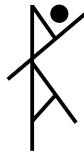


E.T. GUNNARSSON

Remember Us



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*“She sees, coming up a second time,
Earth from the ocean, eternally green;
the waterfalls plunge, an eagle soars above them,
over the mountain hunting fish.”*

-Völuspá, Verse 56, Larrington Translation

Chapter 1

6:03 AM, June 24, 2186

All men are doomed to die, their monuments and sins damned with them.

An age had passed since the wars of the twenty-first century. Once a festering corpse tainted by pollution and covered in darkness, the Earth had been reborn. After over a century, pioneer species like grass grew again, filling the desolate dust bowls and wastelands with green tides. Mutants from labs, zoos, and mutagenic bombs dominated the new world in place of the long-extinct species of old.

From the ruins came new nations. Some bickered, others peacefully lorded over the Wastes. Despite its disadvantages, electricity replaced Ignium, one of the major pollutants of the old world. Most nations focused on a brighter future, while cults akin to the pagans of ancient ages took root in wasteland villages and cities.

The mistakes of the old world were never forgotten. Those who led the world to its downfall had their deeds condemned and their names buried in hatred. In time, folklore and myth claimed their names, placing them alongside divine evils like Lucifer and Kronos.

* * *

Simon sat alone in the mess hall. He felt familiar with the place, blinking in realization while he looked around. He was on the *Arcadis*. Everything looked the same. Chairs and round tables were everywhere, a Tasking Station stood by the mess hall entrance, and a row of Vending Stations lined a wall where he used to get food.

Something felt odd. There were no Peacekeepers or Workers in the mess hall. Alone, Simon looked out into space. Earth. The planet absorbed most of the view. It was a hulking, beige sphere with desert continents and smoggy skies. Space junk orbited around it, imprisoning the planet.

The *Arcadis*, one of many great Ark stations, orbited above the pollution and space debris. It moved at twenty-thousand miles per hour, monitoring the planet's climate and pollutant levels.

Simon squinted out the window. Everything felt wrong. The pollution haze was thick, even though he knew it had faded significantly in recent years. He looked back into the hall, finding someone sitting across the table from him.

"Thaddeus?" Simon asked.

"Hey, Simon, are you going to the Thrash Games tonight?" Thaddeus asked.

Simon couldn't make out his face or features, but he knew it was Thaddeus. Simon blinked slowly, jaw hanging. Thaddeus was dead, yet here he was.

"Uh, maybe? There's one today?" Simon asked.

"Yeah. The best teams are competing tonight. Heard they might serve alcohol."

Simon blinked in confusion. "The Leaders never let us drink alcohol. Wait, the Leaders are gone? I thought they stopped the revolution?"

"What do you mean?" Thaddeus asked.

"I thought they killed you. You're dead." Simon pointed at him.

"Are you okay? I'm right here, Simon. You've been working too much with chemicals."

"This is wrong. You're not alive. Is this even the *Arcadis*?" Simon asked.

"Of course, where else would we be? It's the only place with the Thrash Games. Are you going?" Thaddeus asked.

"Yeah, come on! It'll be fun," said a familiar voice.

Simon's face flushed red. Albert. He sounded as excited as he usually did about the Thrash Games, though his tone had a sinister hint this time.

"Albert? You're here *too*?" Simon snapped.

"Yeah! We always eat together. Are you okay?" Albert asked.

"You betrayed us to the Leaders. You betrayed me!" Simon said.

Albert shook his head and pointed at Simon. "I didn't. I did what I needed

to, and you did not trust me. You had to go with your little Defiants group and ruin everything. We could've been more. Just imagine what the Leaders could have done for us if you had earned their favor and been obedient!"

"We were slaves! They would've shot us out into space eventually!" Simon shouted, and smacked the table.

"Guys! Guys, shut up! They're watching us," Thaddeus said, gesturing downward with his hands.

At the entrance of the hall, dozens of Peacekeepers gazed back. White armor covered them, their faces obscured by dark visors. Impatiently, they grasped tesla batons in their hands and faced the table.

"How are you still alive?" Simon asked Thaddeus.

"Guys, let's stop arguing. We're gonna ruin the mood for the game tonight," Thaddeus said.

"You're right. Who are you betting on today, Thaddeus?" Albert asked.

Simon looked between them in shock. Just as he was about to speak up in anger, a robotic voice echoed through the mess wall.

"All Workers report to the Tasking Stations for your assignments."

It was *Genetrix*, the Ark station's AI. Every table in the mess hall was now occupied by random Workers whose faces he couldn't make out. As soon as the voice of *Genetrix* faded, they stood. Instead of filing to the Tasking Stations, the whole mess hall charged toward the wall of Peacekeepers.

Simon went with them. They swept through the batons, tackling and piling on them. They easily beat the Peacekeepers. As they crashed into the hall, Simon found himself at the Development Sector of the *Arcadis*, far from the mess hall.

His surroundings melted from the Workers attacking downed Peacekeepers to being gunned down by the same men in white. Simon fell back in terror, running from the death surrounding him.

A voice yelled, "Simon! This way!"

Simon ran to the voice, stumbling through an airlock and into one of the engine bays of the Ark station. It was smaller than he recalled. The room was composed of a sealed airlock, computers on one wall, pipes and wires on the opposite wall, and a vast Ignium generator opposite the airlock. The Ignium

generator turned slowly, pushing energy into space to stabilize the station along with nine other Ignium jet engines.

A brown-haired man stood in front of the computer, his fingers gently tapping one of the many keyboards.

“Where am I?” Simon asked.

“Don’t you recognize it, Simon?”

Simon squinted at the man. “Thomas! Is that you?”

