

Apostle

The Vanity of Hope

G. W. Langdon

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Dedication
for Peter

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CHAPTER 1

Light.

The infernal light.

Tom lowered his hat against the sharp sun. The once-golden fields of wheat on either side of the road hung beaten and bleached to a white that burned the eyes. His father said it was the worst dry he could remember, and the old folks of the village warned the big dry of 1439, the Devil's Breath, had started with the same maddening weeks of hot winds from the southeast. A poor harvest meant less money in the village, fewer favors offered with meaner terms—and a shortage of grain over the long winter would cull the weak. Mother Nature was against them. As if there weren't already too many problems in these alien days.

He continued along the dusty road towards the church, absently avoiding the deep, rock-hard wheel ruts. He stopped outside the churchyard and gazed further down Hole Road, between the oak trees losing their leaves early from the dry. Poor Spooky, he thought, peering into the dark shadows of Alice Holt Forest where his problems had begun. Two weeks ago the aliens chose to play their hand, but if he was honest, the signs—the crop circles, the wolves in Pember Forest twenty miles away, the missing young men, showed the aliens had been here for much longer.

He'd only ever seen one, but nobody—alien or not, would travel through outer space on their own. He'd survived their test, but that single event had changed him from a gamekeeper who hunted prey to being the prey of a far-superior hunter. Although he was the biggest man around these parts—two

inches taller than his father, not as broad but that would come, he was small compared to the alien hunter. Quick reactions could overcome any physical disadvantage in hand to hand combat, but he stood no chance against an opponent who could turn invisible. He had to run. If only it was that simple.

He tucked his shirt in tidily and ran his thumbs up and down under his braces, wriggling his trousers straight. He spun his walking staff and pointed to the tall cocksfoot grass moving a hundred yards away on the side of the road, even though it was too early in the day for the hot winds from the southeast. Twenty-two years old in two days' time and his normal life was over.

He opened the churchyard gate and stopped by the rotting wooden crosses in the cemetery. His sister who died when a few months old, his brother; James aged four from pneumonia; George killed by a horse kick when he was a toddler in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was a cross for Frank, but it was in remembrance only as he never came back from the war. Blown to pieces by a cannonball. All his siblings were born before him, lived a few short years and died. He was the last in the bloodline of William and Mary Ryder.

The crosses, overgrown with broken stalks of sun-withered grass, were for the lucky few who'd been loved enough in life to have a final, gentle place of rest, unlike the hundreds who'd died a century and a half ago in the Black Death and were thrown into the sunken trenches behind the cemetery, covered over with lime, and swept from the mind by the passage of time. At least they were at peace.

He rubbed the toes of his boots on his trousers for polish and proceeded up the path towards the congregation waiting in the shade under the yew trees. All were dressed in the same Sunday clothes content with their bounded, predictable world. How did they endure their mundane lives ruled over by wealthy

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landowners, priests, and royalty? The pursuit of fame and fortune were beyond them and so couldn't be distractions from seeking out what truly mattered. Why weren't they curious about the wonders of Nature? Yet, in the greatest personal irony, their ignorant and simple ways blessed them with an ongoing peace of mind—the beating heart of existence he craved above all else. If only he could let the world be. Was it a vain hope to think he might one day understand his true nature and rise above the worries of the world to live in a lasting peace? He knuckled the side of his head to ease the rising strain and massaged his throbbing temple. Careful, he told himself, a scattered mind is easily harvested.

“Here comes King Arthur,” young Brian yelled down the path, waving his mock sword around his head until he hooked his mother's shawl. “Dragon slayer,” he added meekly, as he untangled the stick and ducked a clip around the ear.

“So glad you could make it on such a trying day,” Father Martin said. “You look beat.”

“It's been a crazy few weeks.” The Father's black robe hung like sackcloth in the breathless air compared to his mother's fine dress.

“Thanks to you, Tom, we don't have to worry about the Beast of Woolmer anymore.”

Tom lifted his hat and swiped his long hair back underneath and looked nervously over his shoulder. “All the same, Father,” he said, moving to his mother's side. “It can't hurt to keep up your fire and brimstone sermons a little longer.”

“Mary was just saying Mrs. Chambers is poorly.”

He looked at his mother. “I don't think she's got long. Her eyes were cloudy when I dropped some food off earlier in the week.” He turned to Father Martin. “Can you say a few words for her?”

“Of course,” he said. “How is Sarra taking her mother's

illness?”

“She’s putting on a brave face, but her mother is all she has left.”

“She has the Lord,” Father Martin said.

“And me.”

“I meant her father hasn’t been around for a long time.”

“Sarra’s the strongest woman I know; tougher than most men.” He looked to the gate. Still no sign of Sarra. Her mother must be more sickly than he’d thought.

Mary slipped her closed parasol in front of Tom. “A reasonable turnout today, Father,” she said, “considering the trial is over.”

“Yes, but I’m fighting a losing battle. People forget all too quickly and return to their old ways. These days, people have strange ideas about religion.”

“It’s a changing world, Father,” Mary said. “Columbus has found the New World across the Atlantic and our world will never be the same.”

“I fear for the future,” Father Martin said, clasping tighter his rolled-up sermon papers. “What will become of us if we worship ourselves above God?”

Tom turned to the wheat field shimmering through the trees and considered the Father’s fear of the future. Would Man in five hundred years have solved the mystery of Life to become master of the world with full domain over the birds and beasts, or would he weaken on his final march and yield to his darker side and corrupt nature to create monstrosities like the aliens’ giant boar? Anything was possible in that faraway, imaginary future. Maybe even the church—the bulwark against today’s harsh world, would fall under the weight of Man’s hubris and be replaced by a shrine to a god more to his liking. It was impossible to know the destiny of man, but one thing was for certain: his own troubles in these troubled times would count

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for as little as those forgotten souls in the sunken trench.

“My biggest hope for the future,” he said, returning to Father Martin, “is for Man to be at peace with the world. Wouldn’t that be something to behold—no war on Earth? That’s what it’s about, isn’t it, Father?”

“Yes, peace with your fellow man,” Father Martin said, gesturing to the congregation to move inside.

Tom hung his hat on the stand and followed his mother up the aisle to their regular place on the front pew to the left of the pulpit, beneath the stained-glass windows of divinity scenes and heroic kings fighting dragons and monsters.

Sarra brushed into the empty place he’d kept for her, carrying on her arm a small, woven cradle of freshly cut wildflowers. “Sorry I’m late,” she said, smiling over to Father Martin. “It took longer than I’d hoped to get mother comfortable.”

Tom squeezed her hand. “The main thing is that you made it in time.” He sat upright and solemn, loosened his tie, briefly admired the large Roman vase of flowers and settled upon the halo floating above the head of Christ.

