

## \*The Last Landship\*

What you've got to understand (said Carson) is that the Landships were a doomed species from the moment that Men decided their eyes made pretty baubles. I've seen 'em worn as jewelry, and displayed as art, and even used as currency. Until today I hadn't ever heard of one being chosen over a real live woman, but I've been out of touch for quite a while and for all I know it's happened before.

Anyway, Peponi was a colony planet, prettier than some, wilder than most, and it attracted a lot of big-game hunters and adventurers. A few of 'em started safari companies and took clients out into the bush, but most of them were there to hunt Landships and sell the eyestones they collected.

Well, with as many millions of Landships as covered the planet and as few Men to hunt them, you wouldn't think they could be decimated so fast, but within a century there weren't more than fifty thousand left. They were mostly gathered in one protected area, a place called the Bukwa Enclave -- and then one day the government ran out of money and pulled most of its army out, and suddenly it wasn't protected any longer, and that was the beginning of the end. I still remember it.

My old pal Catamount Greene was the first to arrive. He didn't know a damned thing about tracking, but old Catamount never let minor details like that stop him. On the way to the Enclave he picked up a bunch of carvings and jewelry from one of the local tribes, then found one of the few military outposts left in the Bukwa area and explained that he was trading these trinkets to the tribes that lived in the Enclave. He gave a few of the choicest ones to the soldiers, bought them a couple of drinks, and went on to say that he was terrified of Landships and that he had heard that the Enclave was filled with them -- and within ten minutes he had talked them into marking where the herds were on a map so that he could avoid them while he hawked his wares from village to village. He walked into the Enclave with one weapon, three bearers, and his map, and walked out a month later with more than 3,000 eyestones.

Then there was Bocci, who had made up his mind to leave Peponi, but decided to stick around just long enough to clean up in the Enclave. He found a water hole way out at the western end, staked it out, poisoned it, and picked up 700 eyestones without ever firing a shot.

Jumping Jimmy Westerly went in with a stepladder, took it out in the shoulder-high grass where none of the other hunters would go, climbed atop it, and potted twenty Landships the first day he was there. Once they cleared out of the area, he followed them, always keeping to high grass. He'd set up his ladder whenever they stopped, and he kept right on doing it until he had his thousand eyestones.

Other hunters used other methods. True West Thompson brought in a whole tribe of native hunters who used poisoned spears and arrows and brought down almost three thousand Landships before they started becoming scarce.

After a couple of months, the Enclave began to resemble a war zone, and you could smell the Landship carcasses rotting from miles away, but it didn't stop the slaughter. Kalahari Jenkins took a dry area, about forty miles square, at the northwestern tip of the Enclave, announced that it was his personal hunting ground, and swore he'd kill anyone who entered it. A feller named Kennedy wandered in one day, chasing a couple of Landships, and true to his word Jenkins blew him away. What he didn't know was that Kennedy had six sons, and it started a blood feud. Lasted a couple of weeks before they killed him -- I seem to remember that he got four of them first -- and then the two remaining sons declared that it was now their territory. That lasted about five days, until old Hakira came up from the south, killed the last two Kennedy boys, gathered up all of Jenkins' and the Kennedys' eyestones and lit out for civilization.

Nobody ever found out what happened to the Maracci Sisters. They were damned good hunters, those

girls -- but one day they just disappeared, both of 'em, and no one ever found the 8,000 eyestones they were supposed to have taken.

Anyway, the government finally realized that they had to do something or there wouldn't be any Landships left, and if there weren't any Landships, both the hunting and holographic safari businesses would vanish and Peponi's main source of hard currency would vanish, so they finally passed a ban on hunting Landships.

They meant well, but the ban came too late. They didn't know it, but there was only one Landship left.

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"Just a minute," said Nicodemus Mayflower. "I've never even heard of a Landship."

"That's not surprising," replied Hellfire Carson. "Not many people have."

"I never saw one in a museum, or even in a book," continued Mayflower.

"Are you calling me a liar?" demanded Carson hotly.

"I don't know yet. When was the last Landship killed?"

"In 1813 G.E.," said Carson.

"Now I'm calling you a liar!" said Nicodemus Mayflower. "That was more than 4,700 years ago!"

"I know when it was," answered Carson calmly. "I was there."

"I'm willing to be told that this thing ain't no ruby," interjected Catastrophe Baker, holding up the stone. "After all, talk is cheap. But before I believe anything you say, I'd sure like to know how you came to be almost 5,000 years old."

