

Gin Jackson: neophyte ranger

by

Marianne de Pierres

I didn't want this job but it's a kind of family affair. My father was a ranger, his father, his uncle twice removed. You know the thing?

When it came to be my turn there was one small problem. My family had an unbroken history of males born into each generation.

That's where my dad fucked up.

I don't think he liked women much, so there was a certain lack eager suitors. Which meant dad hired out to a womb factory in Sydney. He just sent sperm samples down, express.

It's not uncommon to meet womb grown kids in the city. But out here in the *wayback* - people still did it the messy way. *Mainly for something to do.*

When I was younger I thought, perhaps, I wasn't even his daughter, but Dad had me gene tested (you know, on the off chance the factory cheated). I was one hundred percent (well 50 anyway) his child - and female.

He tried to get his money back, but the womb factory had a clause and some smart lawyers who fended off dissatisfied customers.

Dad reared me until I was out of wets, had me educated down south and made sure I had what I needed (to' he never let me forget I was a mistake).

The catch was simple. Now he'd retired I was expected to take the job. Hell, there'd never been a time in the history of *Ghost Gum Creek* when a Jackson wasn't the ranger.

So here I was. Virgin Jackson. Resentful, bad tempered and hot.

'Get your damn boots off my desk, Beano!'

'Aw, c'mon, hon. Never bothered your Dad.'

I swatted at the fly sucking sweat off my face. Outside it sweltered like every day in *Ghost Gum Creek*. The whole dome area of the town was meant to be air-conditioned, yet things never worked the way they should. You could still walk from the bank to the *Co-op* without kitting up in outside clobber, but not without losing a gallon.

'In case you hadn't noticed Dad isn't here. So get 'em off.'

'You speak real bad for a girl who's been educated, hon.' He pouted a sloppy kiss at me.

'I speak so you can understand me, Beano,' I said.

Disgust made a home on my face when I talked to Beano. But even insults were wasted. Beano was an ex-gold miner who got forced into a town job on account of some bureaucratic mix up. The mines dep't down in the cittee had irrevocably cancelled his claim – his right to mine – because he hadn't registered his off-world squeeze (the Low Hem government liked to know this shit on account of the fact that off-worlders eat native fauna).

Now Beano spread his bile and his fat corpus around my office. He'd also taken over Gross Gravy's reputation as the town tart, which meant he carried enough disease to

fog a pathologist's microscope. I figured though, he was safe enough to be around if you didn't exchange bodily fluids.

Uuughh! The thought! 'We've got the Humpy run. Saddle up.'

He creaked out of the chair, farted and limped to the door. 'Can't do, hon. BlooRoo day at the cafe,' he said cheerfully.

BlooRoo's were kangaroo rissoles in fresh blood gravy.

'Choke on it,' I chatted back. Insubordination was Beano's only real skill.

I distracted myself by spooling through the morning's bulletins on my palmscreen. It read the same as every other day, apart from a missing person's alert and press release.

Pollee missing after riots at secession rally: Myth-tellers assist police.

*Michaela Rigg, contentious leader of the **One Big Country Faction** - the secession lobby's most vocal opposition - has vanished. Police believe her disappearance may be politically motivated. Cittee-Coast Secession members and Myth-tellers are being questioned.*

Cittee-Coasters wanted to nuke the *wayback* off the planet. Michaela Rigg was the one good thing that had happened to us inlanders in a lo-o-o-ng time. I wondered how the enquiry would go. Sydney's list of disreputable Myth-teller's was longer than the moon elevator.

I yawned and contemplated skiving off my afternoon humpy run. My chill suit hadn't been cooling so well lately. Maybe Beano had tampered with it to shit me. Or maybe it was just that paranoia gene the Jackson's had so carefully reproduced, working overtime.

I pushed back from the desk, grabbed Bara's bridle and locked the double door as I went out. Beano could sit and sweat his fat ass off on the verandah for the rest of the day for all I cared. I didn't want to be a Ranger. I didn't care much about the law. And I surely did NOT want him as my deputy.

