LANGDIMANIA

LACH

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First edition published in the UK by



Cover Art by David Schofield

Art Direction by Mary Turner Thomson and Lach

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Chapter 23

Army's first afternoon class after lunch was science taught by Mr Rupoli. Army liked the class and his teacher. Mr Rupoli was a funny, slightly overweight man, given to wearing tan suit jackets and plaid wool ties. He always taught in a very energetic manner that quite often left him red in the face. Army thought he looked a bit like a dish of ice cream with a large strawberry on top.

Mr Rupoli's classroom was probably the most interesting one in the whole school. He had all sorts of fascinating objects stacked on the shelves lined up along the walls. There were telescopes, microscopes, and gyroscopes. There were triple-beam balance scales and racks of test tubes. There were gerbil cages, guinea pig cages, and fish tanks. But best of all there was Cookie the monkey. A real, live capuchin monkey! It was hard not to love Mr Rupoli's class and Army always looked forward to it. However, on this particular day, Army was too distracted by what had happened in the library during recess and he was dying to see what was in the envelope that fell out of the mysterious book.

Mr Rupoli started the class off by saying that they were going to be learning about the animals of the Serengeti in Sub-Saharan Africa, including elephants, giraffes, and

lions. He then held up a giant map of Africa and proceeded to explain where the Serengeti was, its climate, and some of the various animals the children would be familiar with that came from there. All very interesting, of course, but not as much so to Army as the envelope in his back pocket. With his classmates distracted by Mr Rupoli's presentation, Army took the opportunity to take out the envelope, hold it under his desk, and open it up. Inside was a very old, folded up piece of paper and, as he slid it out, he got a faint whiff of cedar and almond rising from it. Army looked up and saw that everyone was staring ahead at the teacher. Looking back down and slouching a bit in his chair to be as unnoticeable as possible, Army unfolded the paper and was stunned by what he saw. It was a map, but not just any map. It was a map of Langdimania! His Langdimania! The maps he had been drawing for the last few weeks. The fantasyland he was king of. But he hadn't drawn this map. Was this a prank? Was Mike pranking him?

Army looked over at Mike sitting across the aisle. It had to be him. Army hadn't shown the maps to anyone else. But how did Mike know to put it in the exact book that Army would look through? Or maybe he hadn't! Maybe he followed Army, was hiding in the library behind the book return cart and had thrown the envelope to the floor so it just *looked* like it fell out of the book. Army had to know.

"Nice one, Mike," Army whispered.

Mike turned and looked at his friend.

"What?" he said.

"The map. I know it was you."

"What map? What are you talking about?"

“The map in the library,” Army replied, his whisper growing louder in frustration, “the one in the envelope you dropped.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mike whispered back, while furtively keeping an eye on Mr Rupoli who was now looking their way.

“Yeah, right,” Army hissed as he held the map up for Mike to see, “like you didn’t draw this!”

“What’s going on back there?”

Oh no! It was Mr Rupoli!

“Army? Mike? I don’t think you’re discussing the fauna of Africa, are you?” the science teacher said, as he walked over to their desks.

Army and Mike froze, ironically just the way that a gazelle does when spotted by a leopard, as Mr Rupoli had just been discussing.

“Is this what you boys were whispering about?” Mr Rupoli asked as he took hold of the paper that Army was still holding up to Mike. Army instinctively gripped harder onto the old map until he saw the serious way his teacher was glaring at him, and then he released it with a sigh.

“I’ll hold onto this,” Mr Rupoli insisted. “You can have it back at end of the term. That should keep you paying attention from now on.”

Mr Rupoli headed back up to the front of the room, giving Army time to stick his tongue out at Mike, who just replied by mouthing the words, “It wasn’t me.”

The class lecture continued but, contrary to the teacher’s hopes, Army was paying even less attention to it than before. If Mike hadn’t drawn the map than who did? Army just *had* to get that map back. Mr Rupoli turned off the lights and started showing the class a movie on the animals

of the sub-Saharan. Army sat steaming in his chair, watching the images of giraffes and hippopotami flow by while he fiddled with The Langdim Finder in his pocket. He was trying to figure out a way to distract the teacher and his class enough so that he could get into the desk drawer where Mr Rupoli kept the various items he forced students to relinquish over the school year.

"If only the fire alarm went off or the projector blew up." Army thought while randomly depressing buttons on his toy.