The golden sunlight soothed his tired head and Father Martin’s fiery sermon faded away. What was he to do with his life? His talents made him the best gamekeeper round these parts but what use were they in the real world? At least Michelangelo of Italy had something to do with his God-given talents. Rumors coming out of Florence say his Pietà sculpture will be the greatest sculpture ever made. He had to find his purpose in life; his place in the world of Nature, or he would never find true peace. His eyelids drooped lower and the soft light bathed the back of his tired eyes.

A sandy desert of undulating dunes drifted into his mind. Behind and to his right, enormous golden bands held shut pearl-white gates in a fortress wall that curved away beyond sight and towered forever up into an ascending spiral of winged

angels. Archangel Gabriel raised his sword at the front of the Gates of Heaven and flames blazed into the stormy sky.

The desert air quivered and a righteous creature appeared. Golden from tip to tail, the long-limbed creature had a triangular head and half-open mouth revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. The light surrounding the creature intensified as it balanced back on its long tail and snorted a fiery, golden breath over the approaching horde of demons and beasts from Hell ridden by men with fiery eyes. The darkness above the charging horde melted away but returned stronger as though nourished by the devoured light. Red veins of hate pulsed through the deepening gloom of boiling, spectral clouds. A dark angel, Satan, surrounded by its hideous minions, laughed and flapped its black feathered wings in delight.

A tall, pure black figure, impervious to Gabriel's flames and the creature's fiery breath, walked through the hordes to the front. Satan launched into the sky and circled the battlefront, leering as the moment of God's downfall had arrived. The Shadow swept its long arm to the sky and banished Satan to the periphery. It dug its boots into the sand and pointed at the Gates of Heaven. A crack ruptured in the white bedrock beneath the gates and the golden bands stretched.

Gabriel and the golden creature turned to him. He covered his face, unable to bear witness as their hopeful eyes searched the depths of his soul. How could he make a difference in a war between the supernatural armies of Light and Dark? He was a physical man. What could he do against such power? *What do you want from me?*

A horrible scream rang across the desert. Again and again, it echoed, desperate and shrill. "Thomas!"

The vision blurred and the golden bands across the Gates of Heaven changed into the cedar ceiling beams of the church. A semi-circle of questioning faces stared down at him.

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Mary wiped away her tears and stroked his forearm. “Thomas,” she whispered. “It’s all right.”

Father Martin crossed himself and muttered a prayer. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Sarra said, helping Tom to sit up. “He’s been under a lot of strain. That’s all.”

“I prayed to the good Lord the nightmares were over,” Mary said, avoiding Father Martin’s incredulous gawp.

“They needed my help,” he said, struggling onto his elbows, “but I didn’t know what to do. Why won’t they leave me alone, like everybody else?” He rose to his feet, staggered, and grabbed hold of a pew. “Why me?” He pushed through the wall of stupefied faces. “I must find a way through,” he gasped, stumbling towards the open doors. “I have to get into the light.”

He fell in the middle of the churchyard. He reached out to crawl into the shade, but the burning sunlight pressed him to the ground. What was happening? He could hardly move. His arms and legs were like limp rope, as though the angelic realm had drained his mortal energy. Was the mystery of the world too much for his soul to bear and he’d gone mad? He was only a man, physical—limited.

Sarra ran to his side and helped him over to the shade. “What’s wrong, Tom?” she said, laying his head on her lap. “Tell me.”

“It was the end of the world. Light against dark.”

Mary rushed to his aid and held his hand.

“Get rid of them, first,” he said, looking up as the crowd circled around. “What I have to say is crazy enough without them thinking I’ve gone totally mad.”

“Shoo,” Mary said, standing up. “He’ll be all right. It’s just the heat. Give him some air.” She glanced up to Father Martin. “Carry on with your sermon, Father, please.”

“This way,” he said, leading the congregation back to the church.

“They’re gone,” Mary said, brushing his hair from his clammy face.

“They’re after me,” he said, blinking hard to clear his thoughts.

“They?” Mary said, drawing back. “I told you those troublemakers in London with their crazy ideas of a republic would get you in trouble. King Henry won’t stand for...”

“It’s not them.” He searched around for his hat. “My mind feels like it’s going to explode.”

“Don’t think so much.”

“Might as well ask a fish not to swim.”

“Then what’s wrong?” Sarra asked. “I thought life would be easier after you killed the giant boar and got your revenge for Willie, and me.”

“I can’t win.”

“Stop caring so much about the world and settle down, with me.”

“I cannot leave the world alone. For some reason, I have to understand nature—my nature.” He grimaced and bit his bottom lip. “I wish it wasn’t so, but only then can I rest in true peace.”

Mary wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Ever since you were a small boy, I prayed you’d outgrow your curiosity, but over time I’ve come to accept God has a plan for Thomas Ryder. Have you spoken to your father about this?”

“He’s away hunting. I’ll call into Ol’ Smokey’s stables tomorrow, but I already know what he’ll say. ‘A Ryder never runs. He stays and fights.’ But he hasn’t seen what I have. Anyway, what good did staying and fighting do for Frank?”

“Frank, bless his soul, was never the fighter you are. He was gentler.”

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He squeezed his eyelids together and held them closed until the moment passed. “You go back inside,” he said, urging his mother away. “I need a minute to gather my thoughts, with Sarra. I’ll come back in, if I’m up to it.”

“You and Sarra need to sort out whatever’s going on,” she said, letting go of his arm as she stood up. She touched Sarra on the shoulder. “Take good care of him. You’re the only one he’ll listen to.”

“I promise I will, Mrs. Ryder.” Sarra waited until they were alone. “I’m used to you staring into space... a million miles away thinking about goodness knows what with a silly smile on your face, but these days your brow’s knitted tight as a weaver’s thread. What’s wrong, Tom?”

“I’m being hunted,” he said, sitting up. “It’s flesh and blood, but not like us, or any other of God’s creations. It’s from beyond the stars.”

“You’re sure about this... monster?”

He lifted his hat to block out the sun. “I could feel its presence on my skin and at the back of my mind when preparing the traps. But, if it wasn’t for Dougal, I’d never have found it. Instead of sniffing along scent trails or barking at small, noisy birds, Dougal would just sit and stare into the forest, head tilted to one side—puzzled by something odd in the trees.” He rubbed his tight brow. “It’s my job as a gamekeeper to know where a predator might lie in wait and after a time an outline emerged of something watching me—still and patient, cunning, and keeping a wary distance. A master of the game.”

“This outline... it’s not something you thought you saw?”

“It’s as real as you and me. I could sense it watching over me as I dragged the stretcher with Dougal’s body and the head of the beast from the clearing.”

“You have seen this alien?”

“I circled back after a few hundred yards. The carcass had been moved and there were only two arrows in its side instead of three.”

Sarra folded her arms and leaned in. “What did you see?”