Bara opened the stall for me. Bits of her were equine. The outside mostly. Inside she was an early model transportation computer. Inside that? Who knew? I liked to think she had a heart somewhere. But I can be romantic about those things.

Bara meant north-east wind. That was the hot one (even hotter now since the earth had warmed) that evaporated the fluid from your body in seconds. The one that had scoured the *wayback* into grotesque landforms, sharp gullies and dust ball plains.

We headed north towards the gorge country where dust was still rock, and mean spiky shrubs bristled in crevices.

Bara's top speed used to be sixty kays across the flat (with a working containment field to keep me upright and not sand blasted) but Dad had worn her out. On a good day the drive redlined at forty-five. In tough gorge country I had to settle for a walk.

I could have taken the Ranger Patrol Float, but it was too easy to overlook things at speed. Indoctrinated by Dad's old ways, I guess.

Not that much happened in *Ghost Gum Creek*, unless you count the *whirly* that tore a hole in the south side of the dome last summer. Oh yeah, and when Mabel No Chin gave birth to a set of furry twins. They were cute really, if you liked the nocturnal eye look.

My humpy run covered the remains of station houses, some hand-worked mines, the water pipe maintenance camp and the *Dry-Ditch* waterhole.

The inhabitants that I visited out there belonged in two categories. The ones that didn't want to be found, and the ones who thought *Ghost Gum Creek* was the full scope of the universe.

The station houses had long been deserted by the owners - relics of another era now - wind ways choked with cobwebs, roofs torn. Home to the ghostly *Pirra's* who flew about the ruins.

Pirra's didn't bother you much if you had good karma (and packets of sweetbix) - that was my belief, anyway. I'd heard some tales about them pecking the eyes out of squatters and sending lost sales clones crazy with their haunting cry, but I'd just found them cheeky and damn greedy.

The Miner's had no time for the pesky birds who played tricks on them at night while they slept, rearranging their tools and stealing their gems.

See, the Miner's hand-worked their patches as if they were pioneers, forced into using the rough skills of digging, scraping and dry blowing by hand, by the environmental laws.

Dad called it their penance for a clean sky and the absence of neighbours.

Their surly attitude suggested they didn't see it dad's way.

The Water Maintenance Camp was another story again. The National Water Authority couldn't get any one to work in the *wayback* anymore but they were still lawfully required to provide clean water to places like *Ghost Gum Creek*, by the Global Humanitarian Edict.

The way my dad told it, the GHE was a nice idea that only got upheld when the satellites happened to be camming our way. Whatever about it, the Camp was *beast-town*. Literally. A few edge creatures, some screwed, runaway womb kids and the usual drug psycho's. Mabel No Chin's twins had a daddy in the Camp somewhere.

I carried two pistols, a rifle and a canister of banned pesticide when I went there. I'd never been directly attacked: bluff was their game.

I wasn't too bad at it myself. You couldn't be a Jackson and not have a perverse streak. My last boyfriend, a cittee boy named J – 2 – J, reckoned I was more abrasive than a dry condom.

I told him to get a real name.

Bara and I trotted into the old Henderson station house about smoko time. The wind was blistering-dry and gusty, swirling leaves. I crooned and called out, but the resident Pirras were strangely quiet. No noises, no glimpses of white tail feathers and gnarled claws, no swishing of invisible wings about your head. In the end I left my offering of sweetbix in the dry water trough.

The Cooloo homestead and Lagoon Pool were the same.

Bothered by their absence but not really knowing why, I headed Bara towards the Camp. Her speed picked up in the sandy creek beds and for a brief, agreeable period my suit cooled properly as well.

Begrudgingly, I admired the mantle of purple haze above the nearby gorges and the *Dreamtime* greens of the spinifex. Jackson's had the *wayback* stamped in their blood, I grumbled to myself. What else explained my fit of nature appreciation?

Within sight of the Camp, though, I *knew* something was wrong. Doors banging open in the wind, a dark splattering of blood in the dirt near the cooling campfires.

Thirty to forty bodies gone walkabout.

