

CHILD OF EARTH

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The night had anticipated the coming winter, darkness masking the sky as sleet filled the air to the eerie sough of wind that rose, at times, into a maniacal shrieking as if tormented creatures writhed in an extremity of pain. Images too mature for his imagination yet they lingered and teased his mind as he moved cautiously over a bleak expanse of stone, sand and scrub in the growing light of dawn. A twig culled from a stunted bush eased the chatter of his teeth and gave the pretence of food as he chewed at the tough fibers. Frost made the going even more treacherous and twice he slipped to lie, fighting the fear of injury, rising to nurse bruised flesh and scraped skin, to move on, to reach his destination, to turn his back to the east and adopt his position as the sun rose higher into the sky.

Waiting, fighting the desire to close his eyes, to rest, to sleep, to escape into a more hospitable place. One touched by the gossamer fabric of vaguely remembered dreams. Of warmth, comfort and security. Of unknown contentment. An empty wish—he had no choice but to stay alert.

Crouching, cold, almost naked against an expanse of gritty soil as he stared at the area ahead. The wind touched his near-naked body, driving knives of ice through the rents, numbing the flesh and chilling the blood and causing his teeth to chatter. He clamped them shut, feeling the jerk of muscles in his jaw, the taste of blood as his teeth caught at the delicate membranes of his cheeks. Weakness blurred his vision so that the scrub barely masking the stony ground danced and spun in patterns of bewildering complexity. Impatiently he squeezed shut his eyes, opening them to see the landscape steady again, seeing, too, the twitch of leaves at the base of a matted bunch of vegetation.

The lizard was cautious. It thrust its snout from the leaves and stared with unwinking eyes before making a small dart forward to freeze again as it checked its surroundings. Watching it Dumarest forced himself to freeze.

To rise now would be to lose the prey; it would dive into cover at the first sign of movement. Only later, after it had come into the open to warm itself by the weak sunlight and search for grubs would he have a chance and then only one. For now he must wait as the wind chilled his body, gnawing at him with spiteful teeth, sending more pain to join the throb of old bruises, the sting of festering sores, the ache of hunger.

Dumarest touched the crude sling at his side. Braided thongs the length of his hand and forearm joined by a pouch made from the skin of a small rodent. Each thong ended in a loop; a convenience, only one needed to be slipped over the middle finger, the other, the release, clamped by the thumb and first finger. A pouch held stones carefully selected as to shape and size. One was cradled in the sling. He would have time for one cast only. All depended on choosing the exact moment, of hand and eye working in harmony, of speed which would enable him to strike before the lizard could escape.

Now?

The creature was alerted, head lifted, eyes like jewels as they caught and reflected the sunlight, scaled body tense on the soil. It would be best to wait.

To wait, then, guided by subconscious dictates, to act. To rise, the loaded sling spinning in a sharp circle, the thong released at the exact moment to send the missile hurtling through the air.

To land in the dirt at the side of the lizard's skull.

Dumarest was running even as it left the pouch, mouth open, legs pounding, breathing in short, shallow gasps to oxygenate his lungs. To gain energy and speed so that, even as the half-stunned lizard dived for cover, he was on it, holding it fast as his teeth dug into the scaled throat and released the blood of its life.

Blood he gulped until the creature was dead.

It was dark by the time he arrived at the place he thought of as home, the fire a warm beacon in the gloom. The only welcome he would get but, with luck, he would be given a portion of his kill; the lizard swinging over his shoulder. A hope that died as a man came to the mouth of the cave to snatch it and send him reeling with a vicious, back-handed blow.

“Lazy young swine! What took you so long?” He didn't wait for an answer, standing tall and bloated his scarred face twisted into a snarl. “You've been eating! It's on your mouth! Blood!”

“From the lizard! I had to—”

“Liar!” Again the thudding impact of the fist. A blow that sent his own blood to mingle with the dried smears on his chin. “You useless bastard! I took you in, let my woman tend you, and all you do is lie! A day's hunting for this!” He shook the dead reptile. “Well, it's too bad for you. Stay out there and starve!”