“The outline I saw in the trees was next to the beast. I threw my spear as hard as I could, but it stopped mid-air inches from the target. The demon showed itself, gripping my spear in its scaly hand. It was maybe eight feet tall, with a head mostly lizard, a scaly body underneath its camouflage clothes, spines down its back and a tail that stumped the ground. Mainly blue with red gills—and a long forked, purple-black tongue like an adder. Before I’d actually seen the demon, I thought I could trap and kill it the way I did with its beast, but the demon was beyond anything I could ever defeat; beyond any man. It spun the spear around, hissed, and drew back to throw the spear, then for some strange reason it stabbed the spear into the ground, covered up again, and ran away.”

“It didn’t throw the spear. Are you sure it’s after you?”

“It has plans. The beast was a test...” His words trailed off to whisper. “You don’t believe me.”

She sat round to face him and wetted her lips. “Last month I went skinny dipping in the pond.”

“Did you?”

“Nobody was around; at least that’s how it seemed. I checked the paths and made sure there weren’t any peeping Toms.”

He rolled his eyes. Even that hurt.

Sarra giggled. “Not you, silly. I was out swimming when I felt... watched, like you did. I swam back and dressed as fast as I could. Further round the pond, there was a sound—as if someone had knocked a small stone into the water, then ripples at the edge. Nobody was there, but it wasn’t a fish. I can tell you, it put the fear of God in me.”

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The reason why the alien demon was so interested in *them* hit like a horse kick. They were a breeding pair. “We have to leave, now.”

“Elope, how romantic. Cornwall by the sea?”

“No. We have to go to Europe—Spain, or further away... one or two years and then we can come back. Things will be all right after that and we can settle down.”

“Europe! I can’t leave. You only want to go and see that Michelangelo you’re always talking about.”

“It’s too dangerous here.”

She helped Tom to his feet. “No. This is my home and yours too. I’m not running away.”

“It’s after us. You and me. We can’t win this fight. It’s here now, outside the church gate.”

“I don’t feel anything, at least not like at the pond.”

“Its presence is stronger for me.” He grabbed Sarra by the elbow. “It’s playing with us the way a cat plays with a mouse; just before it eats the mouse.”

“I’ll never leave my mother. I’m all she’s got left.”

“I can’t explain why, but time is squeezing in around us. Soon, we’ll be trapped. We have to run.”

“We can beat whatever is out there.” She shot a startled look towards the gate. “Did you hear that?”

She picked up a stone and threw it at the gate. The stone ricocheted off the gate post into the air and vanished.

CHAPTER 2

Captain Jbir searched through the mementos scattered around his quarters. He'd hid it somewhere amongst the gold and jewels so that a sneak would pass over the real treasures and take what could be repackaged and sold on the street. It couldn't happen on his ship way out here, but old habits were why he'd survived so long. He spread the fine chains across the desk and chose the smallest. After trying several places on his overcoat that it might look good, he set it beside the small lock that once hung around the neck of his first apprentice on Tilas in the glory days.

He lifted the dragon tooth up to the light. Smaller than his hand, the sharp serrations showed it came from a whelp and not an adult tooth from one of the smaller species. It wasn't the sort of tooth others would covet in the way of the teeth and scales of the infamous Columni Pink held in the main museum of Nu'hieté. There were bigger, more noticeable, teeth in the haul he smuggled out of the back reaches of the king's empire for the emperor's medicine and addictions, but this tooth was special. The success of *that* daring mission led to him becoming the emperor's most trusted courier and, in an unlikely chain of coincidences and fortunate timing, had brought him a thousand light-years across the Milky Way galaxy to Earth. He put the tooth down and studied his reflection in the inert lightScreen. How had he gotten so old and flabby? He used to bound down to the bridge two stairs at a time. If he tried that now, his knees would buckle and give out under the strain. Fortunately, should his tired old body expire or be expired, his backup failSafe was a

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long way off and would reGen if he didn't get home. Poor Iris was tied to the ship without any lifeline. When her hardware failed, or she was dismantled or superseded, then she ceased to exist. No magical afterlife for her. No wonder she had no need or time for gods. Amie was the closest Iris could ever get to a god, but even as great as Amie was with powers far beyond mere calculation, she was at her core just hardware—as all AIs were.

Even if this crazy mission succeeded, and he became the most famous pirate to have ever lived, if Decay had conquered Heyre there mightn't be anyone left back home to appreciate the courage and his sheer nerve to attempt the greatest treasure hunt in recorded history. Was his quest for immortal fame destined to fail? After all, Tilas had fallen to Decay and Heyre was sure to follow. First things first, Jbir. Heyre was over twelve hundred years away. He sucked in a chestful of air and strode to the window as his zest returned for the final act.

Far below, the survey ship was a small black dot against the angry, blue Atlantic Ocean. He re-focused his eyesight to maximum resolution even though the increased optic load would eventually lead to a full-blown neuroSplit. If all went to plan they'd have the humans back on board before nightfall and be on their way home before sunrise.

In some ways, he'd miss the primitive world below. It would be safer to stay down there and be a king of kings. However, an unchallenged life could never replace the thrill of dealing with the Federation, or further back to the good old days on Tilas and his constant battle of wits between King Jialin and Emperor Tilaxian to secure the most 'profitable' payload.

He'd left Heyre almost fourteen hundred years ago with a starMap in the hope of finding Earth. The treasure trove of data and genes collected by Iris and the eight 4i teams of forensic bioMechs meant only the capture of the humans remained to

complete the terrestrial part of the mission. The untainted genes of Thomas Ryder and his partner, Sarra Chambers, would underwrite an entirely new line of Reals and hybrids *guaranteed* free of Decay. As a bargaining chip that could prove to be the difference between life and death.

The survey ship cloaked at eighty thousand feet, beyond human eyesight, and vanished.

“May the gods of Pando be with you,” he said and dialed the optics back to default to subdue the neuroSplit growing at the back of his head.

The last human experiment cartwheeled past the watchtower, his contorted face forever locked in the final moment of an undignified death. He saluted Spooky then gazed past him across the great void towards Heyre. Would they welcome him back as the greatest pirate, which would be the case if General Reuzk and the Federation ruled the roost, or would his reputation count for nothing if Heyre had fallen?

The trinkets jangled on his three-quarter coat as he turned in small steps on his spindly legs. He stopped by the desk and picked up his revolver from next to the box of Neonite slugs. He ran his finger through the fine dust. Rulg was right about *StarTripper*. Earth was too far from Heyre and even further from Tilas. The ship was built for navigation within the Tilasian solar system, but events—opportunities—had required modifications that put extra stresses on the original design. Iris was beginning to look old—if that was possible for an AI. If Rulg hadn’t in his regular rages dismembered most of the service droids, then the ship wouldn’t be in this mess. Damn Rulg. He curled his old hands into fists. If only he’d never met Rulg then everything would be so very different. He’d have escaped Tilas without his help, made it to Heyre with the Exodus, and be trading favors between Queen Lillia and General Reuzk. Different planet; same game. They were in this mess together, but only one was

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going to make it out.