And then on the screen a lion appeared; a big, handsome lion with a full mane, basking in the sun on the savannah. From the back of the room, Cookie the monkey started chattering away as the camera zoomed up to the lion and the narrator intoned, "And so we come to the lion; the king of the jungle. Just listen to him roar and you'll know why he's called the king." The camera got really close up and the lion filled the screen. Cookie started jumping about and chattering louder and more rapidly. The lion opened his huge mouth and let out a terrifying roar. It was at this point that chaos took over the room, for Cookie thought that the lion was real and he had gotten so frightened when it roared that he let out a screech, followed by a long string of yellow pee that arced into the air and straight down the back of the dress of Nan, the poor unfortunate girl sitting in the back row. Nan turned around and, realizing what had just happened, let out an ear-shattering shriek which caused Cookie to scream louder as well, and the class went absolutely bonkers. Mr Rupoli ran to the back of the room to calm everything down and that's when Army seized his chance. He ducked down and ran up to the front of the room to his teacher's desk. He flew open the drawer of forbidden

items and there was his map laying on top of assorted water pistols, Pokémon cards, yo-yos, and packages of gum. He grabbed his prize and scurried back to his seat just as the lights came back on and Nan ran crying out of the room with the best and worst excuse for leaving school early that anybody ever had. Mr Rupoli placed a big blanket over Cookie's cage and the animal calmed down, only letting out the occasional chirping noise.

"All right class. All right, everyone settle down. That's enough excitement for one day," Mr Rupoli announced. "Now open your science books to the start of chapter three and read quietly to yourselves until the bell."

With his map safely back in his pocket, Army didn't want to do anything else to draw attention to himself, so he opened his book along with the rest of his class and began to read about the strange beasts of Africa.

Chapter 59

The midair collision of wild cat and boy knocked them both out, causing them to drop like wet sandbags flopping over one another into The Well. The rush of wind past their faces woke them both simultaneously. It's a strange thing to regain consciousness whilst plummeting into endless darkness. I believe that if one word best sums up the entire feeling then that word would be, "Yikes!"

"Yikes!" Army yelled.

"Yikes!" the panther repeated loudly, as they both hung onto each other in vain attempts to stop the fall.

I believe the one word that best describes the realization that you are not only falling, but are falling with a wild panther that wants to eat you is, "Yaaaaargh!"

"Yaaaaargh!" Army screamed as he tried to disentangle himself from the clutches of the beast.

This just caused the panther to grip Army tighter as the circle of light above them grew rapidly smaller and further away.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Army commanded.

"Hold on! Hold on!" the panicking panther yelled back.

Army shut his eyes in anxious preparation for his inevitable crash to the ground. A few seconds that seemed like an eternity passed by and, as no murderous introduction

with the ground occurred, Army slowly opened one eye and then both. He was in complete darkness, except for the unnerving green glow of the panther's eyes.

"Wait, you can talk again!" Army realized out loud to his freefalling companion.

"What?" cried the cat.

"You can talk!"

"Yes, I can," the panther said, licking his lips, "and now I've finally got you!"

Army felt the beast tense up to strike.

"Wait!" Army cried out.

"Why?"

"We're falling down The Well!"

"So we are, and if this is to be my last meal before we hit the bottom, then at least it'll be a fine one!"

"But we won't hit bottom; The Well is bottomless!"

The panther considered this for a moment and then said, "It doesn't matter. You're prey and I'll eat you."

The initial rush of wind that accompanied their falling into The Well had subsided and there was an almost eerie stillness to their descent now. Army no longer had to shout. He steadied his voice and, as calmly as he could, he explained, "If you eat me, I'll be gone."

"So? My stomach will be full!"

"Yes, but for how long? Soon, you'll be hungry again and there'll be no prey. Just you. Alone. Falling in the dark forever with no one to talk to."

The panther pondered this, now that he was able to ponder, and the thought made him oddly uncomfortable.

"But catching and eating prey is what I do," he said, a bit uncertainly.

Army, the expert in getting out of tight situations, saw his opening.

"You hesitated! You don't like the idea of falling forever alone."

"No, but I like the idea of starving even less!"

Army quickly pressed his advantage.

"But maybe it doesn't have to be this way. That feeling you felt about being scared…"

"I'm not scared!" roared the giant cat, hurting Army's ears.

"Not scared! No, certainly not! Who's scared? Not you!" Army said, trying to cool the conversation back down. "I meant that feeling of being alone, of having thoughts with nobody to tell them to. That's a different kind of hunger, of emptiness."

"I've always been alone," the panther said. "The emptiness keeps me going, keeps me hunting."