“I'll freeze!”

“So freeze. What's that to me? To hell with you!”

Another blow and he was gone, snug within the confines of the cave, warmed by the fire and the food Dumarest had won. From where he crouched he could hear the mutter of voices, the harsh, cackling laughter of the crone as she heard the news. A liquid gurgling as they gulped fermenting liquids. Later came the sounds of animals in rut. Later still the sound of snores.

Dumarest rose from where he had crouched. Softly he moved towards the cave and pushed aside the curtain of skins covering the opening. The fire burned low and he squatted beside it, warming his hands and rubbing them over his limbs. From the pot standing beside the embers he found a bone and sucked it, cracking it open to get at the marrow before throwing it on the coals. More followed until the pot was empty and, drugged by the nourishment, his outraged physique demanding rest, he fell asleep.

And woke to a scream of rage.

It was day and in the light streaming through the curtain the crone stood glaring at him, her raddled face convulsed with fury. A slut, her body sagging beneath the filthy clothes she wore, lice crawling in her matted hair, sores on lips and chin. A fit mate for the man who woke and reared to his feet, wiping the crust from his eyes.

“He's eaten it!” She pointed at the empty pot. “The stew's gone! The thieving young bastard's eaten it!”

“I'll teach him!” The man pushed her aside. He was naked aside from an apron around his loins. It fell as he stripped off his belt. The leather whined as he swung it through the air. “Now you greedy young swine! Stand still and be taught a lesson!”

Dumarest dodged as the belt swung towards him, feeling the wind of its passing through his torn

garment. Unimpeded the heavy buckle swung on to crack against the woman's arm. Her shriek of pain was echoed by the man's roar of anger. He rushed forward, belt swinging, the buckle catching Dumarest on the shoulder and sending him to stagger and fall beside the fire. Again he felt the impact of the heavy metal and rolled, reaching out, feeling heat, fire that seared as he gripped a handful of embers and flung them into the snarling face.

“God!” The man screamed pawing at his eyes. “He's blinded me!”

The woman was fast. Water showered from a pot and washed away the ashes to reveal eyes filled with streaming tears. A face that had turned into a killer's mask.

“I'll get you,” he panted. “I'll make you pay for that. I'll have you screaming for mercy before I've done with you!”

Dumarest backed, his stomach knotted with fear, and felt the touch of wind against his shoulders as he left the cave. It was barely dawn and a milky opalescence softened the harsh outlines of the terrain, wisps of fading mist clinging to the face of the cliff, shredding as the man lunged through writhing vapors forming a curtain to create an isolated area of conflict.

How to fight a man so much heavier and stronger than himself?

Dumarest turned, running to place distance between them, stumbling as his foot struck a stone. Stooping he snatched it up and held it poised to throw.

“Stop! Leave me alone!”

“Begging, you little bastard?” The man gloated, enjoying the moment. “Well, beg on, boy. I owe you nothing. Nothing but the beating of your life!”

The stone could be thrown but if he missed what then? A second stone would provide another missile and Dumarest looked for one as he retreated from his enemy.

He found it as the man charged.

Desperation fed power to his arm and he threw the stone with all his strength. It hit a temple, the man halting to touch his head, to examine the blood on his palm. Before he looked up the second stone had followed the first, striking against his cheek. In a frenzy he rushed forward, hands extended, fingers clawing. Dumarest felt them catch the neck of his garment to jerk the fabric from his body. A jerk which threw him to the ground beneath his opponent, a fist smashing into his face, fingers closing around his neck.

Fear drove him to attack in turn. He writhed, sending his hands over the bloated flesh, searching the groin, finding the soft bag and gripping the testicles. He heard the shriek as he jerked and twisted, pulling with nails dug deep. Rolling clear to leave his opponent moaning, clutching at his groin, blood thick between his thighs.

More blood flowered beneath the hammering impact of stones from his sling. Missiles that tore flesh and shattered bone exposing the brain and turning the skull into an oozing pulp of gray and crimson.

