wonder if they have any fresh water ponds down at Bondi?'

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