



# **A DIARY IN AMBER**

by

John Markestad

©Copyright 2017

Yaphet stood in the small clearing looking up at his best chance to get off the planet as it lifted off, receded into the sky, and diminished to a speck. He felt very small standing just inside the verge with most of his black, hard-shelled carapace hidden behind a behemoth of a tree.

Nothing more than a small sensor-node of a head on an articulating neck projected out. Eyes that see in a much higher frequency than human eyes watched as the bi-pedal natives repeatedly plunged their primitive weapons into the three already lifeless bodies of his crèche-mates. No doubt the Commander aboard the ship was assuming that Yaphet, too, was dead. Else why would they leave him? Yaphet had to give credit to the attackers, the ambush was well executed and their aim precise. Of the six crèche-mates that were struck in the first volley, three of the arrows had penetrated at plate junctures. Those three arrows had pierced deeply where the others had bounced away. In the desperate scramble to regain the safety of the ship, one other shinga (most-highly-attained-being) had taken an arrow in a leg joint. It had caused him to slow but with help from others he'd made it into the airlock.

The ship had sat on its six struts for nearly half an hour, its black bulk dominating the clearing. The lander wasn't elegant to look at, nothing more than a box with stubby wings, a vertical stabilizer at the back, and some small windows for pilots and passengers to peer out. Its job was to deliver the survey team to the surface, act as a secure base from which to work, and then return them to orbit where the FTL high-liner waited. It wasn't pretty, but the lander was tough. The locals could pound and stab at it for a lifetime and probably not so much as scratch the ablative coating. Though the Captain and his crèche-mates must certainly think him dead, Yaphet was certain that they'd used every sensor available to study the area around the ship. But with Yaphet then even deeper in the forest, away from the locals and their dangerous arrows, they wouldn't have been able to register him. He knew the protocols: minimal interference, minimal interaction. Leave it to the natives here to grow this encounter, over future centuries, into a myth nearly unrecognizable from the original circumstances. Non-interference...an admirable philosophy that did Yaphet not one bit of good.

What could do him some good was his jacket lying on the ground on the far side of the clearing. In one of its pockets was, among other useful items, a locator beacon. If he could gain possession of the beacon and activate it, the Captain would turn the ship around and come back for him. Of course, there were some impediments to his obtaining the jacket. At the moment, the clearing was actively engaged as a party site for the locals. It looked to Yaphet like they'd begun some sort of ritual dance, a celebration of their victory over the ominously black, hard-shelled, six-legged demons.

Long, grey necks were held out rigid, parallel to the ground, forming an almost straight line down their backbones and continuing along the tapered, whip-like tail. Large mouths full of shining, pointed teeth clashed and clacked in a pulsing beat that set the rhythm for stamping feet. Feet that ended in three scimitar-nailed toes. From time to time, with no regularity or signal that Yaphet could discern, the eleven dancing locals would all raise their bows in unison and shake them about. Their only bow to clothing had been a sort of vest that seemed to hold lengths of rope and additional arrows, plus whatever caused the numerous small pockets to bulge. The vests had been cast aside as soon as the dancing had begun.

Yaphet backed deeper into the forest. Careful to keep low, he performed the equivalent of tiptoeing through the thick brush. From where he'd spied on the natives he couldn't see his jacket, but knew approximately where he'd left it. He could smell, though not see, the light tendrils of smoke still wafting up occasionally from the scorched grass that had been under the ship's attitude jets as it had lifted off. Using that as his guide Yaphet circled the clearing on the downwind side. He didn't know how good the natives' olfactory senses might be, and didn't want to find out. It took better than a half hour to make the circuit half way round the clearing. That meant he still had an hour and a half to locate and acquire the jacket, depart the area by a

significant distance, and activate the beacon for pickup somewhere that the ship could touchdown. Nothing to it.

When he thought he must be about even with where he'd shed the jacket due to the increasing morning heat, he began to inch his way back to the edge of the forest clearing. Surprisingly, the dancers were still going strong, a testament to their endurance, to be sure. Four of the natives had picked up stout sticks, as thick as their arms, and were using them to pound the ground in time with the stamping feet. Crouching low behind a thick, thorny bush made up of long, green, ribbon-like leaves, Yaphet raised his sensor-node as high as he dared, trying to see over the grass. It took fifteen minutes of scrutiny but he finally saw a small patch of bent grasses that he thought must be his jacket. The natives had not yet spotted it, or less likely, weren't interested in it. He next looked up at the too-bright yellow sun, directly overhead, feeling its heat on his black carapace, knowing that he would have to seek shade soon to avoid overheating.

Although the dancing, stamping, pounding bipeds seemed totally engrossed in their ritual, Yaphet didn't think he should dare dash out. He didn't know just how fast they were. Yaphet thought it likely that he could outrun one in a sprint, but had no way of knowing what the long distance capability of these creatures was. He did know that he wasn't in terribly great shape, having spent too much time at his investigations aboard the ship and not enough time on the treadmill. And he was certain he couldn't outrun an arrow, although if he stayed in the thick forest brush that would pretty nearly obviate that weapon. Knowing that he still had more than an hour in which to activate the beacon he decided to wait; perhaps the natives would tire and move on.

