

OldEarth ARAM Encounter

Book Sample



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Prologue

—OldEarth—

I Shall Return

Teal exhaled a long breath as he started across the shadowy, evening expanse.

The moon, full and bright, wavered among sinewy branches. Light fragments splayed across the forest floor. In his lean, middle-aged human form, Teal stepped sure-footed among the ancient trees. His leather tunic swayed with each step. He stopped and glanced back only once.

A group of men and women huddled around a meager flickering fire. Their drooping heads and muted conversations bespoke mutual exhaustion and despair.

They were not his people, yet he cringed at the thought of abandoning these helpless beings to the ravages of an unforgiving wilderness. But his year was up, and he must return to his Luxonian home world. Duty called. The Supreme Council awaited his report.

He lifted his hand in salute. “Stay safe—I shall return.” Just before he flashed out of sight, Teal caught the bright eyes of a single human, a brawny man with black hair, who would either lead his people to safety—or die trying.

CHAPTER ONE
—WOODLAND —
THE LAND BEYOND

Aram shivered despite the sweat trickling down his spine. A shower of drops splattered across his face as he beat back the forest's dangling vines and springy saplings. Exhaustion sapped his last bits of energy. With the back of his mud-smeared hand, he wiped his face.

Visions of a warm fire and venison haunches sizzling on a spit caused his heart to momentarily fail. His weary limbs demanded rest, but he only shook his head. Not yet—but soon.

His people staggered in stupefaction. Their flight seemed never-ending, their search futile. Danger lurked in every dark motion of the forest.

As his muscular body plodded through the root-gnarled muck of the late rainy season, a new light grew in his mind. He could still see the tawny-colored fur and glittering eyes of the beast as it snatched its first struggling, screaming victim. When he had heard the throaty growls and the moon's glow had cast uneven shadows on the beast, he had frozen with horror in the face of the cat's great size.

It had struck in twilight when light danced with utter blackness. His wife, Namah, hunch-backed and morose, had been directing the meal preparations. Her orders rang out shrill and abundant—as usual. The other women had obeyed with their typical, sullen compliance.

He had glanced at Namah as the mighty feline landed on its victim, and though her wide-eyed terror had matched his, she had thrown a rock at the retreating creature. Despite her crooked spine, she showed strength of mind—not unlike that of the cat.

Even when he had thrown his spear and others joined in the action with cries of fear and anguish, he knew it was too late. The night was too dark and the cat too mammoth to hunt in the gloomy forest.

Aram had known the youth well and agony had gripped his heart, but his mind would not respond to his grief—only to fear. If he gave his clan time to rest, their anguish might turn to madness. If he kept moving, they might outrun both beast and terror.

A child squalled.

But they were past exhaustion now. The lands of their forefathers lay far behind them. They would soon enter lands unknown to his memory. They had always gained life from familiar trees, made suitable shelters, and found peace beneath their branches. The ancient woods gnarled together in a forest of immeasurable depth. But their frantic travels led them into a foreign land.

“Do you know these trees?” Namah leaned on a staff near his elbow, burdened by the weight of all the earthly treasure she had managed to bundle on her back. No children hindered her grasp. Nearly doubled over, she huffed and her toes squelched, sinking deep into the muck.

Aram surveyed the thinning woods. “Well enough.” He swung his oak spear, swatting a sapling out of the way.

“How far have we come?” Namah’s unfocused stare feigned calm disinterest, but a weary whine seared her words. Women swung crying infants over their sagging shoulders, while men grunted in displeasure, adjusting bulky, threadbare packs. An old man groaned as he leaned upon a thin, ragged child’s shoulder. A little girl wailed and a resounding smack

bore testimony to raw nerves and worn tempers. Aram grunted as he considered the woods’ strange lighting, the speckled texture of

the tree bark, and the warning in his bones. “Isn’t the land different here, Aram? The trees appear more spaced apart, and the ground lays flat. Where are the hills and ravines?” Namah’s gaze flickered to her husband. One inquisitive eyebrow arched. Aram nodded. He had known land like this—long ago.

