

Kishpa Apurchko Taylpak nobhala ruzshami; payka ruzakurpak wawakun

Stones' Quest

In Search of its Master



LaRene R Ellis

www.StonesQuest.com

ma nika lalwini nuna yachay usharkaxot, paykuzapak lukal-kashlak amari

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*To my husband,
for making this possible,
and my kids,
who believed in the story*

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Contents

CHAPTER 1	<i>The Journey Begins</i>	1
CHAPTER 2	<i>The Destination</i>	17
CHAPTER 3	<i>A New Friend</i>	39
CHAPTER 4	<i>The Trap</i>	59
CHAPTER 5	<i>T'rons</i>	72
CHAPTER 6	<i>The Home of the Master</i>	91
CHAPTER 7	<i>The Spy</i>	113
CHAPTER 8	<i>The Secret</i>	138
CHAPTER 9	<i>The Good-bye</i>	170
CHAPTER 10	<i>The Capture</i>	193

Contents

CHAPTER 11	<i>The Compromise</i>	229
CHAPTER 12	<i>The Commanders</i>	246
CHAPTER 13	<i>The Old and the New</i>	269
CHAPTER 14	<i>The Yellow Stones</i>	286
CHAPTER 15	<i>The Virus</i>	298
CHAPTER 16	<i>The Invisible City</i>	316
CHAPTER 17	<i>The End of the Trail</i>	333
CHAPTER 18	<i>On the Run</i>	352
CHAPTER 19	<i>The Family History</i>	378
CHAPTER 20	<i>Asustie</i>	392
CHAPTER 21	<i>A Treasure Hunt</i>	414
CHAPTER 22	<i>The First Clue</i>	436
CHAPTER 23	<i>Longtime Myths Revealed</i>	453
CHAPTER 24	<i>The Celebration</i>	468



The Journey Begins

Timeout!” Jasper threw himself onto his bed. “I hate timeout!” He buried his head in his pillow. “I’m always the one who gets timeout! Buster never gets sent to his room. I think Mom likes him better than me. I’m seven years old. I’m not as young, as he always treats me!” The pillow muffled his yells so he wouldn’t get in more trouble, but he quickly found it hard to breathe. He rolled over and looked around his room. The fleet of models that decorated his room looked crisp and invincible, but they didn’t seem to care about his plight.

He reached out and pulled one of his favorite models off the shelf. It was a miniature Star Screamer that his father had given him only a few weeks ago. He had been really excited because it was a bigger model than the ones he had seen in the commercial center in the city. It was about ten inches long and had more detail than his previous ones. It was surprisingly lightweight for its size, and if you touched a spot on the underbelly of the ship the main bay doors would snap open. It had come with a small transport that could fit in the main bay, but it wasn’t in there now. *Buster probably stole it*, he thought to himself.

Right now, nothing would have made Jasper feel better than to see Buster grounded to his room for a week. Jasper ran his fingers over the sleek silver ship and swooshed it over his head a few times. He wondered what it would take to have a different life than the one he had. Where they lived made it hard to have friends, and his best friend, Johnny, had moved away yesterday. Now he only had his brother and sister to play with, and there was no way he wanted to play with his brother. He and Buster didn’t always see things the same way.

Stones' Quest: In Search of Its Master

“Now I won’t have any friends at all,” Jasper said to himself. Today he was really feeling the pain of his loss. When his parents had moved out to the countryside, the idea of having lots of trees and grass had seemed exciting. The only other family that lived within walking distance was Johnny’s. They had a small farm about a mile away. Jasper had met Johnny on the first morning he had walked out to the school transport. Johnny had smiled at him with a face full of freckles, and the two boys had become instant friends.

Living away from the city had seemed an adventure with Johnny. The two of them had their own secret world away from the other kids at school. Now he felt alone.

“I wish Johnny’s father didn’t get a job transfer to another planet. I’m going to miss him.” Jasper put the model back on the shelf. Johnny told him they would be moving closer to a military base. “He will be seeing the real thing. Star Screamers and Galaxy Creepers,” whispered Jasper.