"Might as well tell you," agreed Carson. "You don't look like you're going to take it on faith."

"Tell you what," said Baker. "I'll take 1,500 years on faith; you prove the rest."

Everyone laughed, even Carson, and when the noise had subsided he spoke again.

"It happened a few years later. I'd left Peponi and had been hunting on Faligor, when I heard there was adventure to be had in a promising little war in the Belladonna Cluster. It figured to be about a three-week trip, so I activated the DeepSleep chamber and told my ship's computer to wake me when I was within a day of the Cluster."

Carson took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he scratched his shaggy gray head. "To this day I don't know what went wrong, but the next thing I knew some medics were pulling me out of the chamber and saying they'd found this derelict ship floating in space with me inside it. All I know is I went to sleep in the year 1822 of the Galactic Era, and I woke up ten years ago, in 6513. I can't prove it, but there are those who can, and if any doubters want to put up enough money, we'll go hunt them up."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Catastrophe Baker. "We got ourselves a regular Rip Van Winkle in our midst."

"No," Three-Gun Max corrected him. "We've got a Hellfire Van Winkle."

Which was when and how he stopped being Hellfire Carson.

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Getting back to my story (said Hellfire Van Winkle), I stayed on Peponi for a few years after the massacre at the Bukwa Enclave, picking up some money here and there as a guide, or from time to time as a meat hunter for the new towns that were springing up, and in all that time I never saw a Landship. Neither had any of the other hunters or explorers, and we just all assumed that the last of 'em had been killed in the Enclave.

Then one day I was out in the bush, hunting Demoncats for the trophy market, when I heard this mournful wailing sound off in the distance. Only sound I'd ever heard even remotely like it was years ago -- the lonesome, heartbroken sound a baby Landship made when you killed its mother. This was kind of like it, only much louder.

I followed the sound to its source, and came upon the biggest Landship I'd ever seen. He must've stood close to twenty feet at the shoulder, and he was standing all alone in the middle of the forest, howling his misery. I couldn't see any wounds on him, so I decided to follow him for a while to discover the cause of all this unhappiness.

Also, truth to tell, I kind of half-believed the old legend of a Landships' Graveyard, and I wouldn't have minded a bit if he'd led me to it so I could go around gathering eyestones, but he didn't. He just kept howling out his pain and his misery as he moved from one spot to another, and after a couple of days it dawned on me that he was searching for another of his kind, that he'd probably been looking for another Landship for years now, and he'd pretty much figured out that he wasn't going to find one -- that he was the last of his kind.

Oh, he went through the motions, traveled to the most likely places to find his brothers and sisters, but I could tell by the way he carried himself that he didn't expect to find anything except more empty spaces where herds of his kind were once so large that it took them a full day to travel past, start to finish.

He spotted me on the fifth day, and though I was sure he'd been hunted in the past and knew the range and power of a Man's weapons, he just stood there and stared at me, as if begging me to put him out of his misery. I didn't do it -- I have nothing against breaking the law, but I didn't want to be remembered as the man who killed the last Landship -- and after awhile he went back to his endless search. I didn't make any attempt to keep my presence a secret, and he just kind of tolerated me. Never tried to charge me, never tried to hide from me, just acted like I was simply one more burden to bear in his already over-burdened existence.

We spent close to two months wandering from forest to savannah to scrub bush, and by the end of that time I was as anxious to find some more of his kind as he was, if only to stop that mournful wailing every time we hit a new area and realized we'd come up blank again.

Then one day we crossed the track of a safari. I could tell by the signs that they were no more than eight or nine hours ahead of us. I wanted to turn aside so there'd be no chance of running into them, but convincing a wild Landship to turn away when he doesn't want to takes more skills than I've got. My Landship was so desperate that the instant he picked up the scent of the safari, he headed off in their direction. I knew he couldn't sense any other Landships up ahead, and he had to know there were hunters and guns at the end of the track, but who knows how a Landship's mind works, especially one that's been slowly going crazy with loneliness for years and years?

A couple of hours later I found a discarded laser battery, and I could tell from the customized casing that it belonged to Catamount Greene, and I knew that if Greene saw the Landship nothing could stop him from killing it for its eyestones.