“We’re near the forest edge. It’s been a generation since my people passed this way.”

From some forgotten abyss, a memory flickered to life. Aram’s grandfather had once recounted the story of a huge beast that struck the unwary in the dark of night. The tale had seemed nothing more than the caution of an old man meant to keep the youth from wandering into dark places. Aram swallowed back fear and squared his shoulders.

Two nights ago, the nightmare returned, and the beast had struck again. It had followed them as they edged nearer his grandfather’s territory. After the cat struck, they headed straight for the border. Now they had to make a break into the unknown.

“Do you know who lives in the land beyond?” Namah panted and leaned on a shaggy, grey trunk.

“No. I grew up far from here. My father’s long dead, though perhaps some of his people still live. I had a brother—” Aram rubbed his chin, his stomach tightening.

Namah shifted her pack.

“He ventured to the high lands. His clan included many women and children—so he favored the safety of mountains. I’ve not seen him since I was very young.”

“And your grandfather—had he no brothers?”

“One, but they disputed over a secret matter and separated. I’ve no wish to meet my grandfather’s brother or any of their kin. They’re

not to be trusted. We'll do well to keep our distance."

Namah snorted. "Surely, such ancient differences could be put aside at a time like this. Perhaps they know of this beast and could help us defeat it."

Aram scowled. "You know nothing of the matter! We don't need help. We'll keep to ourselves."

Namah bowed her head in servant fashion. She cast her gaze to the broken path behind them and lowered her voice. "Would the beast travel so near the edge of the forest?"

Wouldn't it fear these strange lands?" Her gaze searched his face as the sun drew level with the horizon.

Tilting his head as he considered it, Aram exhaled and raised his hand. "We'll rest here for the night."

Grunts and sighs issued as bundles slid to the ground and knees sank to the earth in relief.

Studying the landscape, Aram's gaze roved the expanse. The dense woodlands had fallen behind; open space gave way to patches of bare ground covered only by tall, swaying grasses.

Namah's black eyes narrowed.

A voice snapped loud and abrupt. "Aram!" The largest man in the clan, Barak, strode forward his fur cloak lay slung far over his shoulders and his barrel chest thrust out as if preparing for a weighty pronouncement. His head cocked to one side like a bird intent on its prey. When he came alongside Aram, he folded his arms across his chest. "We're tired of running. The women are beyond their strength, and some of us question the direction you're taking."

With minimal effort, Aram's eyes rolled to the side. Those looking

on frowned in puzzlement. Aram clasped his hands and faced the assembly. “Tonight we build many fires instead of one. Make a great circle of flame, and we’ll sleep inside its protection. Tomorrow we’ll travel into the treeless plains.” Striding over to an enormous, ancient pine tree, Aram unwound his cape and tossed it upon a bed of dry needles. Leaning against the tree and pillowing his hands behind his head, he closed his eyes.

Namah surveyed the uncertain crowd and masked a wavering smile. Her voice rose in command. “Gather kindling and seek fresh water!”

She gathered ideas as a bird hoarded twigs for a nest. With patience, she would rule—in her own way. Her gaze swung from her husband to Barak. A smile rose up inside as her heart fluttered in excitement.

Chapter Two

–Ingoti Trading Vessel–

–OldEarth–

Intercept Course

Ingoti—large beings that originate from the planet Ingilium, range from six to seven feet tall. Extremely heavy due to their extensive weight and girth, they are also fast and powerful. They are never seen outside of their bulky techno-organic armor, although their faces—typically free of masks—appear quite human.

Like a ship jerked loose from its mooring, an Ingoti trading vessel slipped into Earth’s atmosphere...

Zuri, an Ingoti trader renowned for his clever deals, braced for impact, but there was little he could do to protect his co-pilot.