He went back to his bed and stared at the ceiling. Jasper threw his arm up over his eyes trying not to cry. *I miss my friend. I’ll never find anyone like Johnny*, thought Jasper as a few tears escaped the corners of his eyes.

Suddenly he heard a strange voice whisper in his ear. *JASPER, I NEED YOU.*

Jasper sat up with a start, expecting to see someone in the room. There was no one. *I must have imagined it*, he thought, as he wiped his last tear with his sleeve. *I must have imagined the voice*. Jasper wanted to go back to feeling sorry for himself. He lay down again and put his arm back over his eyes.

JASPER, I NEED YOU! HURRY!

This time Jasper jumped from his bed and called out. “Who are you?”

A FRIEND, the voice answered hypnotically. *I NEED YOU. I’M IN TROUBLE.*

“Where are you?” asked Jasper.

I’M OUTSIDE. COME TO ME NOW. HURRY.

Jasper ran to the window and plopped knee-first on the cushions and small pillows that were in the window seat. As he did, he felt his knee hit something hard. Jasper reached down and moved the pillows. He found his galactic atlas. He had left it there after giving up on his homework about the history of the *Ellisarius Galaxy*. Jasper picked up the book and tossed it to the floor. Rubbing his knee, he looked back out the window.

There was nothing that seemed unusual. He could see his backyard and the meadow right behind his house. No one was standing there. So

The Journey Begins

where did the voice come from? He surveyed the grove of trees that were behind the meadow. It stretched off into the distance.

The grove was the place Johnny and he had spent hours making up adventures about alien planets, moons, and galaxies. Jasper was very familiar with the meadow and the grove. They were his favorite places to play with Johnny. Jasper's heart suddenly ached, and his anger flared in retaliation. He hated the meadow now. He clenched his fists. Why should he get timeout for being mad, anyway? Nobody else seemed to care that Johnny was leaving. It just wasn't fair.

Jasper was about to leave but decided to search the whole area behind his house again. He stood back up and shook his head. *I'm losing my only friend, and now I'm hearing voices. That's just great.* Jasper stepped back to leave when something caught his eye. Quickly, he leaped onto the pillows and pressed his nose up against the window.

Out of the sky came a flying object with fire and smoke shooting out the back. Jasper watched it plunge across his view, eclipsing the planet Suzair's two moons. He gasped as he realized that the strange fireball was going to crash into or behind his grove of trees.

He held his breath as the burning object disappeared behind the grove. He could see a glow as plumes of dust and earth from the impact rose high into the air. It had definitely been a ship. Jasper waited to see if the trees caught on fire. It was then he heard the voice again.

JASPER, HURRY! RUN TO THE TREES. THEY ARE COMING!

Jasper just gaped at the scene before him. ***JASPER!*** All of a sudden, the voice became his world. He felt consumed by peace and reassurance, and he knew that he had to move immediately.

He ran to his door and left the room. He swiftly made it down the stairs to the main floor and bolted for the back door, not giving a second thought to the fact that his mother, in the kitchen, would surely see him. At that moment, he didn't care. Everything around him seemed to be blocked from his mind.

As luck would have it, he shot past his mother just as she opened up the door to the refrigerator pantry. As she dug around for something cold to drink for lunch, she happened to move a container that made a loud scraping sound. She never even heard her youngest son run through the kitchen and out the back door.

Outside the house, he knew instinctively where he was going. He kept his eyes fixed on the smoke that was swirling behind the trees up into the sky.

Buster came out of the shed as Jasper crossed the backyard. He

seemed a little surprised to see his brother but said nothing. Buster figured Jasper had sweet-talked his mother into ending the timeout early. It never occurred to Buster that Jasper was outside without permission.

Now Jasper was out in the meadow. He watched for rocks. *Where is the stream? Where is it? . . . There!* Jasper reached the flow of water meandering in its shallow bed and stopped. He tried to slow his ragged breathing as he searched for his favorite place to leap across the water. The stream was not very wide at this place, but it was deceptively deep. He made the jump and was caught by a blinding white light. The glow totally surrounded and blocked his view of everything.