Iris projected her natural blue self into the room, wearing a formal uniform of a jacket, trousers, and combat boots.

“Expecting trouble?” she asked, as he loaded a Neonite slug and spun the chamber.

“Why don’t you wear something a bit more tasteful?”

“You mean like this?” she said, flashing into high heels, a short orange skirt and a breast-hugging top.

“Yeah, like that; it makes you look... younger.”

Iris changed back. “Keep your eyes on what really matters.”

He held out the triangular dragon scale attached to his coat by a thread of shriveled sinew. “Did I ever tell you how I got this?”

“Several times.”

“Of course, you remember everything.” He squinted and held the scale closer. “We’d just picked up the crates of dragon bones for the emperor and hauled them into the hold when one of the crew demanded a bigger cut.”

“I delivered the poison. You carry the scale to remind you trouble often begins *after* you’ve assumed the hardest part is over.”

“I sometimes wonder why I bother talking to you.”

“You say I remember everything, but I have no dataStrings from the time of Emperor Tilaxian’s courts to when we reached Heyre.”

“I had to do that for your protection. The cargo was *sensitive*.”

Iris curled her lips. “My protection?”

“From Reuzk—and Amie. Which reminds me. I’ll have to *manually* delete every dataString that connects the ship—you, to the main storage Orb. If we should run into trouble, which we could when we get home, I want one less complication. If there’s an interrogation, you’ll know nothing.”

“Understandable. I’ll run an analysis algorithm through the systems to collate the Strings for deletion, but it will take time to find every single one if we are to fool Amie.”

He holstered the gun and stalked back to the window. The beaded tips of his dreadlocks slapped into the small of his back as Iris walked silently by his side.

“We orbit Earth fifteen times each day,” he said, “yet its natural wonders never cease to amaze me.”

“Earth’s pre-machine Nature is pristine.”

“Tilas was once that, before us, before...” He shuddered. “Earth’s an irresistible target—much like Thomas Ryder. When is one coincidence one too many?”

“What do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t understand, but experience has taught me that nothing ever goes *exactly* as planned. Thomas Ryder is the perfect human to take away—and we didn’t have to search for him. He lived right where we chose to set up our final base. Just happened to be there.”

“You’re second-guessing yourself. You’ve made a wise choice with Thomas Ryder. His Self-Reliance Index score is the highest of any human we tested.”

“Choice? I guess so, but he’ll need every point if he is to survive the curious Federation.”

“Decay?”

“No amount of self-reliance will save him there.” He clamped his jaw tight and fingered the safety clip.

“You could stay on Earth,” Iris said, “but if I know you then you prefer the bustle of the hyper-tech world of the Federation’s Heyre?”

“I don’t belong here. I need to get back to Heyre and face my fears. But if it’s Decay, I’ll probably wish I’d stayed here.”

“As would I.”

“Rulg’s a first-class navigator,” he said, fingering the scar

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along his jawline. “The best I’ve worked with if I’m honest, but he kept very strange company on Tilas.”

“That, I wouldn’t know.”

“The best pirates have secrets they can call upon for leverage when things get tight, but Rulg has too many. More precisely, he’s hiding one, big secret.” He wanted to confess his own big secret to Iris and reduce its burden, but that would be suicide—or worse if she was ever compromised.

“Rulg lives for the fight,” she said. “His battle logs are crammed with taking calculated risks to defeat superior forces. Don’t underestimate him.”

Jbir rocked back and forth on his heels and stroked his straggly beard as he cast a wary eye over the Category Two storm developing off the coast of Ireland. “Storm prediction.”

“The storm will pass directly over the target zone, but after the extraction.”

A flash of lightning arced beneath the clouds.

“How much fuel have we got left—enough for a fast burn?”

“Yes, but why the hurry?”

“One last thing. I want a full report on the ship’s hardware. You’ve been through a lot since Tilas—modifications and irregular health checks. Rulg’s ranting about *StarTripper* being ready for scrap is just talk, but he’s been around enough ships to have a feel for such things. He’s not right. We both know we’re good for plenty more adventures.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll let you know when I’ve assembled the ship-to-Orb dataStrings for your deletion,” she said and blinked out.

He placed his palm against the window and searched for a final glimpse of Spooky. Outer space was an unpredictable master with gravity waves from exploding supernovae, uncharted asteroids, solar flares, magnetic storms, meddling empires, other pirates, and unexplainable turns of events that the weak-minded would call ‘acts of god.’ He captained with an

iron fist and navigated the undercurrents of treachery better than most, but experience had taught him the most dangerous trouble came from within. All the great pirates he'd crossed swords with over the years had lived and died by the golden rule of bounty hunting: greed trumps fear.

“Steady, Jbir,” he said. “Keep a steady hand on the wheel. You're not out yet.”

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CHAPTER 3

Tom waved his hat to Sarra as she approached on her bay horse, Ellie. He grinned at her riding side-saddle in a dress. Her happy face jarred with how she was at her mother's hasty funeral at the church—on his birthday of all days. Dead on Sunday, mourned on Monday, buried on Tuesday in a grave with a banged-up wooden cross. It was a dignified affair, and necessarily quick given the heat.

Marco and Ellie, brother and sister from the same broodmare, neighed and nudged heads as they came together. Her floral frock had a blue waistband and her bonnet had a matching blue ribbon tied in a bow under her chin. She'd embroidered a golden stag on either side of the wide collar. The sunlight glowed in her blonde hair and a wide smile beamed over her face. Her green eyes sparkled and her cheeks were again rosy. She radiated a sureness of who she was and what she wanted from life, something he had yet to discover even after his brush with death and newfound appreciation of life.

“How are you holding up... after your mother?”

She turned the reins and pressed Ellie closer. “Oh, Tom, it was horrible. I couldn't say at the funeral, but... when I found her sitting on the porch in her rocking chair... the fear on her face.”

He leaned across and touched her on the arm. “I've promised to keep you safe.”

They rode their horses down Hole Road almost as slow as they would have walked on foot. The terrible weight of what was to come hung over them as they passed through Bentley towards Alice Holt Forest for the midsummer festival and sod-

turning ceremony for the new hunting lodge.

“Some of the oaks in the forest are in their sixth century and still growing,” he said, fidgeting the wooden horse at the bottom of his coat pocket. “One blew down in the big storm of ninety-five and it had five hundred and nine rings. That’s an old tree; started out as a small acorn.”

“You know I’m not interested in that sort of stuff. A tree is a tree.”