Gem crouched, covering his head with his arms and hoped that the restraints would hold.

The small vessel plowed a deep furrow into the lush dirt and crashed into an earthen hillside.

As the dust settled, Zuri blinked and returned to consciousness. He studied his biomechanical techno-armor. Seeing it intact, he sighed in relief. Hobbling to the main console, he reviewed the status of the ship. Various systems blinked offline, but life support held firm. Glancing back at the cargo hold, he ticked off the needed repairs in his mind and stepped forward.

Gem lay sprawled across the floor unconscious.

Crouching by his side, Zuri made a quick diagnostic review of Gem's bio-suit life signs. With a chuckle, he lightly slapped Gem's ruddy cheek. "Get up, lazy fool. We're already behind schedule, and Crestas aren't known for their patience."

Rising on one elbow with a groan, Gem shook his head like a confused Ingoti bullock. "I thought I was done for. What happened?"

Zuri stood and rubbed his back. "That replacement Orbital Maintenance you bought blew and sent us spiraling right into the atmosphere. Should've guessed. It was too cheap to be an honest deal."

"Blast! I'll pay them back for this; don't worry." Gem rose and started toward the console. "How long before we're ready to set off again?"

His gaze rising to the ceiling, Zuri crossed his arms. "It'll only take a few hours with both of us working on it. But, I've heard about

this planet—how about we take a little tour?”

Gem scowled. “I’ve heard about humans, too. Primitive and—”

“I didn’t say anything about humans. By the Divide, if I wanted to go to the zoo, I’d visit the one on Helm.” He stroked his chin. “No, how about scouting around a little? We might find resources we could use. The Ingilium would pay dearly....”

A crooked smile crawled across Gem’s face.

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While struggling through dense woodland, Gem wiped his sweaty brow. “How does anyone survive here? It’s not fit for habitation!”

Zuri shrugged. “Not where I would’ve chosen to land—”

A low growl stopped them dead in their tracks.

Slowly, they turned. Zuri raised his Dustbuster and aimed as a tawny, four-legged beast drew near.

Gem swallowed. “That thing’s enormous!” Turning at the sound of human voices, he grinned. “Ah, it’s tracking them.” He pointed to a clearing where a large group of humans had settled down for rest.

Crouching low, Zuri peered between the branches and observed the throng.

Men, women, and children crowded around a central figure—a tall, muscled man with long black hair.

Peering back at Gem, Zuri shook his head. “They’re practically naked—without any techno-armor at all. Amazing they’ve survived! They must be brighter than they look.” After stepping back, he sent a low-power beam searing through the foliage near the stalking cat, frightening the beast into the thick woods.

Gem scowled. “What’d you do that for? Let the whole planet know we’re here, why don’t you.”

Zuri pointed the Dustbuster at Gem. “Is there anything left of you—on the inside, I mean? We were once naked and helpless too. If the Cresta’s hadn’t taught us—”

“They used us in their studies. They weren’t being generous.”

“But we learned from them! That’s what counts.”

Gem stared at the Dustbuster in Zuri’s hand. “So, what’s your point?”

Shoving the weapon into his armor holster, Zuri shrugged. “I’m just giving them a chance to live and learn.” He stalked back toward the ship. “It’s time we left. I’ve got enough data to make up for the time we’ve lost.” He grinned as he swiped a branch out of his way. “The Cresta will pay for both the cargo and the information.”

Gem marched behind. “And the Ingilium Supreme Command? What’ll they say?”

Zuri turned, and, clasping Gem’s shoulder, he lifted his eyes to the sky. “Contrary to my expectations, I foresee a day when humans and their primitive world will be quite useful. We’re on an intercept course. In any case—information always pays.”

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Her nonfiction work focuses on the intersection of motherhood, widowhood, practicing gratitude, and rediscovering joy.

Her fiction novels expand from the OldEarth world to the Newearth universe—where deception rules but truth prevails.

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