JASPER! came the voice again. *THERE IS A WHITE STONE AT YOUR FEET. DO NOT STEP ON IT BUT PICK IT UP. IT WILL PROTECT YOU FROM YOUR ENEMIES.*

"I understand," said Jasper, as the white light evaporated before him. He blinked a couple of times trying to find the white Stone. He felt obsessed to have it. He found it and quickly hid it in his pocket.

The meadow and trees came into focus again. The white Stone was forgotten and now the crash was all he could think about. Jasper ran into the grove stopping to catch his breath. Finding himself a lot more tired, Jasper leaned against a nearby tree and just listened to his beloved grove of trees.

There's something different, thought Jasper as his breathing became regular.

The grove held some wonderful memories. There were always many birds that at times seemed too noisy. Today there was total silence. It was so quiet he could almost hear his heart beating.

After a few deep breaths, he started to walk among the trees heading towards the crash. He had only gone a short way when he heard someone step on a twig. He turned sharply expecting to see someone, but there wasn't anyone behind him. He resumed walking. Again, he heard leaves crunching along with a twig cracking. Jasper whirled around and wanted to run. He didn't even get a chance to take one step before he felt a hand around his mouth. Then he felt someone's body against his as he was jerked quickly over to a nearby tree.

Before he could comprehend what was happening to him, a cloak started to wrap around him and he could feel his body being pressed up against the tree trunk.

"HELP!!!" Jasper tried to shout, but no one could hear him. He started to fight his captor when he heard the same sonorous voice. It sounded so deep and rich as it spoke to him. *JASPER, DON'T MOVE.*

The Journey Begins

YOU ARE IN GREAT DANGER. BY STANDING STILL, YOU WILL LIVE.

A wonderful, peaceful feeling consumed him and he relaxed. He didn't realize that it was the white Stone talking to him, and controlling his emotions.

A shot of purple light streaked through the trees. He could see it through a little hole giving him the chance to see only a few branches with a small patch of sky behind them.

He heard a high-pitched voice. At first, he thought it was a baby crying, but realized there were words that could be distinguished through the cries.

* * *

Buster had gone into the house soon after he saw Jasper running through the backyard. When he entered the house, his mother was in the kitchen, sipping a cold drink. She asked, "Are you hungry? I should have lunch ready soon."

"I'm starved," Buster replied, looking around the kitchen. "Do you want me to get Jamie?"

"Yes, and would you get your brother?"

"Oh, Mom, I don't want to chase him down, too!"

"What do you mean? He's just up in his room."

"No, he isn't. I just saw him running through the backyard a few minutes ago."

"You what!?"

Buster tried not to smile. If Mom didn't know Jasper was gone, then his little brother had broken his timeout. *I guess there's a first time for everything*, Buster thought with a grin. *He's in for it now!*

"Get Jamie in the house now, Buster!" his mother ordered as she took off for Jasper's room. She ran up the stairs and down the hall. The door was open, and she knew then that Buster was right. She ran to his window in hopes of seeing her son.

All she saw was the smoke curling heavenward in the distance. Now she knew what had lured her son away from the house. *How could he just run off like that?* She knew he was having a tough day, but sneaking out was not like Jasper at all. *Going to look at a fire without asking me! Surely, he must know how dangerous that could be.*

She was about to turn from the window and go after Jasper herself, when a shadow fell across the yard. She pressed forward against the glass and looked up. Her heart almost stopped beating. Above their house, a

huge ship slowly glided toward the grove. Even though she didn't share her younger son's enthusiasm for the military, she knew what it was. She had been a teenager when the war broke out, and had spent many sleepless nights wondering when a Galaxy Creeper would come and destroy everything she loved. That was the reason she had insisted that her family move to the countryside. It added a long commute, but maybe—just maybe—if the war reached the planet Suzair, the enemy wouldn't bother to hunt down every little farmhouse.

Maybe it's our ship doing a training exercise, she told herself. She bit her lip to keep from panicking and watched the massive ship move menacingly overhead. The Galaxy Creeper was the largest ship flying in the war. It had a crew of over a thousand people. They rarely descended into a planet's atmosphere and they didn't sport outer markings that quickly identified them as belonging to I-Force or KOGN. Still, there were ways that one could tell. She watched, trembling, looking for the clues. She let out a cry when she saw the small marking that said the hovering monstrosity was clearly part of the enemy KOGN and not I-Force.