He pulled the wooden horse from his coat pocket and passed it to Sarra. “I whittled it from a branch of that old tree,” he said with a wry smile.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, turning the horse over in her hands. She traced her finger over the growth rings around the neck and slipped the horse into the pocket of her frock. A gust of wind tugged her bonnet sideways.

“Those clouds are getting closer,” he said.

They crossed the Wey River and turned down the path to the open clearing and the tents. A horse-drawn wagon laden with food hunted in the forests, passed on the way to the festival.

“Morning, Sarra, Tom,” Mr. Berry said.

“Morning, Mr. Berry,” they replied together.

“At the speed you’re going, the ceremony will be over by the time you two love birds get there.”

“That’s an idea,” Tom said, stopping Marco and hopping down to walk.

“You’re crazy,” Sarra said, as she slid to the ground, holding onto the reins. “It is safe here?”

“With all these people about, I think so. Besides, I can’t feel it.”

He stooped down and picked a daisy.

They leaned into each other and meandered along the path, amongst the gusts of swirling leaves. He stopped and pointed to the bed of leaves that had built up around a large tree root. “See

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it?”

“No. What?”

“The female grouse. They have to sit for a long time on the eggs, so they need the best camouflage to hide from predators. Weasels and foxes, mainly, but also hawks and owls.”

“I don’t see it. There’s nothing there. Are you playing another one of your games?”

He left Marco with Ellie and walked straight for the grouse and yelled, “Get.” The female grouse fluttered a short distance away through the trees, landed and shook its feathers as it watched them.

“How could you see?”

“Practice. It’s what I do. Look for things that don’t match the background. And patience. If you sit still for long enough you can even see the plants grow.”

“Now, you are teasing me.”

“No, truly. The autumn clematis can grow six inches in a day. I put a marker at the tip of the vine and watched it for three hours. It grew more than an inch. Everything grows, decays, and dies. The trees and their branches and leaves, the grass we’re sitting on, your fingernails, your hair. Everything. It’s just that it mostly happens too slowly for us to notice. The world is far more than we experience with our senses. My hawk, Artemis, can see tiny voles from high up that are hiding in the fields.”

“You sat on a log for the day? Weren’t you bored, just sitting there?”

“The slowness of nature takes me out of my own head. Nature helps me stop thinking.”

“Why would you want to do that? Everybody thinks.”

“I think too much... what happened in the church the other day.” He blew on his fingertips to calm his racing heart. “I’ve had time to think.”

“No kidding.”

“I mean, thinking is good; only not too much.”

“You’re a typical Gemini. You love the feel of the earth, but you walk around with your head in the clouds looking elsewhere.”

He enjoyed small talk with Sarra. Anything to not say what was really important and would change their lives forever. Maybe, because they had no choice, it was easier to pretend it was just another day. “Gemini?”

“That’s your star sign. You want to save the world, but I’d be happy saving the town.”

“It’s a pity they don’t have woman sheriffs.”

“They should have. I could thump most of the clowns around here.”

They both laughed, a little too loud. Sarra fiddled with a frill on the frock and her smile faded.

“What is it?” Tom said.

“It’s the way you are when you talk about things we can’t see or imagine. Not everyone cares about those things. Most of us are happy living day to day. That’s good enough for me, but for some reason you want to know what being alive *is*.”

He made a small split in the stem of the daisy with his thumbnail. “It’s just that I can tell you things that I wouldn’t dare tell anybody else. You mean a lot to me, Sarra—more than a lot.”

She leaned in and gave him a tight, brief hug. “That’s because you don’t lie. You might have a wild imagination, but I trust you—unless you are kidding, and that doesn’t count because I know you’re fooling.” She grabbed her bonnet against another sudden wind gust. The oak trees swayed and strained in the rising wind and their old timber creaked. A branch snapped and she gave a small startle. “Shouldn’t we hurry?”

He threaded another daisy through a split stem. It was wrong

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to expect Sarra to just come with him to Europe—Spain... further away to Dalmatia, although he'd never say that aloud around here. Spain for ears; Dalmatia for thinking. What right did he have to ask her to turn her life upside down for an unknown future that was sure to be nothing that she was used to? If an alien demon considered them a pair, then they jolly well were. He gazed into her eyes. “*You* aren’t like the others. That’s what I love about you.”

“What did you say?”

“I have money—Peterson’s gold for killing the beast. I can read and write, blacksmith, break in horses, plow fields, hunt—and you can cook. My teeth are sound.”

“Thomas Ryder, you’re babbling, again.” She brushed the creases off her frock. “I am eighteen years old, and you’re no spring chicken at twenty-two, even if it was the other day.”

He placed the daisy chain around her neck and tied the ends with a granny knot. Now or never. He dropped to one knee. “Will you marry me? If it’s too soon after your mother and you want to be sure your head’s right before—”

“A girl has a lot to consider. I don’t expect you to settle down and be ordinary, but you’ll have responsibilities, and not just to me. I understand what it means for you to live in a fair world, but this talk of a republic? You’re no good to me hanging from the end of a rope. You give *that* up, or else... I’m not going to end up like my mother and have to raise children on my own.”

“I would trade a republic for you every time.”

A wide smile beamed over her face. “As crazy as it is... yes. I will spend the rest of my life with you, Thomas Ryder.”

He slipped the gold ring onto her wedding finger. “The smithy crafted it from one of Peterson’s coins. I promise to love and take care of you, forever.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and she draped her arms over his broad shoulders. He

lifted her off the ground as they kissed and twirled her around in a tight spin.

Marco and Ellie neighed and rubbed heads.

An iridescent cloud of red and yellow insects shone in the sun that beamed through the forest as if there might be magic in the air. Tom let go of Sarra and danced his silly idea of the Ruffy Tufty dance.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and scrunched her nose. “You *are* crazy.”

#

The Midsummer festival always drew a big crowd, but this year’s doubled festivities had attracted over five hundred people. Most were from Bentley, Black Nest and around—regular enough to be called locals. The fancy coaches under the trees belonged to royalty who’d made the two-hour trip from London.

Tom and Sarra tied their horses to the rail.

“Here we go,” he said, drawing his staff from the leather sleeve by the saddlebag. Judging by the grey clouds peering above the horizon the wind would turn westerly later. Although a welcome sight, the clouds were far from drought-busters, but he kept his coat on—just in case the clouds came to something. Out of habit he looked down, expecting to see Dougal padding alongside, eyes fixed straight ahead and eager for the scraps of ‘dropped’ food and hugs from the small children.

The main tent for the ceremony flapped in the warming breeze from the south.

“It’s a big crowd,” Sarra said. “Should be easy for the little ones to get lost.”

“If I was a parent, the first place I’d look is by the food stalls.” He shook his head at the tables of covered food. “They

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must have cleaned out half the forests around here to get that much ready for show.”

“Royalty, dear. Everything’s about appearances.”

“I know, but look at it all.” They stopped at the ceremony tent and peered in. “I’ll be damned. Is there anything left in the forests?”