Sand blasted my faceplate film. Acid burbled up my throat like I'd eaten a handful of Mabel No Chin's red chilies without any bread. I nudged Bara into two full circuits of the Camp looking for clues, not prepared to dismount. Something told me I might need to leave in a hurry.

An Edge creature jumped me on the second loop, scrabbling down from the branches of a gum that shaded the sat-caravan.

It landed on my back, claws piercing my suit. I heard the hiss of escaping humidity as I sprayed it full in the face with *diamopin*. It fell to the ground and Bara obligingly stomped its tail while I dismounted.

'You little piece of-' I broke off. I realized I knew the creature's name. '*Possum-by-day*, what tha' hell you doing?'

The mongrel marsupial writhed, clawing its face.

Dad had kind of adopted this orphan, bringing it food and old music VD's when he did his humpy run. The legacy had been handed to me. *Possum-by-day* was the one living creature at the Camp I would have considered saving in disaster. Maybe I'd been too hasty thinking that.

Or maybe....

I searched my saddlebags looking for the pesticide antidote and a patch for my suit. Already my body temperature was spiraling toward quick and unpleasant dehydration.

I applied the antidote salve to his eyes with a brush and while he was distracted with that, shot a sedative into his hind leg. Then I sat and fiddled with my patch while I waited for him to get groggy.

The damn thing wouldn't adhere. Too much grit blasted onto it. I swore all kinds of threats at the manufacturers for faking specifications they'd never tested.

Back room fuckers, mainlining porn in their cittee monoliths. Never been out in the freaking sun!

In the end I settled for squeezing a tube of epoxy across it and gulping draughts of water from my camelbak.

Possum-by-day was starting to quiet. His second eyelid opened, slitted but seeing.

'Ranger?' he panted.

'What's happened? Why'd you attack me.'

'Scared. Camp go to fight Miner's after *Speak-tru* come. Possum not know whose side you on.'

My blood ran cold inside my overheated flesh. *Camp go fight Miners*. 'Who's *Speak-tru*?'

'Myth-teller from Old Land, I savvy. Our boy Mannon say *Speak-tru* is Old Land's God-voice. Bad sign she come round.'

Mannon. Drug psychosis. Killed his mother with chicken scissors, Dad told me. Found his way to a place where no one asked questions. For two beers I'd shoot Mannon in the back. He scared the jees out of me.

'Where've they all gone?'

Possum-by-day made a movement I interpreted as a shrug.

I remembered the *Pirras*. ‘You seen the ghost birds?’

The mongrel put his hands over his head. He yawned widely and fell into a doze.

Damn. I’d overdone the dosage.

I scooped up his slight form and settled him under a tree, hanging a water bag on the nearest low branch. I slipped the v-discs under his head.

Then I climbed back on Bara.

She sidestepped to voice her unease. I soothed her with a pat which was a waste of time but it made me feel better. If the Miners had a beef, things could have gotten really ugly.

But where?

I tapped the compass route to the *Diggings* and Bara set off, pneumatics happier to be moving. I tried to ignore the heat and sucked steadily on my tube. *Possum-by-day* had said the name *Speak-tru*. It meant nothing to me.

Should I call Beano for backup?

Something told me I should – and yet the thought of it sent my temperature up another degree.

Beano to my rescue?

Never!

The *Diggings* were deserted. Picks gone. Dry-blower screens half emptied. Like someone had just blown a smoko horn the morning after an all night binge.

At a loss I re-set my co-ordinates to *Dry-Ditch*. It was the last call on the humpy run and it gave me somewhere to go. A thousand kays any other direction was pure

desolation. A proper search on *Bara* wasn't an option. I'd have to come back with the patrol float.

The wind picked up. Dust devils shimmied everywhere, clogging up my breather and flicking rocks against *Bara's* coat. The taste got in my mouth and nostrils.

Times like this I was glad *Bara* was a computer – a real horse might have gotten skittish. She also stayed on track where I was tricked by the distortion of the dust.