Thomas looked back and smiled. “Glad you still recognize another Defiant in hiding, Simon.”

“Thomas! It’s good to see you. Do you know where we are? What’s going on?”

“You really don’t recognize it? We’re in one of the engine rooms of the *Arcadis*.” Thomas gestured to the Ignium generator near them.

“What happened to the Defiants? What happened to the revolution?” Simon asked.

“Well, you were there, right?”

“I was. I got sent to Earth. We lost. They shot most of us, right? Thaddeus died.”

Thomas shook his head. “We didn’t stop fighting. And how could you have gone to Earth? You’re right here.”

“You’re right, I just... I was there.”

“Look at that.” Thomas pointed to the Ignium generator.

The Ignium generator warbled softly. It was a quiet, snoring beast, only making thousands of horsepower where it could create hundreds of thousands.

“What about it?” Simon asked.

“Isn’t it amazing? You know all about it, Simon. It can take this station off the Earth by itself and run for centuries, if not millennia. The Ignium going through it redefined our species. A new state of matter. It’s like plasma, water, and electricity, yet better than all three combined.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Simon asked.

“Think about it! What can you do with so much power? The amount of energy in this generator is like a small star!”

Simon looked between the generator and Thomas. “You can use it as a

weapon?”

“There you go! You can use it as a weapon, like the nuclear bombs of old. Nothing compared to these, though. These were what the Defiants missed, what you and I missed. One code error in these computers and all the generators will simply become unbalanced and overloaded,” Thomas said, typing on the computers.

“That’d destroy the *Arcadis* or cause it to crash to Earth! Don’t do it. Everything we fought for will go to waste!”

“Not if you reroute all the power correctly. Let’s say, to a few generators, and determine the load they endure,” Thomas said.

“Don’t do it, Thomas. There are other ways we can defeat the Leaders.”

Thomas snorted. “It’s too late. Now we can sit back and enjoy the destruction.”

Simon looked in horror while the computer screens flashed blue and shut off. Thomas backed away as the Ignium generators sped up, the room vibrating as a loud whirring filled it. A deafening pop made Simon cover his ears. The generator’s inner mechanisms spun out of control, breaking, melting, and flying apart.

An explosion made his vision white. One second, he was on the *Arcadis*. The next second, he was in space, floating down to Earth. He watched the *Arcadis* explode from a distance before turning to the polluted planet below. Drifting, he steadily came closer and closer to Earth.

He sped up, floating faster until he felt like a rocket piercing the atmosphere. He screamed and crashed through the pollution haze, rocketing toward the sandy Earth below him before hitting the ground.

Simon woke up.

“Gah!” he shouted, tearing his blankets off.

His heart thundered. Simon checked his body. He had not crashed down to Earth. It was just a dream.

Surrounding him was his room in the basement of Anna’s home, filled with farm tools, weapons, crates, and all of his belongings. He panted heavily, wiping the sweat from his face, and waited for his heart to slow.

Simon paced until he grew tired again and fell back onto the bed, vividly

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walking through the dream as if he had really been there. It felt natural, yet it wasn't.

It really was just a dream.

Chapter 2

1:46 PM, June 24, 2187

Simon gripped his spear tightly, looking down at the flowing water. He watched for movement, waiting for something to pop out of the rocks, or garbage, underneath the water's surface. So far, nothing. He kept moving back and forth, going where the water flowed from a drainage pipe under a road and down where it curved and ran faster. At the bend, it pooled into a shallow pond. He had gotten more success here than anywhere else along the creek, though today seemed to prove otherwise.

A fish swam out of an old can. Simon quietly gasped. It was sickly and twisted with gnarled fins that weakly pushed it along. An enormous eye with a white cataract comprised most of its head, while a honeycomb of multiple, smaller eyes took up its left side among its gray, sickly scales. Though the fish was a feeble, mutated creature with pale tumors all over its gray body, it didn't seem disturbed by its deformities. It was at peace with its existence and content with life among creek rocks and garbage.

Simon raised the pronged spear made of rusty metal strips and an old pole. He lurched the spear down. It pierced the water, completely missing the fish and planting itself in the creek bed. The fish disappeared, leaving Simon to step into the water and pull at the weapon with a frustrated groan.

The spear came loose without warning, causing him to stumble and fall onto the creek side. A laugh came from the road above the drainage pipe.

Simon looked up to see Rose. Dressed head to toe in hide clothing with metal plates as armor, she was a wastelander. Her clothes were decorated with bones, feathers, and beads. A huge backpack with a skull hanging from it

was on her back. Her wrinkled, tanned, and scarred face was curled into an amused expression. In one hand, she held a crossbow, sunlight gleaming off a bayonet at the end.

She rarely let anyone call her Rose, hardly allowing Simon to. Instead, she went by her first name.

“Hey, Anna,” Simon said as he stood.

“Figured you’d be down here trying your luck with the fish. They treating you nice?” Anna asked.

Simon sighed and shrugged. “Not really. Not a lot of fish out today.”

“I reckon it’s the moon or maybe the Ahari. Come on, neighbors said there’s a beast to hunt near the local mills,” Anna said, gesturing for him to follow her.

“The Ahari? Are they even real? I still think they’re just made up,” Simon asked.

Simon stepped out of the water, splashing the creek side and going through the grass separating the sandy wasteland from the creek. He grabbed a backpack resting against an old road sign and joined Anna.

“’bout as real as the ground you’re standing on, as I’ve told you, Spaceman,” Anna said.

“How can you know something is there when you can’t even see it?” Simon insisted.

“Can’t you feel it?” Anna asked.

“Feel what? It’s just water. It feels wet,” Simon said.

Anna shook her head. “You spacemen from up and yonder really are a different lick of stock.”