They moved onto the craft stalls of the smithies, local folk, and the widows forced to make something extra from yarn, thread, or cloth to get that little bit more on the kitchen table.

“You look like you need a real necklace,” the gypsy said to Sarra.

“Oh, this,” she said, nudging Tom. “It’s from an admirer.”

“That ring’s worth plenty.”

“It’s not for sale.” He reached across the table and picked up a ruby locket on a silver chain. “How much?”

“Two shillings.”

He dribbled three bits of silver from his pouch and held them out in his palm. “And the silver chain,” he said, closing his hand as the gypsy tried to swipe the coins before the deal was made.

“You drive a hard bargain for someone who’s carrying a lot of money around his waist.”

He rested his hand on his knife. “Don’t you or your little gang in the back of the tent get any ideas.”

“Of course not. We know who you are,” she said, exchanging the chain and locket for the coins. “The beast slayer. But there might be out-of-towners around here. Best you be careful, Thomas Ryder, especially since you’re burdened down with her.”

Sarra leaned over the table. “Who you calling a ‘burden?’”

The gypsy dropped the coins down the inside of her tatty dress. “Enjoy your day.”

They passed the fortune-tellers and other strangers who’d

come for the money. He drew his knife and sliced off a curl of his hair. He placed the hair inside the ruby locket, closed it with a small snap, and gently lifted the locket over Sarra's head. He passed her the chain and patiently looked across the festival as she reached around his neck and latched the ends of the chain together.

Forest Ranger Peterson rang the bell and the crowd murmured quietly.

"Thank you everybody for coming here today," he said, holding up a shovel. He nodded to the small group seated in the front row of royals and Bishop Langton who had traveled up from Winchester on the coast. "I want to give a special thanks to the patrons who've made the trip here today to give their royal approval. The Lodge ensures the forests of Alice Holt and Woolmer will stay in prime condition for safe and prosperous hunting in the future. My fondest hope is you enjoy the day and have a safe trip home." Peterson handed the shovel to the bishop.

Tom leaned on his staff. "Just get on with it," he whispered to Ol' Smokey.

"Sorry I couldn't make it to the funeral on Tuesday," he replied. "Had to make sure I had a good choice of shoes in case one of the visitors' horses needed one replaced to get back to London."

"That's all right," Tom said. "It was a small affair."

"Without further ado," the bishop said, "it is my honor and privilege to turn the first sod for the new Lodge of Alice Holt Forest." He turned the already-dug sod, puffed and wheezed upright, and leaned on the shovel handle.

"The bishop looks like he might croak it," Tom said, as the crowd cheered and clapped and blew loud whistles.

"Maybe they'll need the shovel later to dig a deeper hole."

"Let the festivities begin," Peterson called out.

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The women folk broke away and clustered in groups to catch up on local and nearby news. The men, after shaking hands with old friends, headed over to the lifting and chopping events. Father Martin herded the children towards the pile of sacks for the first race.

“Littlest ones grab the sack that’s the right size for you and get to the start line. You bigger ones get ready,” he said, glancing to the pile of sacks on the dray. “We’ve got the three-legged and the egg and spoon races to get done. Get a move on, or there won’t be time for a lolly scramble.”

Tom peered over the field of hats and bonnets for his parents and spied his father above the crowd, but on the far side. Peterson would be very pleased with the turnout for his new hunting lodge. June was a quiet time for the inner circles of London’s royal society and the chance to visit the peasants out in the country would be a welcome distraction from their boring lives of ease. “Blast. He’s spied me. Now we’ll have to meet them.”

“Come in,” Peterson said, cajoling Sarra into the heart of the London visitors. He fawned over her and smiled at her frock. “You look wonderful. And you, Tom, very tidy.”

He removed his hat as he entered the royal den. Good ol’ Sarra. Despite the pageantry and feathery pomp, she was still the same, no-nonsense person on the inside—where it counted.

“You saved us a lot of trouble,” Peterson said, “but the beast could have killed you. You should have organized a gang and played it safe.”

The way his best friend, Willie, had organized a gang of men with dogs and ended up dead—ripped to pieces, and his horse, too. “Gamekeepers work alone,” Tom told him.

“Alice Holt is again a safe place to build a life around,” Peterson said, smiling down at Sarra.

“Look,” she said holding out her left hand. “Tom asked me

to marry him.”

Peterson coughed and stifled a splutter. “Well, that’s a surprise,” he said. He reached across and shook Tom’s hand. “Congratulations, you’ve hooked a good one in Sarra. It’s all happening for you right now. First the beast and now Sarra. Hope you haven’t got any more surprises for us.”

Tom and Sarra looked at each other.

“No, no,” she said.

“Nothing planned,” Tom said. “Just another regular day—except for the lodge. Your lodge.”

Peterson raised his right brow. “Anyway, we’ll have to get Ol’ Smoky to make an iron sign to mark your bravery and skills. An archer with his bow drawn, aiming into the trees. A sign, for eternity.”

Tom shrugged and shuffled his feet; he didn’t belong amongst their delicate costumes, perfumery, powders, and regal ribbons. “It’ll fall down in a hundred years and rust into the ground. Nothing lasts. Not you, not me.”

“It was stupid to risk your life,” a royal visitor said. “Others would have got the boar, one day.”

Tom stamped his staff into the ground. “Leave the dirty work for somebody else. That’s just it with your type. Your bloody wars and silly carry-ons.”

“Here, here, Tom,” Peterson cut in. “There’s no need for that sort of talk. Show some respect.”

“None of you have earned your place in the world. It’s all about the circles you mix in, or who your parents are,” he said, glaring at the young prince who would one day become King Henry the *Eighth*.

Sarra squeezed his arm.

A knight dressed in the Tudors’ white colors over a leather coat with armor mail stepped forward and tapped his sword on Tom’s chest. “So, the cat has claws,” he said. “I will make sure

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when we have our next ‘carry-on’ that you’re at the front.”

“There’ll come a day without kings and queens, and you’ll have to work like the rest of us.” He pushed the sword away with the blade of his knife. “A republic is closer than you think.”

“He hasn’t been himself, lately.” Peterson put his hand on the hilt of the other knight’s sword and guided Tom aside. “We heard about your turn in the church,” he whispered, “but you have to be more careful. These people have the power to make you disappear.” He turned to the knights. “It’s best we forget what just happened. No point in shedding blood over a misunderstanding.”

The knight drew closer. “Haven’t I seen you on the docks *hanging* around with those troublemakers?”

“I think he’s been in the sun too long,” Prince Henry said.

They all laughed, except Sarra.

“Spent too much time in the woods,” another added.

“Head’s filled with rocks, I would say.”

“Always the joker,” Peterson said. “I told you he’s a one of a kind. This sun really is too much. Refreshments are in the tent,” he added to the royals. “Follow me.”