The woman said nothing as he entered the cave but silently handed him a bowl of water, her eyes frightened, little sucking noises coming from her lips. Her man was dead, who would provide? The boy

was better than nothing, a decision that dropped her hand from the knife tucked into her rags but Dumarest noticed the gesture and was cautious as she washed blood from his nose and mouth.

“He hurt you.” The woman was at his side judging the right time to establish her authority. “He was drunk, mad, crazed and dangerous. I was afraid of him. That’s why I couldn’t help you last night.”

Snorting he cleared his nose of clotted blood.

“I tried to stop him this morning,” she continued. “He pushed me aside. You didn’t see that, you were out of the cave by then. The bastard hurt me.” She winced as she pressed a hand to her side.

“He was always hurting me. I’m glad he’s dead. Your nose hurt?”

“No.”

“It will.” She lifted her hands towards him. “Unless you let me fix it you’ll have trouble later on. It will block your breathing.”

Dumarest said, “Give me your knife.”

“Knife? Knife? What the hell are you talking about?”

“The knife,” he said again. “The one in your skirt. I just want to see it.” Then, as she continued to shake her head, he added. “I might be able to make one like it. It will be useful when hunting. I’ll be able to get us more food.”

“You’ll hunt for me?” Dirt cracked in the creases of her face as she smiled. “You’re a good boy, Earl. I’ve always thought of you as my own. Stick with me and I’ll look after you. Stand by me and you won’t regret it.”

“The knife?” He held out his hand. “I’ll look at it while you fix my nose.”

It was crude, a strip of pointed and edged metal with slats of wood to form a grip, the whole held together with lashings of twine. He turned it as her fingers pressed at his nose, pushing cartilage back into place, roughly shaping the damaged tissue.

“There!” She stepped back dropping her hands. “You finished with my knife?”

“I’m keeping it.”

“Keeping it?” Her voice rose in a shriek of protest. “Stealing it, you mean. First you kill my man then you rob me. Why stop there? Why not kill me too? Go ahead, you young swine. Kill me. Kill me, I dare you!” Her face changed as he lifted the blade. “No! No, I didn’t mean that!”

“How do you sharpen it? With a stone or a file? If you have a file I want that too.”

“A stone,” she said bitterly. “I haven’t a file. Not now. He sold it for a bottle.” She watched as he moved about the cave. “What are you doing now? Robbing me some more?”

“I need clothes.”

Clothes and food and something to carry it in. Water and a container for that too. A blanket against the cold of night and coverings for his feet to protect them against the savage terrain. All the things which an adult had and which he had been denied because he was a child. But he was that no longer. He would take what he needed and make his way towards the east to live how he could.

A killer, a thief, a bully and a liar—a child of Earth.

They followed him. The men of the village eager for fun, for sport, for his agony and death. They had assembled and sat and drank and talked and listened to the wailing complaints of the crone and her lies and demands that something be done. Dumarest had always been a little strange, too reserved, too clever, a little too good at what he attempted. Incidents were remembered, others invented. His victim had been popular in his careless, drunken fashion and the sight of his corpse created unease. What had been done once could be done again. Other boys, goaded too far, could remember what Dumarest had accomplished and try to follow his example. And they could succeed. The stab of a point, the slash of an edge, the hammer blow of a stone—could be delivered with such speed and ease.

“Kill him!” demanded the crone. “He robbed me! Took my things. My blanket and jug and knife. He stole my knife! He killed my man! You saw him do it! Let him do it! Watched as he beat his head and face to a pulp. Go and see it. See what he did. Take a good look. Bury him—then go and get the bastard who did it!”

A score of them decided it was a good idea. True, the killer had a knife and he might well try to use it, but he was a boy and they were men and it would be safe enough to track him down, and make him crawl and beg and plead and scream as they broke his limbs, shriek as they tore out his eyes, moan as they used fire to sear his threshing flesh.