“Oh, how many people from space do you know?”

“You, and that’s plenty,” Anna told him.

“I just don’t understand. How do you know the Ahari are real?”

Anna raised her hands and looked at the sky. “You feel them, and you can see where they live.”

“It feels wet. That’s all I am saying.”

“You’ll learn.”

“It’s been two years since I came to Earth.”

“Two years ain’t nothing. You’ll learn.”

The sun pierced the faint pollution haze. Recently, the sky had turned into a light blue color, a color not seen by any living human in the past 200 years.

Dotting the wasteland were small plants, sparsely rising out of the sand in place of garbage. The trash from the old world slowly disappeared as time went on, though occasionally, Simon could see jugs and plastic junk sticking out of the sand.

In the distance were ranches and farms, each a far-off neighbor to one another. Most of these properties had buildings dug into the ground, so only their roofs stuck out. Around them were fields of new-world crops, most of which were low-growing, durable plants. Some people had small herds of new-world animals. Shepherds watched over their animals grazing on pioneer plants: weeds, fungi, and lichen.

The pair walked past a farm, waving at a man riding past on a wooden wagon pulled by two Scab Boars. The beasts were the size of cars. Both were hairless and had growths all over their bodies, ranging from tumors to extra body parts. Pulling the wagon, they let out “orf” sounds from respiratory holes in their chests.

Simon found these new-world animals fascinating, especially since most had what wastelanders called “iron lungs.” He knew little about “iron lungs” beyond that the new-world animals had their digestive and respiratory systems separate, allowing for natural filters in their trachea to breathe polluted air.

“What kind of animal are we going to hunt?” Simon asked.

“Nothing too big. Local folk told me it’s probably a big ol’ Prongrat,” Anna said.

“Prongrat? Never seen that before,” Simon said.

“It’s like a rat, except it usually scampers about on its back legs. Its snout is long and thin, good for stealing grain or digging up food in the ground.”

“How big is it?” Simon asked.

Anna leaned down and held her hand above her knee. “‘bout yay high, big as a toddler. Nothing too bad. Just shoot it if ya see it.”

“How come I’ve never seen a Prongrat before?”

They stopped at a crossroads, took a right past a half-buried metal silo, and went past a cart parked beside a gate.

“Because we ain’t farmers. Ain’t nothing growing no more on the ranch, and the dogs kept most things off my land when something grew. Prongrats like to steal from storage, usually during the summer when they’re trying to get nice and fat for winter. I tell people they should get dogs, no one listens. They always say guns will work.”

“And then they ask for our help?”

“It’s good pay when trade is down. Idiots make money. It’s the only fun thing to do around here since the war, anyway. I’m fixin’ to make some soup tonight if we catch it.”

“Oh yeah, I like getting paid. Still weird that you guys use gas-mask filters for money, even a century after the old world fell,” Simon said.

“They ain’t made no more, and folk used to use them, so ain’t a lot left. Ain’t no need for masks now, so at least they’re not going up in value. Mostly rich folk like water barons and herd lords have a lot, and they pay down the ladder. Sure, people might switch to something else entirely. Until then, we keep making money. Maybe we get you some land sometime?” Anna suggested.

“Land? Like a house and stuff?” Simon asked.

“Yeah, something like that. New Uruk would be willing to give you something. I’ll put the good word in. You have to build your own house, though.”

Simon sighed. “I don’t know. I’m sure you can help me get one. It’s a big responsibility, and I don’t know what I really wanna do yet.”

Anna frowned. “Well, what do you want to do? I know it’s been bothering you lately. I can tell something else has been bothering you today too. What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you could do it. You’ve become mighty tough over the last two years here on Earth. Ain’t nothing the wasteland throws at you that you can’t throw back. Unless it knocks you on your ass.”

“Well, that’s the thing. I had a dream last night about the *Arcadis*. It was weird... I blew it up! Some of my friends were alive in the dream. I just feel as

though something's happened to it, but I don't know what."

Simon paused and looked over a barren field on the horizon. "I feel like I should go out there somewhere. I should go explore and learn about the planet. I wasn't born here. I don't know anything about it, so why should I stay in one spot? If my friends were here, they'd want to see it all. I wanna see the ocean. I wanna see mountains. I've only seen pictures of those things."

Anna pursed her lips. "Well, that's a mighty large undertaking. I did say you've got what it takes to deal with the wasteland, but going out all alone? I reckon anywhere beyond civilization might chew you up, no offense."

"That's the thing... I want you to come with me."

Anna paused. "Simon, I got a ranch to take care of. I can't just leave my land for anyone to just pick at."

"It's a thought. I don't think I'm ready to go just yet."

The pair stepped onto a small wooden bridge. The bridge took them over a wetland separating a shallow dip in the land, holding them inches above hundreds of muddy puddles and watery holes.

"Don't fall in now. I'm not fixin' to pull you out of one of these holes," Anna said.

Simon cautiously followed Anna. A slippery layer of muck covered the bridge, making it even more unsettling when the old scrap moved and creaked under their weight.

"Don't worry, I'm not looking to drown today," Simon said.

Inching over the bridge, he remembered the warnings and stories Anna had told him of wetlands like these. Wetlands were still, dormant killers. Many of their puddles were surprisingly deep, and the mud that covered areas like this one was thick, capable of trapping shoes and arms. Skeletons and carcasses reached out of the muck. Each body had perished from exhaustion, trapped in the unrelenting mud. Most were animals caught in puddles and mud, left for mutant birds to feast on.

At the opposite end, they passed a set of poles marking the entrance to the wetland. Each stick had multi-colored cloth flapping, the largest decorated with an animal skull.