Why would the KOGN be here? she wondered in terror. The planet Suzair was under the protection of the Interplanetary Force. For a ship from the King of the Galaxy Nations to appear so brazenly could only bode ill. *It is headed for the grove.* She ran from the room.

Please Jasper, this time I hope you didn't go to those trees, she thought. Her feet slid on a couple of stairs, but she regained control on the other steps. Immediately, she headed through the kitchen out the back door. She ran into the backyard yelling Jasper's name. Behind her, Jamie and Buster huddled at the kitchen window, watching the Galaxy Creeper.

Her voice caught in her throat when she saw the sudden purple flash of an Indigo Transport Beam arc from the ship to the ground. Tears came to her eyes. "Please, don't take my child," Jasper's mother cried in a weak voice.

"Mom!" Buster's voice cut through her despair. She quickly turned around and ran back into the house. They all gathered at the window with fear on their faces. All of them were clutching each other. Little Jamie had tears streaming down her cheeks. Buster was pale.

"Buster, are you sure Jasper ran in the direction of the meadow?"

His answer was barely a whisper. "Yes."

She held on to her two children more tightly. *I wish my husband was home from work*, she thought. *Don't let this war take my son.*



The Journey Begins

Jasper was frustrated listening to the high-pitched voice. He couldn't understand it very well, and the voice was irritating. The men talking to it stopped yelling, and they all seemed to be silent.

A different sound was now heard around him. It was a clinking sound, and he didn't know what it was. The sounds let him know that there were a lot of people walking among the trees. The clinking sound seemed to get louder and closer to him. Then it seemed to go past the tree where Jasper was hidden fading off into the distance.

The high-pitched whine of a huge engine overhead filled the air. Jasper tried to twist his head to look up at the sky, but the man who held him gripped tighter in warning. Jasper wished he could see what sort of ship was flying above them.

He had closed his eyes for a moment when he heard a man yell, "We found it!" Then he heard feet running. Jasper could feel his captor breathing in a slow, measured rhythm.

"It's just the box! Where is the white Stone?"

"There's a house nearby, sir. Maybe someone at the house took it."

"Secure the structure immediately, and anybody within a half-mile radius. I want that white Stone now. Move!"

Jasper wondered what they were talking about when they mentioned the white Stone. His attention was diverted to a noise in the distance. It made a rumbling noise, and the ground underneath their feet trembled because of it. Jasper so wanted to see what was happening. He started to struggle again but stopped when he saw the air fill with purple and then amber light. A mechanical shriek pierced the grove, followed by a swishing sound. Then everything fell silent.

After a few more minutes, the hand on Jasper's mouth loosened its grip and the man holding him stepped back, pulling his cloak away from Jasper's body. Jasper's knees buckled from the sudden release, and he slumped down to the ground. He turned around and leaned up against the tree staring at the man who had held him.

He was tall with white hair that he wore a little long in the back. His eyes were a still blue, with small wrinkles at the corners that reminded Jasper of his own grandfather. The man looked to be in his mid-sixties, but Jasper knew that his body was lean and strong. There was concern in his face, and Jasper wondered what would happen to him now. Was this man with the others? If not, who was he? . . . Was he KOGN?

Jasper wanted desperately to go home. The drive that had pushed him

towards the forest was gone. Jasper watched the white-haired man carefully as he stood up. Then he started to run.

The grove of trees that he knew so well seemed to whisper he was going the wrong way, but it didn't stop him. His desire to get away brought him to the edge of the trees at last, and he halted. Amazed at what was before him, he thought for a moment that he had stepped into another place and time. There at his feet lay a wide, black swath cut into the earth that seemed to go for a long way. At the end Jasper could see the smoldering wreck of a Star Skipper. The trees were right; he had gone the wrong way.

In his heart, he knew that he should start running in the opposite direction, but his curiosity was getting the better of him as he stared at the wreckage. It was the closest he had ever been to a real fighter. As he looked at the twisted metal and the half-melted shell, he doubted that there were any survivors, especially since there were so many men just moments before. Watching the smoke curl up from the ruined Star Skipper was hypnotic.