No surprise then, that I came upon *Dry-Ditch* abruptly, failing to recognize the usual landmarks. The rocks parted and it was there, tree-dense and eerie as always.

Inside the embankment the wind dropped a little, but the dust billowed in, fogging the air. *Bara* wove between the trees, surefooted in the murk, while I coughed out iron ore grit.

Muddy creek water splashed up and I resisted stripping off my suit and wallowing in it to cool down. The leeches in here sucked like sex-workers.

Two kays until the creek-proper my read-out told me.

Just as my instincts had told me to call Beano, so now they urged me to turn back. But dad's life motto reverberated in my head.

Fuck your fear, Virgin!

Half a kay from the pool I heard the Pirras screeching. Even the blanket of dust couldn't dampen their wailing. A few more minutes of *Bara's* determined walking and I broke through the worst of the dust. It was like walking out of the edge of a fog.

I shut down *Bara's* direction control to stop her.

The creek-proper cut through some heavy ironstone, reducing it to a deep, narrow gorge with tiny red sand beaches on either side.

Right now those beaches were crowded. Bare-chested Miners on one side, psycho Camp creatures on the other. The Pirra's screamed overhead, clutching on to gnarled branches that hung from the cliffs over the center of the pool.

A body lay on a sandbank in the middle of the creek, trussed to a board.

Mannon stood in the shallows on one side. I spotted the greenish coloration of his tattoos.

Much as I didn't want to, I dismounted, and with my rifle slung across my back, climbed part way up the ridge to get a better look. Bara wouldn't go anywhere, but I felt vulnerable without her.

The furor below hid my clumsy attempt at silent bush craft. I crawled up behind a thick clump of spinifex, grunting with the heat and the effort.

My goggles gave me a clear, enhanced view of the body.

I recognized it. Female. Foreigner. Gold jewelry glinted from her wrists and ankles and neck, pulling tight on her bloated limbs.

She looked a lot less attractive than she should. Michaela Rigg, missing pollee, should be slim, svelte and *in the cittee*. Not lying bloated like a week old carcass on Ghost Gum Creek.

I grabbed my walkee-talk. No place for ego, time to ping my sighting to Beano.

The damn thing only garbled static at me.

A chanting started up. Mannon waded out into the creek towards Rigg. She spasmed as he touched her.

Alive! But not for long, I guessed.

Mannon showed every intention of drowning her.

The Miners raised their picks and rumbled a warning. They swarmed closer to the edge of the water.

I thought through what the whole scene meant.

Somehow the Campers had kidnapped Michaela Rigg. I figured they probably wanted her out of the way so they got left to their own devices out here. They wouldn't want better conditions for the *wayback*. Better conditions would mean closer scrutiny from everywhere.

I'd bet Bara's CPU, that the Miners had come to stop them.

As Mannon began to haul Rigg off the sandbank my gut twisted into a pretty mess. This was about to get ugly and what I didn't see, I wasn't obliged to act on.

I made a quick decision to split back to town and took two sliding steps down the cliff towards Bara, when the Jackson scruples grabbed me by the collar.

Where do you think you're going? Fuck you fear, Virgin.

Shove off Dad, I'm going home!

The traitorous Jackson feet refused comply like dad was joysticking them from the grave. They turned me around and scrambled me back up to the tuft of spinifex.

Then my treacherous Jackson arms took over. They aimed of their own accord and fired close to Mannon, spraying water over him.

I bellowed my best Ranger imitation. 'Mannon, you piece of shit! Get away from her!'

The psycho froze. In fact the whole damn weird gathering froze. Even the Pirras got quiet.

'Get out of the water and go back to Camp. All of you!'

I wasn't fool enough to try and arrest anyone. Just getting Rigg out alive would be a miracle.

A murmur echoed back to me. Dissent amongst the Campers while the Miner's watched intently from the other side.

Slowly, *Mannon* slid Rigg back onto the sandbank. Then he swam back to his side. He stared up at me. Through the goggles I could see beads of water and leeches on his bare chest.

'You alone Ranger?' he called.

'You think I'm stupid?'