Next, they entered a crossroads and turned left, following a slope past a

series of buried farmhouses.

A farmer carrying a small sickle passed them. “Ahari bless,” the man said in passing.

“Ahari bless,” Anna replied.

Simon nodded at the man. They walked along the road’s curves and twists until they reached the local windmill. The base of it was a long, rectangular building made from clay with nine vertical metal turbines protruding from the top. A clay wall separated each turbine, which helped divide air through the turbines. He had seen this strange wall of turbines in the local area many times but never had visited them up close.

The windmill was a complex yet primitive wonder. Despite being made of clay and scrap, the entire structure helped power the local villages and process food.

A woman met them outside. Simon didn’t know her, though he had previously helped her with a few harvests. Like most, she dressed in animal-hide clothes decorated with bones, shells, feathers, and rocks. Plant residue had stained her clothes, and small fragments of plant matter rested in the seams. Her face was wrinkled and tanned from exposure to pollutants and sunlight.

“Ahari bless,” Anna said as they walked up to the woman.

“Ahari bless, Anna,” she replied.

“Trouble with a Prongrat, I heard?” Anna asked.

“Yeah, has me tied up tighter than an angler’s knot. Harvest is coming, and I can’t have it larking about eating everything. Anything I try seems to fail. Critter gets away from every trap. Now half the people helping with the harvest been scared off, saying that the Gordya is angry.”

Anna shrugged. “I’m sure it can’t do anything about the Prongrat. It’s just bad luck. As long as you’ve made peace with the Gordya, my partner and I will take care of the Prongrat.”

Simon stood in silent confusion, lost on what a “Gordya” was.

The woman nodded. “Yes, gave what it wanted, but the Prongrat still comes.”

“Any idea where it went recently?” Anna asked.

“Somewhere down the split, out past the wetland. It tipped over one of my jars of potted meat, ran off when I chased after it. I followed its muddy footprints past the wetlands but lost it near that old cabin. You know, the old-world one that leans?”

“I reckon it’s around there. We’ll handle it. Go home, get yourself right. We’ll come back when we got Prongrat for stew tonight,” Anna said.

The woman nodded in a respectful half-bow. “Luck favor you, Anna. You’re doing the whole village a favor.”

“Ahari bless, be safe now,” Anna said.

“Ahari bless, you too,” the woman said before departing from the mill.

Simon watched the woman leave before turning to Anna. “What’s a Gordya again?”

“It’s an Ahara that lives in buildings and takes care of them. I got one on the ranch, remember? They usually live in barns and stuff. Come on, let’s go find this Prongrat.”

“They do *what*?” Simon asked in disbelief.

“Come on, Simon.”

Anna led them inside the rectangular building holding up the turbines, going through a creaking metal door into the gloom. Simon’s eyes adjusted to the darkness. Machines filled the structure with barrels, shelves, and bags. Three of the turbines connected to millstones that rolled continuously, the scraping sound of stone grinding filling the building. Six of the turbines connected to electrical generators, each humming quietly. The last three turbines went into the ground, pumping water into reservoirs near one end of the building. A layer of flour and sand coated the floor, pieces of straw dotting the surrounding ground.

Fetishes and strange objects hung from hooks and machines inside, many made of bones, bells, scraps, and rocks tied together with strings. In one corner of the building stood a small statue on the floor. The idol was made from clay and had candles, beads, and baubles with a jar placed around it.

Anna approached the altar and knelt. She grabbed the jar, joggled it, put it down, and continued to search the building. Simon stood near a millstone.

“Simon,” Anna said.

“Huh?” Simon looked up at Anna.

She pointed at a collection of jars and directly at a broken one blocking a hole leading outside.

“Varmint’s dug its way in here. Must’ve been using these jars to hide the hole.”

“It probably left some tracks out back.” Simon pointed out.

“If it went out past the wetland, then it definitely left some tracks. We just need to figure out where it went to and get there first.”

“Wait, what is this?” Simon asked, pointing at the idol on the ground.

“It’s an offering to the Gordya.”

“Is that statue the Gordya?”

“No, it’s not the statue itself. It holes up in there, like a house. Think of it like an anchor to a spot. We give offerings, which pass onto the Gordya through the anchor,” Anna explained.

Simon looked at the idol, slowly blinking before he shook his head. “All right then, let’s just go hunt down the Prongrat.”

Anna chuckled. “You spacemen sure are numb,” she said while she led them outside.

“What do you mean, numb?” Simon asked as they went around the windmills.

They approached the hole in the wall on the opposite side. Anna knelt beside the hole and examined the ground before following a faint trail of paw prints.

She glanced up from the tracks. “What I mean is that you don’t *feel* like people from Earth do. It’s like you don’t have any gut sense. Understanding the Ahari seems to pass right over your head.”

“Well, it’s different where I came from. It’s all metal. The only thing that is alive other than people are plants in the greenhouses.”

“I reckon you were raised believing that everything had to be explained, that there were formulas or laws describing everything. If it couldn’t, it wasn’t real, huh?”

“Well, yeah, that’s reasonable. How can I know the Ahari are even real? Is there evidence?”

Anna shook her head. “Better to leave that sort of stuff well enough alone.

You'll understand, come time. Knowing your fancy laws and math don't amount to a hill of anything out here."

"Well, what does?"

"What you can do and how many brain cells you got. Come on. I think I figured out the critter's trail. Bunch of scuffed-up sand going out toward the wetland." Anna gestured to the ground.

Was Anna subtly giving him advice or insulting him for being stupid? Simon tried to make out the trail. He had previously learned animal tracking from Anna and used the new skill, but couldn't determine what she was pointing at. Even though he couldn't see it, Simon trusted her.

