

Opening extract from

Aquila

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CHAPTER ONE

It began when Geoff disappeared.

The last words he said were, 'Where do you want to go then?' And Tom was about to reply that he couldn't really think of anywhere worth going when, without warning, with barely even a sound, the entire wedge of earth and grass on which Geoff had been sitting came away from the side of the hill and slid with astonishing speed down the side of the quarry in front of them.

Tom watched in astonishment. Geoff had his rucksack on his lap, a can of drink poised in one hand, and there was scarcely time for the look of surprise to register on his face before the earth hit the bottom of the quarry. There was a rumble like passing thunder . . .

And he disappeared.

Tom looked at the place where Geoff had been sitting, then at the path that had been scythed

through the undergrowth on the side of the slope, and finally at the dark hole at the bottom of the hollow into which his friend had vanished.

The whole thing had taken a little less than three seconds.

'Geoff?' he called, and the sound of his voice echoed round the countryside. 'Geoff, are you all right?'

There was no reply.

Tom hesitated. It was one of those times when fast, decisive action was required, but he had never been good at rapid decisions. He was the sort of boy who needs time to think. Quite a lot of time usually, and for anything of real importance, he preferred several days' notice.

He could go back and get help, but he knew that would take time, and Geoff might need him now. Alternatively, he could climb down and see what had happened, but if Geoff really *was* hurt, what could he actually do?

Decisions . . .

'Geoff!' he called again. 'Can you hear me?'

'Aaaaaagh!' A sudden wail came up from the ground. Distorted, muffled, but not encouraging.

'Geoff? What is it?'

'Aaaaaaaaaagh!' The cry was followed this time by an odd scrabbling sound.

Tom threw off his rucksack, rolled over on to his stomach and lowered himself over the edge of the quarry. As his feet searched for a foothold, his

fingers gripped the grass – but the earth beneath them instantly gave way, and he started to slide.

Halfway down he grabbed a branch to try to slow his rate of descent, but the tree was dead, the wood broke off in his hand and a moment later he was turning, sliding, tumbling and falling all the way to the bottom before disappearing into the darkness.

Winded and blinded, he struggled to his feet. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the light.

He was in a cave. The only sound was of water dripping softly from the roof above, and the rock beneath his feet felt damp and cold. Over to one side he could just make out his friend sitting on the ground nursing an elbow.

'Are you all right?'

Geoff nodded.

Tom looked at him carefully.

'You're sure?'

'Fine.' Geoff was recovering his breath. 'Absolutely fine.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.' Geoff nodded a little more certainly. 'Really. Fine.'

Tom's shoulders relaxed a little, but his grip on the piece of branch he was still holding did not loosen.

'So . . . why the screaming?'

'Sorry about that.' Geoff smiled a little sheepishly. 'I suppose it was seeing him over there.'

Tom turned round to where Geoff was pointing.

'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!' he screamed.

'Missing?' The Deputy Headmistress had the sort of penetrating voice that can only be developed from years of shouting across playgrounds and playing fields. 'Who's missing?'

Mr Urquart winced. 'It's two of the Year Sevens. They were supposed to be back at twelve thirty but . . . but they're not here.'

Mr Urquart was understandably worried. This was the first school trip he had organized, and the Peak District National Park had seemed the ideal place for so many learning experiences. He had not banked on losing two of the children before they had even sat down to have lunch.

Miss Taylor looked at her watch. It was twelve thirty-five.

'Boys or girls?'

'Boys.' Mr Urquart hurriedly consulted a list on his clipboard. 'Geoffrey Reynolds and Thomas Baxter.'

'Ah!' Miss Taylor relaxed, took a can of ginger beer from her briefcase and pulled the ring. 'You hadn't given them any written work by any chance, had you?'

'Well, they had a worksheet.' Mr Urquart produced the master copy from his file. 'I gave one of these to all their form, but I did emphasize they *must* be back before lunch so that –'

Miss Taylor sat down at one of the picnic tables with her drink.

'I shouldn't worry about it. Here.' She offered her colleague a sandwich. 'Have something to eat.'

'But the boys –'

'The boys'll be fine.' She gave him an encouraging smile. 'I'll bet anything you like they're sitting somewhere quietly at the moment, doing nothing at all.'

'You're sure?'

'Believe me. I know those two.'

Tom and Geoff sat quietly on the ground, doing nothing.

'It's all right,' said Geoff. 'He's dead. I didn't realize it at first, but he's definitely dead.'

'Yes.' Tom nodded. 'I can see that.'

He was not an authority on dead bodies, but he knew that not having any skin – or anything else except bones, really – was not a sign of peak health.

And anyway, there was the armour. You see a skeleton wearing a suit of armour, clutching a sword in the bones of one hand and a shield in the other, and you know it's dead. It has to be dead.

Tom just wished it wouldn't keep looking at him like that.

'I'd say he was Roman.' Geoff got up for a closer look. 'I've got a model dressed like that at home.'

'We need to try and get out.' Tom stood up and looked at the hole in the roof through which they

had fallen. It was their only way out of the cave, but it was too high to reach. 'Any ideas?'

Geoff did not reply. He had taken the sword from the skeleton, scattering finger-bones all over the ground, and was experimentally stabbing with it at the air.

'I suppose if we piled some of these rocks into the middle, we might be able to stand on them,' said Tom. 'Or maybe I could climb on to your shoulders and then . . . Geoff, are you listening?'

'Sorry.' Geoff had stopped waving the sword around, and was staring into the cave. 'I was just wondering what that was.'

'It's a skeleton.'

'No, no, I meant that thing. Over there.' Geoff pointed in a direction slightly to one side and behind the dead body.