"Yes, but every time you kill one animal, another one somewhere has lost their one to talk with and the emptiness just spreads, it gets bigger. If you kill and eat me now you'll be full, but soon after that you'll be empty again and not just in your belly but all over. It's how I felt when my brother Nick started ignoring me and hid in a room as dark as this stupid well, or when my best friend Mike walked away from me when I couldn't hang out with him in school, and worst of all when Wendy didn't appear with me when I first tried to jump with her here to Langdimania. That sudden aloneness is the worst feeling I ever had, worse and ever so much emptier than hunger!"

"If I eat you, it will make me emptier?" the panther said, half to Army and half to himself. Army felt as if he was

watching the panther becoming enlightened before his eyes.

But suddenly, the panther shook his head violently back and forth, as if trying to eject these strange thoughts from his mind, and roared, “No! I don’t know this Nick, Mike, or Wendy, they mean nothing to me and I’m hungry NOW!”

The great monster opened his fanged mouth wide, his hot savage breath inches from Army’s face, forcing Army to realize that just telling the panther about loneliness could never be as powerful as showing him. There was only one solution, and so Army wriggled out of his sweatshirt, pushed away from the great cat, and allowed himself to plummet further ahead into the darkness.

“NO!” bellowed the beast, horrified at the loss of his dinner.

And so they fell, with Army only several feet ahead of the panther; but in the blackness he might as well have been miles away.

“Boy, where are you?” cried the panther over and over for what felt like an eternity, his plaintive cries growing softer and softer until eventually all that Army could hear was the sobbing of the terrified animal. Army waited a while longer and then spoke up, “So, how’s it feel to be alone?”

If he had been on the ground, the panther would have jumped high into the air at Army’s sudden question; but as he was already in the air it looked more like he had just had an electric shock.

“You’re still alive?” he cried out.

“Yes,” Army replied, and then continued cautiously, “do you still want to eat me?”

“No!” the panther exclaimed. “No, you were right, the loneliness is torture! I thought I was going to be all alone falling in the dark forever! Please stay with me, I won’t eat you, just don’t leave me alone!”

“Now you’re getting it! You’re understanding it!” Army cheered.

And then Army realized that they didn’t seem to be falling anymore, but rather they were floating in place and Army had risen to come face to face with the panther once again.

“Do other creatures ever feel this way?” The panther asked.

“Yes, all of them, but the animals of F’orest can’t express it; they don’t have language yet like you do now.”

A great sorrow passed over the panther as he recalled his long history of hunting, of killing, of causing others to feel the loneliness he had just experienced. And as these recollections, these overwhelming feelings of regret sank upon him, they began falling once again, and The Well seemed darker than ever.

“It’s awful,” cried the panther. “I’ve harmed so many. I’ve brought the emptiness to so many!”

Faster and faster they began to fall until Army feared they’d never stop; they’d never get out!

“No, panther! It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t know any better. You didn’t have the reasoning, you hadn’t the… the… illumination yet! You can still do good. You can make up for it.”

“How?”

Army thought about all the bad things he himself had done, like making his classmates into servants to try to win

Wendy's approval, and how only her forgiveness, her belief in him, had relieved him of the guilt.

"Forgiveness, panther. I forgive you for attacking me. I know it was just your nature and you didn't know any better. But now you do, and I believe that you'll do good from now on."

"I will! I will!" the panther bellowed, and their descent slowed down until they were once again merely floating in place.

"And now comes the hardest part; you have to forgive yourself."

"How do I do that?"

"Just do it. It may feel silly at first but just say it out loud. That's what words are for!"

The panther took a deep breath and thought about his life thus far. A life that had brought pain and misery to so many. A life that lead him to this moment of being trapped in the dark, filled with a terrible emptiness and desperation. A life he was ready to leave behind.

"I wish to stop the emptiness, the sorrow, the grief," the panther said.

Nothing happened, they simply continued to float in place.

"Don't wish for it," Army said, "Believe it. Believe that you are forgiven. For I forgive you, panther, but you have to, too."

"I… I… I forgive myself," the panther whispered softly.

Gently, they began to rise.

"That's it! That's it! It's working. Keep going, say it louder."

"I forgive myself," the panther said, more confidently.

They were definitely rising now.

Army joined in, “I forgive myself for not reaching out better to Nick and Mike and I’ll make it up to them if I can just get out of here!”

Not to be outdone the panther continued, “I’ll atone for what I’ve done. I’ll ask forgiveness from all I’ve harmed and spend the rest of my days helping rather than harming my fellow creatures!”

That did it. They were now rising rapidly as if they were standing on top of an express elevator. The darkness around them turning into dusky greys and dark blues and then lighter blues as the halo of light and sky above their heads grew larger and brighter, and then seconds later they shot out of The Wishing Well and landed tumbling in the wet grass of the new morning.