The trail went down the sandy hill from the windmill, through a fence, and onto a cultivated property. Anna followed it, carrying on through fields of mixed crops. All sorts of plants grew here. Some were purple, some green, and a few were even blue. Many resembled old-world cabbages or had flowering stalks, while a few rose in tall stalks like wheat. They avoided stepping on the crops, following the trail away from them and toward the wetland near the windmill.

"Do I need a gun for this?" Simon asked.

"Nah, I reckon that there fishing spear will do fine if I miss my shot. I rarely miss, so don't get your panties in a twist, Spaceman."

"Whatever you say."

The land dipped into the wetland, a muddy stain that had carved out a dent in the ground. To the left, the bridge gently swayed in the distance, warnings of colored flags and skulls posted on both sides. Anna went right, avoiding the muddy border of the deathly scar.

In the mud, Simon could see that the Prongrat had jumped around like a kangaroo on its hind legs, each footprint appearing in pairs a few feet apart. The wetland disappeared. They found an old wooden cabin. Most of it had fallen apart. The northern wall had collapsed entirely, the roof was gone, and the remaining three walls leaned to one side. A mound of sand sat inside the building, the earth slowly devouring the structure.

Anna slowed. Her head moved side to side like a hound. It was as if she could smell the Prongrat or hear it breathe a mile away, or at least Simon believed

she could. She raised her crossbow when they entered the broken threshold of the structure. Simon raised his spear in nervous anticipation.

Nothing. Not a peep or a stir in the sand. Apart from some little pile of bones and a collection of animal prints, the structure was empty.

Anna circled the mound of sand in the center, checking to see if a burrow was inside it, “Well, I reckon the lil’ critter ain’t here. Look around, might find a fresh trail.”

Simon paced around the building with a frown. “How do I make out what’s fresh?”

“Find ones like the ones we just followed. They’re deep. Sand ain’t washed over them yet.”

Simon’s brow wrinkled as his lips pursed. The difference between one print and the next seemed indecipherable.

“Here!” Anna waved him over, pointing to two separate trails of footprints. “Look, like I said, one on the left is deeper. Goes out toward the old highway, I think.”

Simon knelt and examined the two sets of tracks, sinking his finger into each and blinking in realization. “Oh, I see... Well, let’s chase after it then.”

Anna led them away from the sinking cabin, following the twisting trail over the weed-covered dunes. Simon paced after Anna, gaze darting back and forth between the ground and the horizon as he tried to spot the Prongrat. The trail turned when they came across the remnants of an old-world road.

Like the cabin, the ground had started swallowing the black pavement. Time had split it into chunks and covered each piece with a web of cracks. Weeds grew between the separations. A sign stood by the road, rusted with a bit taken off the top. The green paint had all but peeled away, though someone had recently written the directions to the city of New Uruk and the local village on it.

The trail twisted and circled the road, passing the shells of century-old cars so rusted out that the wind could break their brittle frames. Simon couldn’t help but stare. He had seen pictures of cars before but had never seen one in person that wasn’t an empty shell. What did the metal skeletons look like before they had been stripped and decomposed?

His focus drifted briefly until a metallic rattle sounded in the distance. Anna stopped, Simon almost tripping into her.

“What?” he blurted out.

Anna swatted at him. “Shh!”

Simon squinted over her shoulder when Anna pointed her crossbow toward the remnants of an old bus. A pileup of car shells stacked against the bus made it lean over the edge of the broken old-world road. The metallic rattle sounded again. Simon’s breath halted with an excited gasp, squeezing his spear in anticipation.

Anna approached the bus. She went to the back, where a giant hole revealed the inside. Her footsteps became ghost-like, completely silent compared to Simon’s inexperienced oafishness.

She stopped abruptly as they stood in front of the gaping hole. Inside the bus was sand, along with a substantial dark pile that ominously sat at the driver’s end of the bus.

“Simon... this ain’t the Prongrat,” Anna whispered.

Simon looked between her and the bus, blinking and shaking his head. “What?”

“Back away.”

The pair stepped backward slowly. The pile stirred. Simon gasped, caught his boot in a deep hole in the road, and fell with a thud. The mass flinched at the sound and crashed out of the bus into broad daylight with a shallow groan. Completely hairless, it resembled a truck-sized rat covered in tumors, occasional giant bristles, and dark pigment markings. Its mouth had two enormous tusks, scabs covering its face and forming around two dark eyes that sat deeply in its skull. It stood only a few inches off the ground, propelling itself forward on giant, clawed paws that sent the half-ton monstrosity onward like a semi-truck.

The creature charged Anna with a deep, barrel-like groan. A loud twang sounded as she shot a bolt into its side. The beast flinched away and swung its log-like tail at her. She flew off her feet, tumbling to the sand with a groan. Simon stood with his spear, a horrified gasp escaping his lips when the giant turned to him.

Again, it charged. Simon raised his spear. As its snout met his chest and launched him, he planted the weapon in its shoulder with all his might. He flew over the creature. The sky rolled past his vision.

“Rose!” he shouted.

He landed on top of the bus, crashed through the rusted roof, and into the creature’s den. Simon laid in the sand, grabbing his chest. He tried to inhale, only wheezing as agony filled him. He couldn’t move or breathe, only squirm. Anna screamed at the beast outside. A thunderous roar echoed. Anna’s shouts followed, a deep growl resonating through the ground before the creature’s heaving footsteps faded.

“Simon!”

Anna ran inside and propped Simon up on her lap. He gasped, hands rolling up her clothing in panic.

“Yer fine, Spaceman! Just got the wind knocked out of ye by that big ol’ clomper! Just breathe, get your breath!”

Air came back to Simon after a minute. His grip softened in relief while he gasped. “That thing made me fly... What was that?”