Jasper jumped when he heard feet walking behind him again. Whirling around, he saw the white-haired man coming towards him. This time Jasper recognized that he was wearing an I-Force uniform, his cloak flowing with each step. He came to stand before the young boy, and his eyes seemed to sparkle with life as he spoke.

"Son, you can't stay here. It's too dangerous for you now. They'll come back for you."

"Why?"

"Because you have the white Stone that they are looking for."

"I don't have a white Stone. I don't know what you are talking about," said Jasper with all innocence. He had no memory of the white Stone. The man's voice gave Jasper the courage he needed to run again. His desires were strong to get home to his mother and siblings.

He took off into the grove, this time headed for his house. He didn't stop until he realized that he didn't know where he was. The huge cloud of dust had settled into the trees, creating an eerie, sooty fog. Nothing was familiar to him. Even though he didn't want to, he started to cry. He choked and coughed picking his way among the trees. Trunks and branches loomed through the grayness. Evil shapes and shadows seemed to taunt him.

Finally, he stopped for a minute to pull the bottom of the shirt up over his mouth to breathe easier. He stood peering through the dust in search of something that looked familiar, but recognized nothing.

The Journey Begins

As his tears formed little trails in the dust on his cheeks, despair felt more stifling than the air settling over Jasper. “I want to go home,” he cried aloud.

TURN TO YOUR RIGHT A LITTLE AND START WALKING. YOU WILL FIND WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR.

Jasper didn’t question the voice as it kept him quiet and feeling calm again. He headed where the voice told him to go to find his home. The voice kept encouraging him every time he felt discouraged. After a while he noticed that the trees began to thin, and then suddenly they ended completely. When he reached the stream that ran across the meadow, Jasper suddenly knew right where he was. He jumped to the other side excitedly began running through the dusty gloom to his backyard.

“I’m home! I’m home!” he yelled through his shirt, sobbing and coughing. He dropped his shirt and started to yell. “Mom, I’m home!” Then he stopped, wiping his face in confusion. This was his backyard, but the shed and the house were gone!

In place of the shed was a smooth patch of dirt, as if the whole thing had simply been picked up. Where his house had been, there was a giant hole. Jasper walked to the edge of the hole. It was several feet deep. Its sides and bottom were smooth except where a stream of water was dripping out on the far side. The water was coming from the underground pipe that ran to the house, and it looked as if it had been sheered off as cleanly as the dirt and shrubs and grass at the edge of the hole.

Jasper just stared at the water as it continued to splash into the hole. Where was his house? Where was his mom and Jamie and Buster? As the dust began to settle, and sunlight illuminated the scene more fully, Jasper began running around the yard searching for any sign of his family.

“Mom! Mom! I’m sorry! I’m here! . . . Where are you? . . . Buster! Jamie! I’m home!” Nobody answered, and after several frantic minutes Jasper finally collapsed on the grass, shock and fatigue overwhelming him. What had happened? Where was his house? His family? His father wouldn’t be home for hours yet. How could he get word to his father? Does he know about this?

A voice suddenly broke the stillness—

“Son, you have to leave.”

Jasper turned to see the white-haired man walking across the lawn toward him.

“Come with me to my ship, and we’ll find your family,” said the man. Should he trust this stranger? If only his father were here, he would

know. The man was wearing an I-force uniform. Jasper suddenly realized that this man had protected him from whoever had taken his family.

JASPER, GO WITH HIM. It was the same calming voice that only Jasper could hear. *HE WILL PROTECT YOU AND KEEP YOU SAFE UNTIL I-FORCE CAN BRING YOUR FAMILY BACK. YOU WILL FIND YOUR FAMILY IF YOU GO WITH HIM.*

Jasper once again felt his mind strangely focused, and he got the odd impression that he was somehow disconnected from himself. His crying stopped and the pounding in his chest subsided. He got to his feet and ran to the man, who turned and began to lead him away from the yard. The cloud of dust had all but dissipated. His heartache began to ease as he followed the billowing cloak.

The voice had told him he would find his family. It felt good and right to be with the man. The white-haired man led him back through the meadow, but in a different direction.