Sarra grabbed Tom’s elbow to leave. The knights blocked their way.

“For a big man, you’ve got an even bigger mouth.”

Peterson turned on his heels. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” he said to the knights. “I was referring to the shedding of *your* blood.”

The knights bumped past.

“We’ll catch up later,” Peterson called out, as he guided the knights towards the tent. “To discuss your ideas for the curtain tapestry in the lodge. No hurry.”

“Yes, later.”

Sarra kept a firm hold on Tom’s arm until they were out of

earshot. "You can think those things, but you can't say them out loud, at least not around their sort. He was being civilized and you barged in all boorish. I don't ever want to hear talk of a Republic ever again. You promised."

"I'm sorry, but they need to hear the truth."

He quietly shook his head as his parents left Farmer George and Mrs. McGuire at the wood chopping and headed their way.

"I know this won't be easy," Sarra said, as they walked to meet them, "but keep your emotions in line."

"Won't do any good. Mother will know."

His father, William, leaned harder than usual on his walking stick. Too many wars had left him with a limping left leg, two dodgy shoulders, and three crippled fingers. Because of his size, he was always at the front or holding the line while the smaller soldiers fought around him. His father was a brave and courageous man because size only got you so far against dozens. 'Stay and fight,' he would say. 'A Ryder never runs from a *noble* cause.' He was a proud man who more than once said he'd do it all over again for the duke, even though the stupid battles against his countrymen had crippled him to where he could only help out with part-time blacksmithing at Ol' Smokey's stables. He was a practical man who had worked with his hands his entire life. If he had told him that when he cut the beast's head off he found a half-inch 'pearl' in the spine and that was probably how the demon 'talked' and controlled the beast, he would have been marched out the stable doors and given a half-kick to help him on his way.

"Hello, Mr. Ryder; Mrs. Ryder."

"Hello, Sarra."

Sarra held out her hand and turned it back and forth to catch the sun.

"So, you finally got the gumption to ask," his father said. "What brought this about? I hope it wasn't to do with Mrs.

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Chambers.”

“We’ve known each other for a long time and the time just seemed right.” He glanced to his mother. “Nothing’s changed.”

“When we were kids,” Mary began, “I would bring you to play with Willie, or you would run over by yourself and I’d have to come and get you.”

“I used to tag along with them,” Sarra said. “Guess that’s where I first learned to stand up to the bully boys for myself. Never got any help from you,” she said, giving Tom a playful punch in the arm.

“It’s Tom’s way.”

“Three kids out having fun around the village. Tom, Willie, and me—just one of the boys.” She giggled. “Until I grew up.”

“He’s always liked you. He would come home from your mother’s and talk about you more than Willie.”

“Mother, you’re embarrassing me,” Tom said, feeling his face turning red.

“One way or another, I always knew where to find you.”

“Harden up, son. The world’s a tough place.”

He took a deep breath. “Father, I’m sorry for all the arguments we’ve had over the years. None of it matters anymore.”

“What brought that on? You sure you’re not up to something?”

“The past is done with. Getting engaged, it’s about the future now.” He stepped forward and hugged his father. “I love you.” He turned to his mother who was already reaching for her handkerchief.

“Oh, Thomas. You’re such a good boy,” she managed to say before the tears started.

“Now I know something’s up.”

“No, no, William,” Mary said. “Tom’s a grown man, and Sarra is the most beautiful daughter I could have wished for.”

She hugged Sarra. "You make a wonderful pair."

Pair. The word stabbed. "Couple. We're a *couple*."

"What are your plans? Have you set a day?"

"No plans."

"Make sure you get a haircut, first," William said.

"Look," Tom said, "there's Father Martin. Let's go and see what he's got planned. No. First, I need a good lunch. This way," he said, clasping Sarra by the hand.

Mary grabbed Tom by the arm and hugged him tight. "God's speed Thomas Ryder," she whispered into his ear.

"I'll come back, just you wait and see."

Mary turned to William and buried her face in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and patted her shoulders. "You two run along," he said. "We'll be fine."

They filled their plates with food in silence, picking listlessly from the menu of smoked, cured, and cooked game and early-ready garden vegetables. He threw a scrap of meat on the ground. "That's for you, Dougal," he said, remembering how the old fella used to hover close for the free food.

"Oh Tom, I just can't stand the crowd anymore," Sarra said. "Let's leave."

They fetched their horses and rode Marco and Ellie slowly around the outside of the clearing, passing the group of rowdy boys and girls at the horseshoe tossing contest, the earnest shooters in the fifty-yard archery final, and lastly, the boisterous tug of war teams getting ready to take up the rope. The team from Black Nest roared and poked jibes at the Bentley team. "Let's see how good you are this year without Tom to anchor your pull."

"Don't get caught doing anything I wouldn't do," the judge called out.

"I don't plan on getting caught."

They left the festival behind and rode along one of the oldest

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pathways in the forest between the enormous oaks.

The emotions from the festival subsided and a cold, rational mood settled on them.

“There’s the clearing,” Tom said.

“And there’s Thornton Way.”

They galloped toward Thornton Way, then turned sharply and raced for Shipwrights Way.

The beech trees down either side of the lane rattled in the rising wind and the fallen leaves whirled up into the air.

Three horsemen rode in front of them from the London end of the Way. The frontrunner of the out-of-towners hollered his horse to a stop and the other ruffians, swigging on a shared bottle of grog, fell into line, blocking the escape route.

The oldest rider, the father of the two given their similar faces, reached down and pulled out a loaded crossbow. “Off, now,” he said, waving them to dismount.

Tom glanced over his shoulder. Hopefully, he’d get them on their way before the real trouble arrived. He nodded to Sarra and stepped down, keeping a firm hold on Marco’s reins. Sarra came to his side. He drew his hunting knife, remembering what had happened to her father.

“I’m Pikey,” the oldest rider slurred. He gave a drunken bow and wobbled upright. “And these are my sons, Ed and Arty.”

The laughing, fool sons copied their father’s stupid bow, right down to the wobble in the saddle.

Pikey gripped the reins tighter against his unsteady horse “Who have we here?”

“A damsel in distress who needs rescuing,” Arty said.

“The festival is down the Way,” Tom told them. “You can’t miss it if you keep to the path on the other side of the clearing. There’s plenty more grog in the tents.”

Sarra held Tom’s arm tighter.

“All we want is a kiss from the fair lady and then we’ll be on

our way.”

Arty passed the bottle of grog to Ed and climbed off his neighing horse.

Sarra spat at his feet. “I’d rather kiss a toad.”

“Feisty, aren’t we?” Arty said.

Ed’s horse shied backward as he stuffed the bottle into the side saddle and he tumbled to the ground. He gripped hold of Arty’s leg and hauled himself upright. “That’s how I like them,” he said, leering at Sarra as he jammed his hat back on.

