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Opening extract from

Thyme Running Out

Written by

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The TARTAN of THYME
Part Two

Thyme
Running Out



by

Panama Oxridge

INSIDE POCKET

Thyme Running Out – The Tartan of Thyme – Part Two

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'*KraaARRRK!!*'

A sudden, guttural cry broke the island's tranquillity. It was a harsh, incongruous sound, like someone strangling bagpipes – but Justin, perfectly used to the discordant call of the dodo by now, merely glanced up from Iversen's journal and peered across the lagoon.

The old sentry dodo glared back at him mistrustfully and kraaked a second time, waking the last sleepy members of his colony. As they yawned and ruffled their feathers, Justin noticed there were far fewer than usual.

He withdrew a folding monocular from his lab-coat pocket and peered through it, taking a swift head count. There were eighteen adults, a couple of newly-hatched squabs and a week-old doddling – making twenty-one birds in total; less than a tenth of the dodos he'd observed on his previous trip in 1655.

Why had they died out so rapidly, Justin wondered. Surely they hadn't been hunted if they were as inedible as Iversen's journal suggested. Perhaps a new predator had been introduced. Or maybe some unknown virus had swept through the main colonies, leaving just a handful of survivors.

Once again, it struck Justin forcibly how different these birds looked to the few illustrations of dodos that had survived. These were no obese captive specimens, but were quick-witted, lithe and agile. At the start of the 17th century they had seemed docile – tame, almost – watching with apathetic disregard as Justin removed the occasional egg. But after years of being hunted indiscriminately by starving sailors they had grown wary in the extreme. Now, while the broody hen-birds squatted on their nests, the males – puffed up and ridiculous – stood guarding them.

As Justin watched, each drab grey female rose gingerly from its egg and defecated copiously. Crusty white peaks of steaming dodo dung encircled the squalid nests, reminding Justin horribly of lemon meringue pies.

Meanwhile, the males bobbed and bowed, making deep throaty burbling noises. Each climbed onto a nest and settled carefully on a single egg or squab. A few started to preen with their oversized beaks;

others basked in the morning sun, its light catching the iridescent sheen on their neck feathers.

The females stood for a moment on tiptoe stretching their stumpy wings, and then plodded off along the shore, foraging for crabs. The young doddling waddled after them, tripping over his huge yellow feet in an effort to keep up. His mother, a dull brownish bird, took her turn at sentry duty, whilst his father, the old male, closed his diamond-bright eyes and fell into a deep slumber.

Justin wondered how long it would take to establish a similar sized colony back in the 21st century. A while yet, he guessed. Anxious not to be the cause of the dodo's demise himself, he'd never taken more than a couple of eggs per decade – which meant the incubators contained just a dozen. And, of course, nobody knew how long they'd take to hatch, or at what age the dodos would be mature enough to reproduce.

In an effort to learn as much as possible, Justin's last few trips into the past had been pure fact-finding missions. He'd watched the same colony on each occasion, photographing their nest site with his digital camera and noting how their behavioural patterns changed with the seasons.

So far, he'd kept interaction down to an absolute minimum – and this, his final trip, was to be no exception. Justin assumed that Iversen and his companions would exterminate the remaining dodos with a ruthlessness to match their hunger, but that didn't give him the right to meddle with history.

'No interfering,' he reminded himself firmly. 'Remember what Dad said: you're here as an *observer* only.'

Sir Willoughby Thyme had extracted this solemn promise scarcely a couple of weeks ago, the morning *after* his son had completed the chronopod. When Justin casually mentioned that he'd tested the pod already, his father had embarked on a garbled lecture about disrupting the hypothetical space-time continuum. Justin had listened patiently, faintly amused by his father's grasp of the concept. But eventually, when the 24th Laird of Thyme had paused for breath, Justin promised to limit his forthcoming time travels to the confines of an uninhabited

island. Sir Willoughby had sighed with obvious relief.

'Collecting the odd egg is probably quite safe,' he'd muttered, running his fingers though his hair until his Thyme streak stood on end. 'But that's all. Remember: interacting with the past can have irrevocable repercussions. The entire Mauritian economy depends upon the dodos' extinction.'

Sir Willoughby had worn an expression of such deadly earnest that Justin shivered as he remembered it. He was probably right. Most of the shops on Mauritius sold dodo souvenirs made out of everything from coconuts to seashells. Preventing the death of these last few specimens could destroy the tourist industry, or even create a parallel universe swarming with dodos.