Jasper followed the man for some time in peace as they wandered in and out of the different groves of trees. He stayed very close behind him. Eventually, however, Jasper grew tired of the silence. So he ran up to the man's side. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"We're going to my ship," the man replied with a smile.

"Why aren't they coming for you?"

"I don't want them to get shot down like I was."

"Was that your Star Skipper?"

"Yes."

"Was anyone else on board?"

"No. I was the only one."

"Where did all of the other men come from?"

"My, aren't we brimming with curiosity." The man paused as if considering something. "The other men were from a Galaxy Creeper," he finally said.

"Is that who took my family?"

"Yes."

Jasper thought hard for a minute. "If they took my family, they must have been KOGN. How come they didn't find us when they were walking right next to us?"

"You *are* full of questions! And bright, too. How old are you?"

"I'm seven years old. How old are you?"

"Old."

"You look old."

The man smiled. "Thank you," he said.

The Journey Begins

“You’re welcome,” said Jasper. “Why did the KOGN come here and take my family?”

“Do you remember what they were talking about?”

“They were looking for a white Stone.”

“That’s right,” the man replied. “You didn’t happen to pick up a white Stone, did you?”

Jasper thought for a moment. He didn’t recall seeing any kind of white Stone. “No.”

“Why did you come out of your house?”

“I was in my room and saw you crash.” Jasper didn’t remember the strange voice. “I wanted to see what had happened.” The man nodded to himself, as if Jasper had just confirmed something. He looked down at Jasper again.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Jasper. What’s your name?”

“My name is Dapper.”

“You’re a general in I-Force, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m a general. How did you know?”

Jasper pointed at the insignia on the man’s uniform. “I like to read about I-Force, especially their spaceships.”

“I see,” said Dapper.

“Someday I’m going to join I-force and fly one of your spaceships.” Dapper’s lip twitched at that. “So, how come the KOGN soldiers didn’t find us?”

“You’re persistent, too. . . . Well, let’s see. Have you learned about the harmony of the universe in school?”

“Yeah. My teacher said that everything in the universe vibrates with energy.”

“Hmm. I guess you could say that. Everything in the universe is made of smaller balls of energy. And those smaller balls are made up of even smaller ones. Well, the smallest of the smallest balls are all vibrating. Those vibrations are kind of like when you pluck a tight wire on an instrument. So, yes, you could say that every smallest ball is singing its own note. All I did was harmonize with the notes that the air was making. When I do that, I’m able to blend in with the air and become invisible.”

“Wow!” said Jasper. “It sounds awesome. Can I learn to do it?”

“Yes, you can but it’s actually really hard. It took me a long time to be able to master it.”

“How did you hide me? Have you done that before?”

“No, this is the first time.”

“Why?”

“Because you need the help of a white Stone to hide two people,” said Dapper.

“My dad told me about stones. He said that they’re very rare, and only I-Force has real stones. I wondered what they look like, since you are the only ones who use them.”

“Well you will be seeing a lot of stones once we get to my ship.”

“How long can you be invisible?”

“I can do it for quite a long time.”

Jasper looked up at the white-haired general. Then he looked at his surroundings. He had never been this far away before. He wondered just how much longer it would take to get to Dapper’s ship. Without realizing it, the boy started to rub his stomach.

“Jasper, are you okay?”

“I’ve never been here before,” said Jasper looking at Dapper. “How much further to your ship?”

“From the signal that I’m following, we’re getting close,” said Dapper, looking ahead. “C’mon. It’s in this direction.”

Jasper didn’t move and just rubbed his stomach. Dapper noticed it, and he said, “Jasper, are you hungry?”

“Yes,” nodded Jasper. “I’m very hungry and thirsty.”

“Here, sit down for a moment, and we’ll eat,” said Dapper pointing to a spot underneath a nearby tree. The general sat down folding his legs in front of him. Jasper followed and almost fell to the ground, catching himself at the last minute. He dropped onto the soft earth and leaves next to the older man and leaned against the tree trunk, closing his eyes.

“Hey, Jasper, here you go. Eat this, it will make you feel a lot better,” said the white-haired man.

Jasper opened his eyes to see the general smiling at him. Dapper was taking a white substance out of his weapons belt. “What’s that?”