“I don’t know, big ol’ varmint. Probably would’ve crushed us something good had you not stuck it. I scared it off, but your spear is gone, sorry to say.”

Simon let out a shuddering exhale. “Not gonna keep me up tonight. What about the Prongrat?”

“I reckon that big thing got it. Trail led toward the bus, so it probably was lunch. Let’s head on back to the ranch and nuss you right up.”

Simon groaned loudly and grabbed his chest in pain when Anna stood him up. He leaned on her, carefully walking out of the bus while looking down at the sand where the scuffle had happened.

“How’s that for a trail?” he asked.

“Mighty fine trail. How do you feel?”

“I think I just bruised like... everything. A day in bed might fix it. Let’s just go home.”

“Well, varmint didn’t break yer spirit, at least.”

“Maybe my spleen, though.”

“Don’t start whining now. Wait till we get to the ranch, at least.”

Simon chuckled and groaned, holding his sides in pain. They followed the highway. After passing cars and occasional highway signs, they found a post marked by a blue flag, turning right toward the local village. A dirt road sprouted from the old black asphalt. Hundreds of feet, hooves, paws, and wagon wheels had carved out the route, conforming to the land in twists and turns. The path rose to a hill overlooking a sandy plain. Ahead was the local village center, composed of a few half-buried buildings, market stalls, and a large shrine in the middle. To the right were the windmills. Occasionally dotting the horizon were farms. Fields of crops dotted the landscape between the sandy, weed-covered expanses dominated by herds that grazed on lichen and dry plants.

“Did you and London ever meet something that big?” Simon asked.

Anna chuckled. “I don’t recall anything with him. Had a big ol’ mutant in a barn few years before you dropped out the sky. Scared it something mighty when we all tried to kill it, near about took down the barn. Damn near sent one of us to the grave. Had food for weeks once we killed it though, reckon a month of full bellies from it.”

“What kind of mutant?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something from the old world, like them folks that got caught up in them mutagenic bombs. I reckon it wasn’t no animal from no lab or nothing.”

“Human? So, you ate human flesh?”

“Wasn’t human anymore. You’re lucky you fell down to Earth at this time and not a few decades ago. You’d’ve made a fine meal for someone hungry.”

Simon grunted in disgust.

Anna grinned. “Been a long time since we’ve been that hungry, don’t you worry. That was a different time.”

“Yeah, it’s just... How could someone do that?”

“People can do a lot of horrible things, Simon. Trust me.”

People waved at the pair as they passed through the village. Stalls and half-buried buildings dominated the village center, filled with busy people. There were many shops and even a bar, a popular place for meetings and festivals. Some people knelt in prayer at the village altar and gave offerings to a clay

statue that watched over the village and faced New Uruk. Fetishes, bones, animal bits, bowls, candles, and stones were piled against the statue's feet.

The statue represented a spirit that protected the village and provided good harvests. What ignorant superstition. Anna passed it and gave a short, informal bow. A visiting priest sat beside the statue, covered in hide robes, his face obscured. He hummed quietly, rocking back and forth in meditation with his hands interlocked in front of his chest.

"Does he do that all day?" Simon whispered to Anna.

"Who does what?"

"That guy by the statue in the robes. I've only seen him by that statue all day."

"He's a Unahari, a priest. Ahari bless him. He's from New Uruk. It's his job to care for that there statue and make sure we're on good terms with the Ahari. Now shut yer mouth, Spaceman, don't want no one hearing you say something stupid 'bout him."

"I won't! I won't. Does he have a name?"

"Not sure. Some of them give up their names in order to find their true selves."

"True self?"

"Like who he truly is, without the names or labels that people give you. Your identity that isn't given to you by everyone else. It's why he never speaks to anyone."

Simon glanced back at the man while they left the village square. Bizarre. The idea of a true self sounded ridiculous. His face wrinkled when he tried to wrap his head around it. He was who he was—Simon. So how could anyone be any different? He shook his head and threw the absurd thought from his mind.

They passed the local smithy. Anna waved at the blacksmith working a piece of metal on an anvil, who smiled and waved back. Soon, the village fell behind the dunes as they went toward the ranch.

"Did you call me Rose back there when you went flying?" Anna asked.

Simon nodded. "Yeah, sorry."

"You're fine. That was just London's name for me. Been a while since I've

heard it.”

“You don’t like it when people use that name, right?”

“Most people. Some can use it, if they know me. I guess you get the pass, spaceman.”

Simon smiled. “Well, I’m glad you trust me.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t push it.”

“Right, sorry.”

Anna stopped in the middle of the road. “Do you feel that?”

Simon looked around. “Feel what?”

“Wind stopped. Something’s not right.”

“What’s not right? What is it?”

A bright flash appeared in the sky.

For a moment, it was small, then exploded into a massive sun-like flare. The sky erupted into colors of orange and blinding white light, as if a star were crashing down to earth. Simon shielded his eyes while the orb burned the sky and blotted it with light. It arced over the clouds, descending almost as quickly as it appeared, and faded into the distance. The sky returned to its smoggy-blue color. A huge smokey trail stayed behind, slowly fading.

A tremendous boom thundered across the wasteland. A shockwave came with the bang, running through Simon’s chest and knocking him back slightly. The pair stood in shock, Simon’s mouth agape.

“What in all hell was that?” Anna whispered.

It was as if the world was still. No animals cried out, nothing moved, not even the wind stirred. The boom had stunned everything.

“Anna?”

Anna looked at Simon. “What?”

“I think that was the *Arcadis*.”