“Take another step,” she said, “and I’ll show you feisty.”

Tom peered towards the leaves swirling around the *two* invisible, cylindrical shapes approaching up the Way. “We haven’t got time for this. None of us have. We have to run.”

He struck Arty flush on the temple with his staff as he tried to block their way and Sarra punched Ed square in the mouth with her left fist, her good arm, and then kicked him in the crotch.

Pikey drew his loaded crossbow. “For that, I ought to shoot you where you stand.”

“You only have one arrow,” Sarra said.

“Your woman has quite a mouth on her.”

Tom stepped further away, keeping in front of Pikey. “Run, before it’s too late,” he said, concentrating on the swirling leaves.

“You’re scaring me, Tom,” she said, hitching up her frock to run. “What can you see?”

An invisible charge blasted a hole in the chest of Pikey’s horse and razor-thin red beams of light seared Arty and Ed clean through the forehead.

Marco, and then Ellie reared sideways and bolted in terror after the other horses.

Pikey struggled out from under his horse. “You’re going to pay for this,” he said, still clutching his crossbow. A green beam

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of light vaporized the crossbow. The dot moved onto the long coat and turned black as it drifted up and settled on Pikey's forehead. His head splattered over the ground.

A small, feathered dart hit Tom in the arm as he held Sarra behind him. He stumbled and sagged to his knees and reached for Sarra. The harder he pulled on the dart, the longer the barbs grew under his skin. His grip faltered and he collapsed onto the ground, still fumbling for the dart.

Sarra slid her arm across his chest. "Can you hear me?"

He looked into her eyes. "Ad infinitum."

A dart struck her arm. "Una in perpetuum."

Tom's limp arm rose off the ground as though lifted by an invisible string.

"Pulse is active," Rulg said, as he moved over to check Sarra's pulse.

"What the hell are you up to?" Jbir screamed down the audio channel.

Rulg slung the blaster over his shoulder. "After one hundred and fifty-two years on this rock it's only right we celebrate leaving town." He unclipped his bioGen camouflage skin and displayed his magnificence to the world. "Always wanted to use the blaster one more time," he said, cursing how the helmet sucked the joy from his laugh.

"Get your tail back to the shuttle."

Strapi clicked the scanner shut. "The targets are stable. Good work, Rulg, but you needed the hoverPods to make up the lost ground for being tricked. They nearly got away from you."

Rulg jammed the barrel of his sidearm under Strapi's chin and the spines between his shoulder blades stiffened. The camouflage skin tightened as he puffed out. "I was on to it. He mentioned 'Thornton's Way' once too often." He knelt and patted Tom on the shoulder, admiring the human's love of the hunt. "You and me are going to have a lot of fun." He could

refine and rebuild from the human's knowledge of predator and prey, and his unmatched skills at reading the terrain until Thomas became the right tool for the right job. He was an invaluable asset for the task ahead. "Me against you. Never know, if you get good enough we might even team up and go after some big game. You sure had some nasty animals seventy million years ago."

Strapi opened the chamber lid of the hoverPod. Sarra rose from the ground as he lay her inside the chamber.

"Rulg, stop staring at her," Jbir yelled. "Stop day-dreaming and pay attention."

"Relax, there's nobody around and even if there was, who would believe a story about a lizard-man?"

"Have you forgotten about what happened with Nukal?"

"Werewolves in London? Lucky bastard."

Strapi lifted Tom's limp body into the cloaked isolation chamber. He closed the lid and Tom vanished from sight.

Rulg jerked his head towards the forest and flicked his tongue in the air. The pits flared down either side of his jaw. "Shut the lid and get the cargo back to the survey ship," he said, staying uncloaked to boost the suit's scanning power. He slapped his tail on the ground and an ancient unease grew inside his gut that he hadn't felt since the bad old days on Tilas. His yellow eyes narrowed as he reactivated the helmet and visor and meticulously searched the forest. Nothing, except squirrels and roosting birds in the trees, two crouching rabbits, an adder, and one, slow hedgehog.

He unclipped the safety and blasted into the forest until the magazine emptied then swung the blaster over his shoulder and grabbed the smaller, rapid-fire ray gun he'd used on the horsemen. The air sizzled with hot laser fire as he sprayed back and forth and up and down into the trees. Burning branches fell to the ground and clumps of grass spat into the air. Rabbits

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crisped, the adder was cooked where it slept, and the birds exploded in feathery puffballs.

“Get out of there, Rulg. That’s an order. Now!”

He stood his ground, firing into the forest until the energy pack warning lights glowed. He aimed at the snuffling hedgehog and squeezed the trigger. Empty. He sniffed the burnt air. Nothing on Earth could’ve survived the barrage, but just in case, he popped a canister of iDust and shook the micro-sensors over the ground. He backed away for twenty yards then turned and ran to catch Strapi.

“What was that about?” Strapi asked, as Rulg barged past up the ramp.

Rulg grabbed an energy pack from the weapons locker and stood guard in the doorway. “Get inside,” he said, scanning his blaster back and forth until the ramp had fully retracted.

“Do as he says,” Jbir said. “Iris is acting twitchy.”

The outside seals hissed shut and Rulg switched on a lightScreen to read the iDust dataStream. He thumped the screen. Just static. “Get this tub out of here.”

#

A creature with skin that mirrored the forest’s dappled sunlight emerged from the trees. It whipped the iDust canister away with its long tail and stalked forward to where Tom had fallen. It sniffed the ground and delicately picked up his walking staff between its claws.

A tear formed in its star-filled eyes as it crouched on its back legs as though praying while it looked heavenwards. Lightning flashed against the darkening sky and a crack of thunder split the air. It blinked and the tear slid down its scaled cheek and fell upon the parched earth. Heavy drops of rain fell from heaven so hard that plumes of dust exploded in the lane beneath the

gaps in the forest canopy.

The creature watched the shuttle ascend through the atmosphere and dock with *StarTripper* with timeless patience. The stars passed from the creature's eye until only one remained.

The door opened and Rulg glided Tom's hoverPod off the shuttle behind Strapi who led the way with Sarra. He spun around to face the shuttle door. The feeling from the forest had followed him. *It was here.*

"What's wrong with you?" Jbir asked. "Your gills are flashing and you look like you've seen your reClone."

Rulg thumped his tail onto the floor and bared his teeth.

Jbir edged behind Strapi and Kuilp. "I thought you would be happy to be going home."

"It's not too late to leave them behind," Rulg said, raising his blaster into the doorway.

"Are you crazy? Fire that thing in here and we'll all end up out there. Strapi, take the chambers to the medical bay. Rulg, you can stay behind if you want, but the humans are the most valuable part of the treasure. They *prove* Earth is real."

Rulg peered at Tom inside the chamber as Strapi walked passed. "This will not end well."