“This is field food. A few bites will take away your hunger and thirst. It will also give you energy,” said Dapper. “Here, hold out your hand.”

Jasper put out his hand eager for the food, but instead of handing him some, Dapper tucked it back in its pouch on his weapons belt and reached into another container. He took out a couple of small damp cloths, handing one to Jasper and keeping the other for himself. Jasper looked down at his hands. He hadn’t realized just how dirty they really were. Jasper suspected that from the tears and the dust cloud his face was probably worse.

The boy and the man proceeded to clean their hands and faces. Dapper finished first and put the small wash cloth in the palm of his two

The Journey Begins

hands quickly rubbing them together. Jasper was amazed to see the washcloth disappear. It had apparently evaporated into thin air.

Jasper copied him when he finished, and was delighted when his cloth also vanished. "How does it do that?" he wondered aloud.

Dapper grinned. "It's the heat from your hands," he replied. "The friction causes the molecules of the cloth to break down directly from solid to gas."

"Oh." Jasper said. He looked over at Dapper to see the white substance once again in the general's palm. Jasper held out his hand again, and the man reached over and gave him a piece. The stuff was soft and bendable. It reminded Jasper of a sealing compound his father had used to weatherproof the shed at home. He glanced over at Dapper to see him eating it.

Jasper pinched a small bit off the piece and slowly put it in his mouth. He was surprised to find that it tasted very good. It was also very chewy. He worked on it for a moment. When he could see that it wasn't going to dissolve quickly, he swallowed it. It felt lumpy and strange going down. His hungry stomach felt so much better that he stuffed the remainder in his mouth.

"How long have you had that?" Dapper suddenly asked him. Jasper looked up. Dapper was pointing to Jasper's left hand, which had a cut across the back. Jasper watched as a bead of red formed and then broke free racing down his hand and dripping onto the ground in front of him. He hadn't even noticed it. Dapper popped the rest of his own food into his mouth and opened another pouch on his belt.

Jasper looked at the gash oozing blood slowly down his wrist. It was strange that he hadn't noticed it bleeding before. "Just today," he said finally. "I cut it this morning when I was outside playing with my brother. My mother fixed it once for me. I guess I tore it open again. It doesn't hurt," he added.

Dapper gently took his hand and applied a small amount of clear gel to his cut. Then he put a second skin on to protect the cut and allow it to breath. Jasper shivered a little as Dapper finished up. Dapper noticed and looked up to see the sun kissing the top of the hills behind them.

"We need to go Jasper. I don't want my ship to leave without us," said Dapper as he stood up.

Jasper had been looking at Dapper's belt while his cut was being dressed. As the boy stood, he decided to ask about something that had been bothering him for several minutes. "Dapper, in one of my books it

says I-Force soldiers carry six knives. I don't see any knives on your weapons belt."

"They're there," said Dapper.

"Where?"

Dapper took out a black handle about four inches long and held it in the palm of his hand.

"My knives are here," he explained.

At the end of the black handle a silver blade suddenly appeared. After a second it disappeared, only to be immediately replaced by a different one. The blades continued to change in rapid succession, one right after the other. Jasper counted six in all, with different lengths and widths. But he couldn't see where they had come from. Only one of the blades he had seen looked like it would even fit in the black handle.

"How did you do that?"

"The handle has a small shard of red stone that powers the blades. As I harmonize with it I can command whichever blade I want to appear," explained Dapper.

"Where do the blades come from?"

"They are all inside the handle. When I get in harmony with the energy waves, I tell the knife which blade I want."

"Is that how your blaster works, too?" Jasper asked, pointing to a slightly longer black handle on Dapper's belt. He stumbled a little as he was walking beside Dapper.

"Yes. I can use it as a laser blaster, a launcher for gas bombs, or I can use it for fire or light."

"How far does the blaster shoot out fire?" asked Jasper.

"About six to eight feet if the person using the blaster is skilled enough."

"I noticed you put on glasses after we got through eating. Why?"

"They are what we call our field glasses," said Dapper.

"I wondered about that. Is it true, what I have read about them?"

"What did you read?"

"They can block the sun's rays and then make it possible for you to see perfectly at night without a light."