Chapter 3

4:27 PM, June 24, 2187

The cart creaked as it rolled over the rocky road. Anna sat hunched over in the driver's seat while her massive Scab Boar, Slubber, easily pulled the cart forward. Wrapped in a blanket, Simon sat cross-legged in the wagon tub, watching the road behind them.

The sky was blue and slightly hazy. Simon could see the sky burn whenever he closed his eyes, his memories returning him to his dream. He placed a hand on his chest, reminiscing about the thunderous boom that followed the light.

"You okay back there, Spaceman?"

"I keep thinking about the *Arcadis* and that dream. I was there with someone who fought with me in the Revolution. Thomas. He did something to the Ignium generators on the ship and blew it up."

"Well, I don't know nothing about no Ignium generators, but I'll tell you right now, maybe you had a vision. Dreams are more than you think."

"More than I think? It's just a dream."

Anna sighed and shook her head. "Numb Spaceman. Who told you that?"

Simon's face flushed a light hue of red. "Well, what are dreams then?"

"They're a lot of things. I know a few, but I reckon there's more to them than I'll ever know. Some dreams come from the Ahari communicating with you, some come from your mind, and some are nonsense. Maybe it came from Thomas? Who knows?"

"It came... from Thomas?"

"Maybe, you never know."

The superstitions of the wasteland frustrated Simon. He could never sense

what people felt, see what they saw, or even prove anything they claimed. Simon fixated on the horizon and grumbled.

Anna looked back and tapped his head. "Don't be in a twist. Just 'cause you ain't got no gut sense don't mean nothing. You'll learn."

Simon sighed. "I know. It just doesn't make sense."

"I understand. It's just new to you. We'll see what the council says. I reckon a heap of nonsense."

"They're gonna speak about the caravans going west?" Simon asked.

"I done heard something about that in the village. You know how important the caravans are, settling new lands and that sort of mess."

Simon shifted and laid down, gripping his sides as the cart's rocking made his sore muscles tense. "Maybe I should join the caravans going out west? Explore the world?"

"That's a thought. Any particular reason for picking caravan life?"

"Well, think about it. I could explore the world and see what's left out there. I could learn and maybe find my own land."

"Reckon you can make it, Spaceman?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Frontier life ain't for everyone. Lots of things to gobble you up."

"Bah! I could make it. I just have to learn."

"Ain't that much room for learning out there, trust me."

"Well, I'll think about it."

"Well, you don't have to decide today. Lots of caravans going out west over the next year."

They approached New Uruk. Fields of weeds and distant farmhouses slowly became fields of green, with clusters of houses sprouting up among them. Herds of new-world mutant animals grazed the pastures. They basked in the sun, only momentarily glancing at the passing wagon.

Crops grew everywhere. Simon was baffled by the work put into making farms akin to a wild ecosystem rather than fields of singular crop types. In the fields were tall plants, short plants, flowering plants, and more growing in unorganized coexistence as if in the wild. The ancient method of endless single-plant fields bathed in chemicals had been abandoned. It wasn't needed.

A near extinction of insects and diseases that affected old-world plants had led to a cleaner, more natural way of agriculture. Towering windmills loomed over the area, their vertical panes turning slowly with the wind. Irrigation systems covered the bio-diverse pastures like spiderwebs, drawing water pumped up by windmills. No chemicals, no sprays, no poison, no unnatural rows, and no destructive plowing. Occasionally, mutant birds flew over the fields, landing to peck at the crops.

Simon leaned against the wagon's side and gazed at the fields. The buildings became more clustered when they approached the city's border, the terrain soon shifting from areas of green to refurbished ruins from the old world. Concrete structures rose around them. Most were old warehouses, factories, or shopping malls. In place of old parking lots were market squares, greenhouses, and vast piles of crates full of merchant goods. Wagons pulled by Scab Boars were everywhere, causing traffic that slowed Anna and Simon down. The further they went into the city, the more industrial and urban life became. People lived in old-world buildings turned into apartments. City blocks were places to shop and trade; many old ruins had become belt shops, power plants, butcher shops, bakeries, and other businesses.

Panic filled the air. The omen of a burning sky had shut down the city for the day, closing everything. Most traffic stemmed from people going to different squares to wait for council news. Others simply went home.

Anna grumbled, "Darn traffic. I miss when the roads were clear. I can't stand all these crowds in the city, reason why I never come here."

"Clear road means less people, less business, right?"

"Ah, business was plenty fine without these fools blockin' the roads. Y'all move it!"

They approached a gigantic metal gate looming between the city buildings. Two towers almost twice as tall as the gate imposingly guarded its corners. In each tower were dozens of guards. They sat and watched out the windows or patrolled along balconies that circled the scrap-and-metal constructs. Walls shot out from both sides of the towers, wrapping around the inner city. More guards walked along these walls, gazing down at the traffic jam below.

Angry shouts came from the wagon drivers while the traffic jam slowly

sorted itself out. The wagons inched until the arguing drivers moved, and the traffic flowed like a river once again.

People walked past the traffic jam. The city folks dressed in light clothing, reflecting their easier, urban lives. The farmers from outside the city wore more layers of clothing, were dirtier, and wore jewelry reflecting their religious beliefs. Bones, feathers, and rusted metal objects from the old world adorned the farmers, making them stand out from the city people. Though some in the city were religious, few were as superstitious as the country folk.

The population had boomed during peacetime, causing congestion in the city and local communities that grew into a third category of people: frontier folk. Many frontier folks were wanderers who came from other parts of the wasteland or were given land out west by the New Uruk government. They were rugged people covered in hide clothing. They often wore hoods or masks and carried around guns or tools. Some were lucky to own wagons. They had their entire homes packed up on wagons, ready to go out to the western frontier.