And suddenly I realized that I didn't want the last Landship to die for the same stupid reason that all the others of its kind had died (yeah, including all the ones I myself had killed). Greene and I were old friends and had been through a lot together, and I knew him well enough to know I'd never be able to talk him out of shooting the Landship so he could cash in on two more eyestones.

I don't know why I cared so much, because it sure as hell didn't care what happened to its eyestones once it was shot, but somehow I just couldn't let it happen.

So I called out to the Landship, the first time I'd said a word in his presence, and suddenly he stopped in his tracks and turned to face me, and I walked up to within about twenty yards of him.

"I'm sorry to do this to you," I said, aiming my burner, "but if I ever saw a thing that was tired of life, it's you, and I'm not going to let them chop you into saleable bits and pieces. You're one animal whose eyes aren't going to decorate a jewelry shop and whose feet won't become barstools and whose tail won't be sold as a flyswatter. This world and its Landships have been good to me, and I figure I owe you that much."

He stood there, swaying gently, and staring at me, and then I pulled the trigger, and I'm not one to get overly sentimental or pretend something's human when it's not, but I'll swear he looked grateful as he tumbled over and sprawled on the ground.

Then I walked over to him, made sure he was dead because I didn't want to cause him any extra pain if he wasn't, and melted his eyestones right there inside his head so no one could ever make a profit on them.

Peponi didn't seem all that pretty to me after that, and a week later I took off for Faligor.

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Sinderella wiped away the first tear I'd ever seen on her flawless cheek. "I think that's a beautiful story," she said.

"I got a question," said Max.

"Go ahead," replied Hellfire Van Winkle.

"What would you have done if you'd known there were five or six other Landships still alive?" said Max. "Would you have killed him anyway?"

"Sure," said Van Winkle. "But I'd have taken his eyestones and sold 'em."

Max chuckled, but Sahara del Rio kind of snarled at him. "I thought you were a decent man. I guess I was wrong."

"I am a decent man," protested Van Winkle. "I never claimed to be a saint."

"You ain't ever going to be mistaken for one," she assured him.

"That don't bother me none. I'd never know which to put on first, my hat or my halo."

"Tell me more about Landships," said Sinderella, who was all through crying now. "I find them fascinating."

"I told you everything I could about 'em," said Van Winkle.

"I still can't get a mental picture of one," said Sinderella.

Little Mike Picasso, all four feet nine inches of him, spoke up. "I think I can help you."

"Oh?"

He started thumbing through one of his sketchbooks, tossed it aside, and went through another. "Here it is," he said, opening it to a certain page and handing it to her.

"My God, that's awesome!" said Sinderella. "And they went twenty feet at the shoulder?"

"Closer to fifteen," said Van Winkle. He reached out for the sketchbook. "May I?" She handed it to him and he studied it for a moment, then looked over at Little Mike. "That's a Landship!" he said, surprised.

"Of course it is."

"But no one's seen one for close to 5,000 years. How did you know what they looked like?"

"Back in my starving artist days, I accepted a commission to create six stamps for the Peponi post office. One of the ones they wanted was a Landship, so they sent me some early holos and drawings."

"You got everything right except the eyes," said Van Winkle.

"Well, I never knew what the eyes looked like until I heard your story," said Little Mike. "You'd be surprised how badly faded a five-millennia-old holograph can be."

"So you're a painter."

"The best," answered Little Mike.

"Modest, too," said Gravedigger Gaines.

"I was never one for false modesty," said Little Mike. "You know the Mona Lisa?"

"Yeah. It's hanging somewhere on Deluros VIII."

"Bullshit. It was stolen thirty years ago. That's my Mona Lisa on display. And Morita's Picnic on Pirhouette IV?"

"Yours too?"

"Of course." Little Mike smiled smugly. "And when they moved the Cistine Chapel to Alpha Prego III and lost half a dozen of the ceiling panels, who do you think they hired to replace them?"

"Okay, I'm impressed," said the Gravedigger.

"You ought to be," agreed Little Mike.

"So how come I've never heard of you if you're so good?"

"Oh, you've heard of me. 'Little Mike' is just for my friends. My whole name is Michelangelo Gauguin Rembrandt van Gogh Rockwell Picasso." He paused. "But I do most of my best work incognito."

"Why would an artist work incognito?"

"Oh, there are reasons."

"Suppose you share them with us," persisted Gaines.

Little Mike took a swig from the bottle he was holding. "Sure, why not?" he said.