It would be a thing to remember. Once they had whipped and tormented him into a mewling heap of lacerated flesh and blackened bone. They would drag him back and hang him on a pole as an example. Something for all to see and hear if they were careful to leave him alive. A lesson to those who might be tempted to forget who and what they were and what would happen to them if they did.

“Let's go!” said a man. He swigged the last of the liquid in his jug. “Let's teach that little bastard a lesson no one will ever forget!”

They knew the terrain. They had hunted and roved and scavenged and they knew which direction Dumarest had taken. Knew, too, that he was young and relatively small and they could make faster progress. They had no doubt they would catch him. He was starved and weak and would have limited endurance. Fear would ride with him and terror would make him careless. He could even have made the mistake that there would be no pursuit. That they would leave him alone. That he could walk away from his killing as if it had never happened. They would relish reminding him it had.

He learned they were coming. Far back in the distance a bird had risen to wheel and glide away and, by so doing, had signaled the presence of strangers in its domain. He knew who they had to be and could guess at their numbers. Guess, too, as to how long they would take to reach his present position. By dusk, he calculated, studying the sun. Maybe before, but he doubted it. For them dusk would be soon enough and the darkness of night would give an added zest to what he knew they intended. But it would also give him an advantage.

Shards rattled from beneath his feet. The rags with which he had bound them protected him from the jagged edges but the sound would carry and a hunter would recognize it for what it was. He repeated it, a third time, then stepped slowly and stealthily to where the opening of a narrow gully pierced the

surrounding mounds of the terrain.

The setting sun filled it with shadows and a straggle of trees resembled hostile sentries mounted on vantage points and glaring at the opening, the expanse beyond. Stones lay scattered around and Dumarest paused to study them. He had lost his sling but it was not a good close-quarter weapon. It took time to load and get into action and, when spun, would produce a sound recognizable to any hunter. The knife was better but it was small and fragile and to use it at all meant he would have to get in really close. An attack from the rear and a quick slash to cut the throat or a stab to sever an artery. An attack that might work if the target was alone but relative size came into it and that advantage was not his.

Carefully he chose from the scattered stones.

A sling wasn't essential to launch a missile. He had hands and arms and a back and shoulders to provide muscular power. The thing was to get close enough, to throw fast and hard enough, to have a reserve in case of need. The stones would provide it. He had reason to know how effective they could be. Others could have forgotten.

Standing among the trees he heard them coming. He stood against a bole, arms lifted, a stone gripped in both hands. A heavy rock treble the size of his clenched fists, its weight taking its toll, giving birth to muscular tremors and a mounting, numbing ache. Things he had expected and ignored. The bole of the tree eased his weight and gave a degree of support. More important it enabled him to stand immobile. To wait in the thickening shadows as the rasp of boots grew louder.

The voice was loud, blurred, careless. The man, a shape that gained features and details as it came closer. A big man, blotched with sores, his clothing ragged, his temper short. A man Dumarest recognized.

“Earl! You in there? Answer me, lad. Let's end this and get back home. I've food and a fire and you're welcome to share.” He added, “Trust me. You'll come to no harm. I give you my word on that.”

The rasp of boots grew louder as the man came closer. A hunter and a good one but a liar all the same. His head moved as his eyes searched the dimness for a betraying trace of movement that Dumarest knew better than to provide. He held his breath as the man turned to face the tree against which he stood, eyes studying the bole, the silhouette, eyes and mouth opening in recognition at what he saw.

“By God, I've found you!” His voice rose to a shout as he ran towards his prey, coming close. “Hey! Here! I've—”

The shout died as Dumarest swung forward from the hips, the stone he held flung with all his force, arching from his hands to land directly against the gaping mouth. Teeth shattered, bone, blood jetting as the man fell, dropping the spear he had carried. Dumarest lunged forward, snatched up the weapon and slammed the blade into the fallen man's heart.