Electricity dominated. Light poles dotted the city blocks, along with wires hanging high among the buildings. Giant machines hugged the sides of apartment buildings and factories, pumping hot or cold air inside. Industrial shops, mainly belt shops, were driven entirely by electricity. The industry of New Uruk baffled Simon. Electricity continued to be a mystery to him since his whole life had revolved around Ignium. His most recent venture into investigating electricity led to him getting shocked and giving up in frustration. The lights and wires continued to be a mystery, though he felt as though he was getting closer to understanding.

Eventually, the crowded city blocks opened into the remains of a giant parking lot. Hundreds gathered in the lot and squeezed themselves toward the center, where a man stood on a raised platform. He waited, eyeing the crowd.

Anna moved the cart to an outer portion of the lot, joining other wagoners while they parked. Soon, there was standing room only in the lot. Murmurs filled the air. After a few minutes, a woman parted her way through the crowd. She gave the man on the platform a piece of paper and disappeared back into the crowd.

The man raised a loudspeaker to his mouth.

“Citizens of New Uruk! Word has arrived from the council! The Five, elected by y’all, the People, have come together to discuss the meaning of the sky fire! Some of y’all fear it is an omen against the settlement of the west! Rest assured, the caravans will continue! Some fear for the crops! Gut sense will tell y’all that all will be fine and dandy! We have spoken to the wisest Unahari! Offer to the Ahari, keep peace with the land, and y’all will be fed!”

Some of the crowd cheered, and some jeered.

“The Ahari want to end the caravans!”

“We’re gonna starve!”

“Nonsense!”

People shouted and argued, only stopped by the booming voice of the man on the platform.

“People! People! Calm down, y’all! The council will investigate the matter further but has found no reason to stop anything! Return to y’all’s homes and carry on!”

The crowd burst into more arguments while the man tried to calm them.

Anna grabbed the reins and whipped them, causing Slubber to heave forward with a loud “orf!” The crowd parted when the wagon passed. They left the square and entered an empty street, driving out toward the countryside again.

“That was a whole stinkin’ pile of shit,” Anna said.

“What are they all freaking out about? It’s just something crashing from space.”

“Lots of them are afraid that little sky fire means the Ahari are unhappy. They’re superstitious, unlike you. You’re just naive.”

“Hey!”

“Caravans mean a lot to the people here, more space here in the city and more trade with people leaving for the west.”

Simon shrunk down against the wagon’s corner and rubbed his face. “It has to be the *Arcadis*. I just know it is.”

Anna glanced back at him. “Sure as the sun shines?”

“Yes, it might’ve survived even. We should go find it! I need to know if anyone survived. I need to know what happened.”

“Simon, I’ll put it as bluntly as a brick. Even if anyone survives, how are they gonna make it? Sure enough, you barely made it before I found you. And where did it crash? Some things are better if they leave you wondering.”

“I need to make peace with it. I need to make peace with my home. Why don’t we both go and find it? It must’ve crashed out west. We can join the caravans. You always talk about the good ol’ days and how many adventures you used to have before the ranch.”

“Now watch it, Spaceman. Make me sound like I sit on my ass all day doing nothing,” Anna grumbled.

“It’s true. Ask the neighbors to take care of it. Think about it. We can go out there, explore the world that I never had, and maybe we might be able to come back.”

“So, you figure we oughta just leave the ranch, go looking for your space friends, and hope to survive going there and back? Just so you can get a gander at the rest of the world?”

Simon shrugged. “I mean, what else are we gonna do? Just sit and kill pests all day, every day?”

“I ain’t gonna say I like your point, but it does make me sound boring. Heck, even my friends from the war wonder why I never leave the ranch. Maybe it’s time.”

“Hey, I’ll admit. I’m selfish. I don’t really want to go and find the *Arcadis* all alone.”

“Yeah, you’re a Spaceman. Probably will get lost without your fancy space tools to navigate.”

Simon chuckled.

They journeyed out of New Uruk and into the green fields until the pastures became distant ranches full of livestock. They went around the village. Soon, Anna’s home came into view. An old fence surrounded the property, dead trees rising along it. In the middle was a house, a barn, and a small shed. Barren fields surrounded the ranch.

Slubber pulled the cart onto the property and past the barren fields. Nothing had grown since the last season. They had tried everything to get the plowed fields to grow, ranging from manure fertilizer to rituals to appease the Ahari.

The robot that once plowed, weeded, and harvested the fields sat inside the barn ahead, rusting away with nothing to do. It was like a shadow loomed over the ranch. Anna's dogs and a flock of mutant poultry had passed from sickness. The only animal that hadn't gotten sick was Slubber. The gloom on the ranch had deepened the shadows, covered everything in a sickening stillness, and weakened their spirits.

Anna sighed when they pulled into the barn. She sat silently for a minute while Simon got out of the wagon and began removing equipment from Slubber.

"You okay?" Simon asked.

"I'm fine. Just miss when this place was my pride and joy. Wasn't nothing in the wasteland that could heap up to this place, best ranch there was. Now ain't nothing sprouting in the fields and no animals living here. Just quiet all damn day. Wish we knew why."

Anna stepped off the wagon and helped Simon, releasing Slubber. The beast let out a grateful "orf," giving Anna a gentle nudge before wandering into the fields.

"Well, it still is the best ranch, but... Maybe it's time for a vacation? Can ask Liam up the road if he can take care of the place while we're gone."

"I'll think about it. Liam's a whole heap of nothing useful, but I think Devin might be up to it. Don't matter. I ain't decided on anything but dinner right now. Come on, Spaceman. We're having stew."

Simon smiled. "Better let me chop the vegetables this time."

"I ain't putting your thumb back on if you cut it off then."

"Hey! I'm not that clumsy."