Either way, it was hardly low impact.

Justin groaned silently. His father tended to be rather an old fusspot, imagining doom and despair round every corner; though when it came to time travel he had good reason to be wary. Years ago, (before Justin was born), he'd been tricked into building a prototype time machine for a bogus espionage company called *TOT Enterprises* – but it had a terrible, fatal flaw. It altered time *inside* the pod at the same rate as on the outside – which could have proved fatal for Willoughby if he'd been the first to test it. No wonder he'd been left with a warped view of time travel.

Fortunately, Justin had no such traumas to haunt him, and his grasp of time was second to none. He'd recently formulated his own theory on the subject – *Tartan Theory* – which proposed that individual timelines wove together like the threads in an everlasting multiversal tartan, forming the fabric of time itself. He was even writing a book about it.

As Justin thought about his next chapter: *The Standard Rules of Time Travel*, he leaned back against a sun-kissed rock at the mouth of the cave, and closed his eyes. He gave a wide yawn – and half-jokingly wondered if the first rule should be: *make sure you get enough sleep*. He listened dreamily to the gentle plish-plash of feet, and opened his eyes, expecting to see a dodo scavenging along the water's edge, but instead, he saw something that made him gasp.

Paddling through the shallows towards him was the bent figure of an old man. He wore a voluminous black robe which trailed in the water, and his face was obscured by a dark cowl.

Justin blinked. To his astonishment, he saw what looked like a rusty hourglass in the man's right hand, and a fearsome scythe carried over his left shoulder.

Old Father Time, Justin wondered – or was it the Grim Reaper? Surely he was dreaming. He rubbed his eyes, certain it was some sort of optical illusion caused by sunlight shimmering on the wet sand. But it wasn't.

The Grim Reaper lowered his scythe and pointed at him with a long skeletal finger. Justin's heart missed a beat. He wriggled his toes, desperate to activate the *Hover-Boots*' propulsion-thrusters and glide back into the cave, but in his panic he forgot how sensitive the new pressure circuits were. A sudden explosion of power sent him somersaulting backwards for several metres, slamming him against the chronopod.

The sidecar door swung open and, for a millisecond, Justin felt the urge to scramble inside and blast himself back to the present – but then he spied Iversen's diary outside, lying in the sand where he'd dropped it. After a deep breath, he allowed the logical left side of his brain to regain control. With his toes carefully clenched away from the *Hover-Boots*' pressure switches, he crawled on his hands and knees to the cave mouth and peeped out. The journal, its fragile pages fluttering in the breeze, lay just out of reach.

Justin glanced across the lagoon. Close behind the Grim Reaper, a group of men were now visible wading across a sandbar from a neighbouring island, towing a spoilt-looking girl on a rickety driftwood raft.

Instantly, Justin realised his mistake; Iversen and his companions had arrived early. As the man in long black robes reached the far side of the lagoon he pointed again – but this time it was obvious he was simply gesturing towards the dodos foraging along the shore midway between them.

Justin breathed a sigh of relief; it looked as if he hadn't been spotted

after all. Hurriedly, he fumbled in his pocket for a folding monocular, and raised it to his right eye to examine the intruders in more detail.

The men looked unshaven and dishevelled, yet as Justin recalled their names from the journal he found it surprisingly easy to identify them.

From his sombre clerical robes, Justin guessed the Grim Reaper was Padre O'Gain. What he'd mistaken for a scythe, was simply a cutlass tied to the end of a long, sturdy branch; the hourglass turned out to be nothing more than a ship's compass. The old man pushed his cowl back and turned his face towards the gentle warmth of the sun. He had deeply hollowed cheeks and a cruel mouth half hidden by a scrubby white beard.

Of the others, the easiest to recognize was the ship's cook, Arquebus Gunn. He was a huge, red-haired man wearing a grubby singlet and kilt, and reminded Justin of the gardener at Thyme Castle. His arms were tattooed and muscular, and he brandished a hefty club in an enormous menacing fist.

Behind Gunn, a timid, scholarly-looking individual dithered, clutching a doctor's bag. His clothes were in a pitifully ragged state, and as Justin glanced back at the others he noticed they were all wearing bandages Dr Filby had torn from his own shirt.