Then he was running, weaving between the shielding trees, hearing shouts and curses behind him, the sounds of pursuit, which faded as he gained distance and safety. Darkness closed around him and he moved steadily towards the north living as best he could. A time of tribulation then, at the limit of his endurance, he stared at the strangest thing he had ever seen.

It was something he had never seen before. A slim, rounded construction pointed at the sky. One bearing symbols equally strange to which he gave no more than a glance his attention concentrated on the ramp leading from the ground to an open port. Nowhere could he see or hear signs of life.

For a long moment he hesitated then, as the wind stung his flesh with the chill of approaching night, he darted forward, mounted the ramp and dived into the chamber beyond. A compartment filled with bales and boxes, containers like coffins resting in the center. Odd things to find in an odd building but he had no time to examine them. The sound of footsteps and coughing warned of the approach of others and he hid, watching, as they entered the compartment.

Two men, wearing clothing almost identical in color and style, neither bearing weapons. One older, larger than the other, dark stains marring his hands and cheeks who coughed and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and swore as he saw the trace of blood.

“That damned stuff Dorph's been feeding me isn't working. I've still got something eating at my lungs.”

“Drugs take time to work,” said the other. “You're loaded with antibiotics, there's nothing more Dorph can do. But you engineers are all the same. You have no patience. No toleration. You want things to work and work at once. Here.” He produced a bottle from behind a heap of bales. “Take a slug of this, then we'll get to work. I checked the cargo earlier so all we have to do is raise the ramp and seal the hold.”

“You don't need me, Jesso. That's handler's work.”

“You got something else to do?” The smaller man snatched back the bottle and took a gulp. He spat, cursing.

“This is too raw. It will taste better with some basic. I'll get us some from the dispenser while you wind up the ramp.”

“After we've wound up the ramp,” corrected the big man. “I'm only here to help, remember?”

He moved towards the port and stood looking outside as the other crossed to where a spigot sprouted from the wall. A thick liquid streamed from it as he pressed a control and half-filled a container. He topped it with what was in the bottle, stirred it, sipped, nodded, tipped half into a second cup that he handed to the big man.

“This will hit the spot. Better than Dorph's tablets.” He glanced at the open port. “What's it like out there?”

“The same as it's been all along. Cold, deserted, a barren waste. Now it's growing dark.” The engineer gulped at his cup. “Let's seal up and get the hell out of here.”

Out of the compartment, away from where Dumarest crouched, shivering, fighting the hunger eating at his belly.

Crossing to the spigot he did as the smaller of the two men had done. The liquid was thick, sweet with an appetizing tartness, emitting a tantalizing odor. He sipped at it then gulped it down. His stomach relayed messages of gratitude. He helped himself to more and then more. Bloating he returned to his hiding place and snuggled against a yielding bale.

Asleep he didn't notice the sudden movement of the compartment. Feel the change in orientation as the vessel lifted towards the stars. Unaware that he was traversing the void until, inevitably, he was discovered.

Captain Bazan Deralta had an old, lined face with tufted eyebrows and a pinched nose set above a firm mouth and prominent jaw. His skin was creped, mottled and pouched beneath the eyes. Thin hair graced a rounded skull. His hands toyed with a small, rounded disc of polished stone.

“Your name, boy?” He nodded as it was given. “Well, Earl, so you decided to become a stowaway. Why did you do it?”

Dumarest knew he needed to be polite.

“I didn't intend to, sir. I'd never seen a ship before. I thought it a building and I was desperate for shelter. I took the open port to be a door and the ship as some kind of barn. That's the truth, sir. I swear it!”

“Did you know we'd left the planet?”

“No, sir.”

“Even so you made a mistake, boy. A bad one.” The captain leaned forward in his chair, eyes and face serious. “A bigger mistake than I think you realize. It is my duty to punish you for having broken the regulations. Stowaways can't be tolerated. They aren't invited and they aren't welcome. They can be dangerous. When found they are dumped as unwanted cargo.” The captain paused. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

“No, sir.”

“It is my duty to evict you into space. Now do you understand?”

“I'm not sure, sir. What is space?”