He seemed to consider the question carefully, which annoyed me, so I fired another shot near his feet. I held up my walkee in my free hand like it was a 'corder. Actually it was, but the 'cording function hadn't worked in my lifetime.

'This woman's all over the cittee bulletin's. I got a live 'cord on you and a QR squad about fifteen away,' I bluffed.

Mannon conferred with the Camper crew again.

I concentrated on keeping my outstretched arms from shaking. I'd never had to bluff for someone's life.

Finally they reached an agreement and began to shuffle along the red beach out the narrow opening of the gorge. Mannon was the last to go, tossing a sly smile upwards.

'You sure about this Ranger?'

I waved the muzzle. 'Piss off, psycho.'

When they'd gone, I let my arms drop and shudder themselves still. Then I slithered down the knoll, scraping my hands and knees on the way.

The Miner's still lined the banks on the other side, witness to my enormous bluff.

Feeling ten-feet-brave, I un-holstered, gave them gracious, 'any-time boys' wave and swam out to Rigg.

The board she was tied to rested unevenly against a rocky oval lip. The lip was a gnamma hole that cupped a lethargic draining whirlpool like a sink someone had just pulled the plug on.

I'd never seen one in the middle of a sandbank in a creek before, but this land had more mysteries than dust.

I made sure she was strapped on tightly before I pushed her into the water and back to shore.

Soon as I got my breath I whistled up Bara. She hopped in a few minutes later (without me on board she liked to play frog) and I unhooked my camelbak from the saddle.

The Miners steady, silent watch from the other bank was beginning to creep me. They showed no signs of leaving, or helping, or signaling their approval at what I'd done. I could see one of them on a walkee.

Holding Rigg's head in my lap, I splashed water over her face. I tried my own walkee again. This time, for some reason, it worked.

'Better bring the Float. I can't get her on the horse,' I told Beano.

'Sure boss, would if I could. But the office's locked. Float ignition's in there. You know them doors are darn *holo-corst* proof,' Beano hedged.

I didn't wait to hear the rest of his excuse. I switched him off.

'They gone?' The croaky whisper came from Rigg.

I looked down at her. ‘Yeah, I said. ‘But we need to get you patched up quick. How’d you get here?’

‘Where?’

‘*Wayback*. Far North Quarter. I’m Gin Jackson, the Ranger.’

She tried to lift her shoulders and look around but her eyes were almost swollen shut. Bruising and bloating made her limbs stiff. She trembled like dad’s antique seismometer.

A gusting hot wind blew a shower of dust up the gorge and over us. It set her off coughing. Without a heat skin she’d dehydrate in a matter of hours. And I wouldn’t be far behind her with a leak in mine.

I slugged some more water into her and had a sip myself.

Her lips moved barely, trying to tell me what happened. ‘After the rally...myth teller came to me... warned me they’d found the veins... she said couldn’t help. Woke up... hot...’

‘But the poleece bulletin claims you only went missing a few hours ago. You couldn’t have got here that quick, even by aer.’

‘How... then?’ she whispered.

I stared dumbly into her busted face. I didn’t know.

She lost consciousness again.

Splashing noises started up. A few of the Miners had waded into the creek. I instantly saw something in their advance that I didn’t like.

A big fat dose of doubt hit me.

I remembered Mannon's sly smile and an ugly flash of understanding sent me grabbing for the walkee again.

'Beano break the frigging office door down. I need back up. NOW!'

All I got was static.

Pigshit!

No, Beano was worse than pigshit! He was...

...an ex-miner!

I groaned aloud. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. The Campers *weren't* the secessionists. They *weren't* trying to kill Rigg. They'd come here to help her.

I fired frantic shots over the Miner's heads. 'STOP!'

They took no notice, more of them plunging in.

'You could give her to them!'

For a second, I thought the voice was the Jackson conscience at it again. But it was too coherent and... cultured.

I twisted where I sat. Behind me stood a tall, aged, gaunt woman. Raised scars criss-crossed her chest and arms. Her clothes were scant and soiled. Red dirt caked in the tight coils of her hair.