Tom peered nervously into the darkness.

'It's just a rock. They're all rocks, you can . . .'

He stopped. The rock Geoff was pointing to was a different colour to those around it, and had a curiously regular shape. As they walked towards it, they could see that, whatever it was, it certainly wasn't a rock.

It was large, smooth, a dull red in colour and shaped rather like a small boat. The front was pointed in a smooth upward curve that reminded Tom of the nose of a dolphin.

'It's got writing on it.' He leaned forward to brush away the dust with his sleeve. On the upper surface,

someone had painted a series of letters in gold, but before he could make out what they were, Geoff called him.

'Tom?'

There were two seats let into the centre of whatever it was, and Geoff was sitting in one of them. He was beckoning to Tom, and staring intently in front of him.

'What?'

Geoff pointed and Tom came round to look. On the surface in front of the seats, a green light glowed in the dark.

'What did you do?'

'I didn't do anything. It just came on.'

'It came on?'

'I just sat down and it came on.' Geoff pointed. 'Like that one.'

A small orange light had appeared beside the green one. A moment later it was joined by another.

And another.

Silently, Tom climbed in to sit beside Geoff. They watched as the lights continued to flick on until they extended to cover the whole board in front of them and then spread along the panel that stretched between them to the floor.

At the same time, the boys became aware of a faint humming, an almost inaudible vibration that they felt rather than heard, culminating in a ping that reminded Tom of a microwave oven telling you the pizza was ready.

And that was that.

'Wow . . .' Geoff reached out a hand. Directly in front of him were two horizontal handles and between them a circle of four large, blue lights arranged like the petals of a flower. 'I wonder what it is?'

'What?'

'This. What do you think it is?'

'It's . . .' Tom shrugged. 'Well, it's a machine.'

'Yes, but what's it for?' Geoff ran a finger cautiously over the surface of one of the lights. 'I wonder if we could find out.'

'What are you doing?'

'They're not just lights, are they?' Leaning forward, Geoff stared intently at the surface under his hand. 'They're buttons, you see? I reckon if you pushed one of these –'

'You can't do that!' Tom stared in horror at his friend. 'You don't know what'll happen!'

Geoff said nothing. Obviously they didn't know what would happen. It was why he wanted to push a button and find out. His finger still hovered over the group of blue lights.

'At least let's think about it first,' Tom pleaded.

'Think about it?'

'Just for a minute or two. It might help.'

Reluctantly, Geoff sat back and thought about it. But the more he thought, the more it struck him that you could think for ever and still not know anything. There was only one way to really *know*.

'I'll try this one.' He reached out and stabbed one of the blue lights firmly with a forefinger.

Tom opened his mouth to protest but before he could speak, the world disappeared in an explosion of light and noise accompanied by a thin, high-pitched wailing sound, which Tom only slowly realized was his own voice.

'Frightened?' said Mr Urquart. 'You think they're frightened?'

'Terrified.' Miss Taylor brushed the crumbs off her skirt. 'Both of them. It's a straight biological reaction. You mention the possibility of written work and their feet feel this irresistible urge to move in the opposite direction.'

'I see.'

'It's a form of allergy, really. You know I've actually seen Tom come out in a rash when someone asked him to write a poem?'

'I'd no idea . . .'

'I should have warned you. It doesn't matter so much in the classroom, of course, but out here . . . well, they just run away.'

'I see . . .'

Miss Taylor paused for a moment to tell a child half a mile away to stop picking its nose. 'What have you got planned for their group this afternoon?'

Mr Urquart picked up his file. 'At one thirty, I was taking them up to see the Hall . . .'

'That's when they'll turn up. One thirty.' Miss

Taylor took a bite out of her third pork pie. 'They'll have some story about losing the worksheet in a gale, chasing after it, getting lost. Little blighters.' She patted Mr Urquart on the knee. 'The important thing is not to spoil your lunch bothering about it.'

When Tom stopped screaming, he realized the main reason it was still dark was that he had his eyes closed. He opened them to find everything was white. White light, white mist, white everything.

Geoff was still sitting beside him. He had gone a bit white as well.

'Are we still alive?'

'I think so.' Geoff forced a smile. 'I'm still breathing and things.'

'Where are we?'

'Ah . . .' Geoff hesitated. 'Well, I had a look and we're still sort of in the same place, but . . . up a bit.'

'Up a bit?'

Geoff nodded. 'If you look over the side . . .'

Tom looked over the side and immediately wished he hadn't. The ground was still there, but a very long way away. Between the clouds, he could see the vast pattern of fields, trees, a river winding through the valley . . . He hurriedly closed his eyes again.

'I reckon it's about half a mile.' Geoff sounded calm, though his voice was pitched a little higher than normal. 'But it's OK, I know what to do.' He reached forward. 'If that one made us go up, then this one –' he pointed to the button underneath it –

'should make us go down.'

'Don't touch anything!' Tom gripped Geoff's arm.

'What?'

'Don't touch it. Leave it alone, just don't . . . touch anything!'

'We don't have any choice, Tom!' Geoff spoke quietly. 'Unless you want to stay up here for ever.'

'I know, but . . .' Tom was still holding Geoff's arm. 'I think we should sit here and think about it first, all right? Let's . . . think about it.'

They sat together in silence for several minutes while Tom thought about it.

There was, he eventually decided, only one thing to do if they were ever going to get down.

'OK,' he said. 'Try it. But slowly, OK? Very slowly.'

Geoff reached out and gently pushed the button.

Several seconds passed.

'Is anything happening?'

'Yes,' said Tom. 'We're going backwards.'