"Yes."

"And they have a black light to show metallic substances invisible to the eye."

"Yes."

"They can go to long view and let you see things in the distance up close."

The Journey Begins

“Yes,” said Dapper. “There is another function that they have. Do you know what it is?”

Jasper thought for a moment and then said, “No, I don’t remember.”

“There is an intercom built into the glasses that will allow us to talk with each other at a distance. We call it comset,” said Dapper.

“Can you talk to your ship now from your glasses?”

“We are too far away.”

“Why did you put your glasses on?”

“So I could see in the dark.”

The sun faded quickly as they continued their journey into the back country. For a while Jasper found himself shivering from the cool night air, but as the terrain changed from grassy meadows to wooded hills he began to warm up from the exertion. Once the last golden rays slipped behind the horizon, darkness descended rapidly, and soon Jasper found it very difficult to see where he was going. They stopped briefly while Dapper reached up and activated his field glasses so he could see in the dim light.

“Stay very close to me, Jasper; I can’t give you a light. There are spies out and about, and I don’t know if they are KOGN or I-Force.”

Jasper could see the man’s silhouette against the sky as Dapper looked about them. The stars were out, but were partially obscured by some clouds moving in. Jasper didn’t say anything but reached his hand out and grasped Dapper’s cloak. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but it seemed to Jasper that the general smiled.

Spies. Jasper had heard of spies, but wasn’t sure what they were. His books and vids on I-Force and the war never gave much information about what spies looked like or what they did. He imagined hooded figures slinking among the shadowy trunks of the surrounding forest, watching them and waiting.

They marched on through the darkness, walking slowly for Jasper. When they came to an open area, Dapper had Jasper walk beside him. He kept his hand on Jasper’s shoulders to help guide him through the blackness. The two were quiet as they walked.

After a while, Jasper became aware of the sounds of the forest around him. They were very different from the noises the forest made during the day. Strange whistles occasionally broke through the whisper of the night wind, and every so often something would scramble through the underbrush. Above them Jasper could see the crooked branches of the trees moving against the black sky, blocking out stars with their sinister fingers.

Feeling fear begin to flutter deep in his stomach, Jasper broke the silence with a ragged whisper.

“Dapper, how much further is it?”

The general’s voice echoed quietly, almost inaudible. “Actually, the signal is indicating that the ship is close. It won’t be long now.”

They only went a short distance when, suddenly, Dapper stopped walking and Jasper felt the I-Force general’s hand grip his shoulder in warning. The two stood still, and then after a moment Dapper pulled Jasper into him even closer and wrapped his cloak around him.

“Dapper are there a lot of people who can be invisible?”

“No, I’m the last to master the art,” said Dapper.

In the near distance, they could hear men’s voices, but they were too far away for Jasper to understand what they were saying. Dapper and Jasper stood frozen in the inky night. Jasper could tell that his protector was straining to hear the voices. Jasper’s heart started to race, and he realized that he was holding his breath. The voices seemed to move and change and then draw nearer. As every muscle in his body tensed in panic, Jasper suddenly wondered what it would be like to be shot with a blaster.

He almost yelled when Dapper suddenly started to make a low humming sound. At first Jasper thought it was a single note, but then he seemed to hear all kinds of little peaks and dips, as if there was an entire song bound within the one tone. Jasper listened as the voices, now close by, all stopped. Then he heard a humming sound coming out of the darkness in reply. It started on the same pitch as Dapper’s hum and seemed to contain the same subtle richness, but then abruptly dropped a third to a harmony. Although he did not know why, Jasper knew that the notes were a language that Dapper was speaking with another person in the darkness.

The notes ended, and Dapper let go of him. Jasper grabbed a hold of Dapper’s hand. “Were you just talking to someone?” whispered Jasper.

“Yes,” said Dapper. “Let’s go this way.”

He had a hold of Jasper’s shoulder as he began to talk again. It was all in hums and pitches. Jasper glanced up at him. *It almost sounds like he is singing. But the tune doesn’t repeat itself*, thought Jasper.

They hadn’t gone far when Jasper heard, “Dapper.” The voice rang from the black, “we finally found you.”