I hadn't heard her approach.

'It's the Miner's. I-I got it wrong, didn't I?'

Her lips creased. 'Goes with the name Jackson.'

'You're *Speak-tru*?'

She didn't answer, but looked across the creek. 'The Miner's have found the veins. They want secession then they will use its secret.'

‘Veins? Of what? Gold?’

She laughed at my inadequate assumption.

‘The veins give *journey-quick*. It’s been ours for all time. That’s how we survived in this place. You-all think we tread it from waterhole to waterhole.’ She lifted her chin with disdain. ‘We fly the veins.’

‘Another way to travel?’

She nodded. ‘Now they know the secret too.’

‘How will they uses the veins?’

‘They’ll bring the *Borers* back. And the sky people.’

I gaped disbelief. *Borers* had been outlawed globally for decades in mining. Their mineral extraction ability was superior but their saliva damaged the fragile *wayback* ecology. Sky people were off-worlders like Beano’s ex-squeeze: uncivilized carnivores who knew how to work the *Borers*.

‘And secession would mean no police, no customs up here...’

‘Only you to stop them. With *journey-quick* tho’...’

‘I’d never be able to.’ I swallowed hard. ‘Is that how they bought Rigg here so quickly?’

She averted her eyes and began to walk away, her feet barely leaving marks.

‘Won’t you help me save her?’ I called.

‘If you work it out then maybe I be allowed some....’ She kept going.

‘Crap.’ I glanced back at the Miners. *Another way of traveling the wayback? It sounded ridiculous... and yet...*

My mind ran options until it hurt. It kept circling the gnamma hole.

On impulse I dragged Rigg back into the creek and swam for her life. Halfway across, her breathing got erratic and faint. I wasn't going to make it. She'd be dead.

Or we both would.

A few strokes later the first few Miners were nearly upon us, their normally impassive faces distorted with purpose.

I shouted and kicked out. Muddy water splashed up my nose and into my mouth. I was going to drown in those cruel, work-strong hands.

Then, like a gift, the Pirra's fell from the skies attacking them.

Speak Tru'. Surely?

While they bombarded, I coughed up water and propelled Rigg's board toward the sandbank.

My calf muscles cramped with the effort as I pulled the board onto the bank and over to the rocky lip. Fumbling with the ties, I slid her off the board and rolled her into the softly draining water, falling in after.

The sucking began immediately. I let go of her to grab the edge.

Her eyes flickered open in panic as she slipped under.

It frothed.

Had I just committed murder?

Or a rescue?

As abruptly as they'd descended, the Pirras lifted in a screeching cloud and wheeled east. They'd driven the Miner's nearly back to shore. Blood stained the water from the assault of sharp claws and sharper beaks.

As I swam towards Bara, I scanned the gorge for *Speak-Tru* but she had vanished into the red rock.

I fired Beano for insubordination when I got back (though I knew it should have been conspiracy) and spent the day holed up on the dunny with a bottle of rum and my palm-screen.

Hourly police bulletin's reported Rigg discovered on a riverbank in the Cittee surround, half tortured to death. Quick medical attention saved her life. Her recollections were hazy and they couldn't find the Myth-teller who'd warned her she was in danger.

On the up side, support for *One Big Country* had soared. Nothing like a sympathy vote to swing popularity! The National Water Authority even jumped on the wagon and pledged improved service if the party was elected.

A couple of days later when Rigg came off the critical list I took the Patrol Float out to Dry-Ditch and blew up the gnamma hole with some home-bake gelly.

Then I visited the Pirras and left them a trough of sweetbix. Standing in the breezeway of the old homestead I sent a whisper of thanks to *Speak-Tru*. Whether she was alive, dead, or a figment of my dehydrated mind, it didn't really matter.

I had no regrets. Keeping the gnamma secrets meant keeping the *wayback* how it had always been. Things could be worse.

I'm still not sure about being *The Law* 'round these parts, but I'm a Jackson, if I'd made a mistake I could live with it.

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