“You don't know?” The captain shrugged. “No, why should you? You've never seen a ship before. Never left your planet. Space is a vacuum, boy. A vast emptiness devoid of air. It cannot support life as we know it. Are you afraid?”

“Of dying? Yes, sir.”

“Of course you are. To taste the void is not a pleasant way to die. Especially for the young and you are how old? Ten? Eleven?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes what? Ten or eleven?”

“Ten, sir, I think. Or I could be eleven.”

“Aren't you sure?”

“No, sir.” Dumarest looked at the captain. “Does it matter?”

“It should. Earth!” The captain spat the word. “You poor little bastard!”

“Sir?”

“Forget it. I meant no insult. You've no family, of course. No kin. No one to care for you. Nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep. What the hell could you lose by stowing away? How were you to know you were committing suicide?”

Dumarest remained silent, watching the hands as they toyed with the stone, sensing the man's doubt, his indecision.

“What am I to do with you?” muttered Bazan. “Kill you, a boy? Toss you into the void because you acted from ignorance? Dump you like excreta into space because you were desperate for shelter? Were you born for such an end? Was anyone? Damn it! What to do?”

The stone slipped as he passed it from one hand to another, bounced on a knee and dropped to the deck. Dumarest caught it just before it landed. It was carved in the shape of a woman depicted with her knees drawn to her chin, head, back, buttocks and limbs blending in a smooth, continuous curve. The figure was worn with much handling.

“Sir!” He handed it to the captain then saw the expression on the lined face. “Sir?”

“Do you always move as fast as that?”

“It was falling and I didn't want it to get broken.”

“So you saw it begin to fall, lunged forward, stooped and snatched it before it could hit the deck.” The captain tossed the carving into the air, caught it, caressed it with the ball of his thumb and tucked it into a pocket. “Quick thinking, boy. Can you read?”

“Yes, sir. A little. An old man taught me in exchange for food.” He added, “He had some books but those who killed him burned them for fuel.”

“They murdered him?”

“They thought he had things of value.”

“I see.” The captain drew in his breath. “You've had a hell of a life. But it could change. Are you willing to work hard? To learn?” As Dumarest nodded he added, “Damn it! I'll take a chance! You can work your passage. Ride with us as crew. It will be a restricted life and it won't be easy. But, at least, you won't starve. Report to Dorph, the steward. You'll find him in the salon.”

A stranger as they were all strangers, as the ship was strange, the customs, the life. One of work and teasing, of being the victim of mindless sadism, bearing the brunt of men tormented by boredom and the fear which accompanied all who traversed the void. The empty dark in which dangers lurked and death could come in unexpected ways.

Things the navigator taught him, as did the engineer, the steward and the handler. Each in their own fashion and at their own pleasure. But he learned. Like a sponge he soaked up all the information that came his way. He read all there was to read. He grew. He already had an animal-strength but a regular diet enhanced his physique. He exercised. He washed and polished and cleaned the cabins and bulkheads, the cargo restraints and the caskets meant for the conveyance of beasts in which those traveling Low rode doped, frozen and ninety per cent dead.

Most interesting was the salon in which those able to travel High idled away the tedium of the journey with the help of quicktime which turned hours into minutes. And, for the rest, there was drink, gossip and gambling.

Jesso the handler took care of that and took a pleasure in teaching the newcomer the tricks of his trade. From him Dumarest learned how to shuffle, deal and handle a deck of cards. To manipulate them as he did those of lesser skills. To sense a sharp, a cheat and a liar. To act as the handler's accomplice when he was involved in a game. A shill who raised the betting when given the signal. To quit when told. To act when it became necessary to lower the tension and restore equanimity.

To discover a vast new dominion of which he had been totally unaware. One filled with enticing novelty, of unexpected beauty yet one that housed more savage predators than he had previously encountered. But he learned and had acted when the need arose and had gained a measure of respect and acceptance. Life was good and he relished the first contentment he had ever known.

But, on the world of Figona, it would all come to an end.

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