Next in line came a lugubrious-looking sailor wielding a dagger. Squinting through his monocular, Justin spied a leather-bound journal sticking out of the man's pocket, and guessed this must be Volkert Iversen. He had greasy hair, a large sunburnt nose, and shifty-looking eyes that darted constantly at his fellow castaways. There was something about his veiled watchful expression that made Justin feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Finally, Justin peered at the Bravesoles. Perhaps because he'd assumed they would be an elderly couple, their appearance rather surprised him. Sir Robbie was a tall, gangly gentleman in his mid-thirties, with a stiff blonde moustache. His clothes, once of good quality, were now the threadbare shabby-chic of penniless gentry. Veins stood out on his forehead as he struggled to lift his young wife off the raft.

Lady Eugenia, who looked scarcely twenty years old, prodded her husband with a parasol, bombarding him with instructions in the petulant voice of someone used to getting her own way. As she spoke, she fidgeted constantly, playing with the frills and flounces edging her dress, or twirling her strawberry-blonde ringlets.

'Wobbie, tell these impertinent lickle men to kill those howwid, ugly birds wight away,' she whimpered, gesturing dismissively at Iversen and the others. 'I'm *fwightfully* hungwy.'

'Patience, my angel,' her husband replied in soft, cultured tones, as he lowered her gently onto the sand.

'Not *here*, you dwivelling dolt! It's *wet*. Over there ... on that big wock.'

Sir Robbie obeyed silently – only to be rewarded by a sharp kick in the shins. He smiled indulgently through gritted teeth – but through his monocular, Justin saw an icy flash of hatred in his flint-blue eyes.

'Och, fear not, ma wee lassie,' roared Arquebus Gunn. 'We'll kill every bird in sight if it'll make yer happy.'

Iversen and Padre O'Gain nodded in eager assent, while Sir Robbie withdrew a slender sword from inside his walking stick and swished it a few times, dangerously close to Lady Eugenia's ringlets.

'Either of you gentlemen fancy a wager?' he enquired, with a sly glance over his shoulder at the old hen dodo on sentry duty. Engrossed by the exploits of her bold young doddling, she seemed unaware of the impending danger.

'How about whoever bags most birds gets our final tot of rum?' suggested Iversen, slapping a hipflask in his jerkin pocket.

'And a kiss from her ladyship,' added the padre. He licked his cracked lips in anticipation and winked at a mortified-looking Dr Filby.

Lady Eugenia giggled coquettishly into her handkerchief, and Sir Robbie – who looked as if he'd rather kiss a dodo's bottom – shrugged with complete indifference. Then, mimicking the clarion of a huntsman's horn, he galloped along the shore with Iversen and Gunn lumbering after him. Meanwhile, Padre O'Gain grabbed his makeshift sickle and started swiping at the male birds guarding their nests. Dr

Filby followed him, half-heartedly plundering eggs and wringing the necks of defenceless squabs with clinical detachment.

Justin shuddered. So this was how the dodo had finally met its end, he thought: the hapless victim of a silly bet. This wasn't the theoretical extinction he'd read about in dusty academic books; it was extinction raw and savage, brought about by the most brutal creature on the planet.

He turned away, sickened by the senseless slaughter – but then he remembered Iversen's journal. He couldn't leave it. If the book had been for sale he could have bought it a thousand times over, but the museum had insisted it was on short-term loan only. Slowly, he inched his way out of the cave, dragging himself over the sand on his elbows. He kept his eyes lowered to avoid witnessing the carnage, but couldn't block out the distressed bird cries interspersed with callous squeals of delight from Lady Eugenia.

At length, Justin reached the journal. He slid it inside his lab-coat and edged slowly backwards. Then, pausing at the mouth of the cave, he took a reluctant glance across the lagoon – and immediately wished he hadn't.

The shore was littered with bleeding bodies. Justin watched as the terrified doddling scurried to each in turn, eventually huddling beneath the crumpled, blood-soaked carcass of its mother, uttering desolate cries of bewilderment and despair.

'Don't let the little blighter escape,' roared Sir Robbie, gesturing with his sword. 'It's the only bird worth eating.'

The men swiftly surrounded the doddling, advancing stealthily, arms at the ready. Even Lady Eugenia, unable to contain her excitement, kicked off her shoes, tucked up her petticoats and tiptoed after them, wielding her parasol. Moments later, they all stood shoulder to shoulder, encircling the world's last living dodo with their assorted weaponry held aloft.

Frozen to the spot, Justin boiled with rage at their cruel sport. He desperately wanted to help, but his father's warning kept ringing in his ears: *NO INTERFERING ... NO INTERFERING ...*

'All together,' Sir Robbie whispered, 'when I say *now!*"