While waiting, he took the time to assess what he had immediately on his person: a lightweight belt with a canteen, some dry snacks, a bit of cording, a small multi-tool, and his

diary. Not much to try to live with if he couldn't retrieve the pack. Most of what he needed when doing first-stop, on-planet surveys were kept on his jacket, which doubled as a sort of daypack. A compass, fire-starter, some dry ration-bars, a decent knife, a goodly length of strong but light rope, two tiny but very bright signal flares, and of course, the beacon. There were other, more technology oriented items available to him, but he, and most others on his team, preferred to carry the minimum essentials on an everyday basis. A rapid-fire-rate projectile weapon would have been welcome just then. Instead of shooting his way to freedom and recovery, he took out his diary and began recording the events of the day so far. He liked to make entries every day, although on board FTL high-liner some days were so boring that he could have simply copied one day's notes to the next.

The time available to Yaphet to make a move wound down to no more than twenty minutes, and Yaphet was having to seriously consider bolting into the clearing for the jacket. In the clearing, the dancing stopped in mid-beat. Immediately, all eleven of the saurishian-like natives bolted for the forest on a line that was the shortest distance for each. One of them passed within ten feet of Yaphet but missed seeing him in the thick understory. They were collecting dry branches. Each made multiple pell-mell trips into the forest, returning each time with what was clearly intended to be fire fuel. Within two minutes they had a goodly pile. Initially horrified, then with growing relief as he had time to think it through, Yaphet watched as the bodies of his crèche-mates were dragged through the grass and dumped atop the branch pile. More branches were then piled atop the bodies. It seemed like only seconds later that the first wisps of smoke began to waft upward. Flames soon followed, feeding eagerly in the oxygen-rich atmosphere. The eleven gathered in a circle around the fire and began a chanting a 'harraumph' sound.

Estimating that, by now, he had no more than ten minutes remaining, Yaphet elected to make this his moment. Most of the natives either had their back to him, or were on the far side of the growing, smoky fire. Yaphet was glad he was no longer downwind, he didn't want any part of the odors that were being carried on the breeze just now. Moving just slightly to his right, Yaphet aligned himself with a small break in the brush. The spot he wanted was only about ten yards away and he covered it in seconds. He was right, it was his jacket. Snatching it up he turned and bolted back to the cover of the forest. Behind him, the chanting stopped. The synchronized 'harraumphs' morphed instantly into a claxon of alarmed voices.

The natives were quick to dash to where they'd laid their vests and bows. Yaphet had a fourteen second start before the first of the natives began the pursuit. The chase was on.

Yaphet was right in that, in a sprint his six legs could easily gain him an ever increasing lead, he was also right to be worried about a lengthy chase. It didn't help that his stride, his breathing and his concentration were being knocked out of rhythm as he fumbled in his vest pockets for the beacon. At one point he nearly ran headlong into a tree as he looked down to fuss with the pocket catch. Finally, the beacon was free. Yaphet glanced briefly at it as he depressed the activator stud. The tiny blue light lit. The beacon was active. Stuffing the beacon back into its pocket and securing the clasp, Yaphet concentrated on running.

The first hour went well. He was able to put nearly a quarter of a mile between himself and his pursuers. Still, if he wasn't able to lose them, then when the lander returned and settled into whatever clearing could be found, he would be totally exposed to their arrows. Yaphet slowed his pace slightly. Although that would allow the bipeds to close the distance it would also give him a bit of a break. Loping used less energy than a full out gallop.

At the end of the second hour the bipeds had closed the distance to about two hundred yards. The forest had opened up some and if the trend continued Yaphet would soon be running through savannah country. He was undecided if that was good or bad. It gave the lander more options as to where to set down, but it gave the pursuers a more exposed target. Well, he'd worry that problem when he heard the lander. He was becoming a bit concerned that the beacon had not, as yet, pinged its warning of the imminent arrival of the lander.

Closing on hour three of the pursuit and Yaphet knew that the lander wasn't coming. He'd been too late in activating the beacon. Without any way of keeping accurate time, he must have miscalculated. The lander, his crèche-mates, the FTL liner, and all hope, were no longer in orbit. He wasn't going to be rescued. That changed the dynamic for Yaphet greatly.

The day grew late and the forest was far behind. Yaphet now ran on open savannah, an endless stretch of grasses almost as tall as Yaphet's up-stretched sensor node, interspersed with lone trees whose branches spread wide. With only open sky above Yaphet could, if pressed, spread his dorsal carapace and bring his two pair of translucent wings out, and fly. But his kind were poor flyers, he'd be able to cover perhaps a quarter of mile before being forced back down. And flying was calorie intensive, he would only accelerate his dehydration without gaining significant advantage in his flight from the bipeds. Yaphet ran. Under the afternoon sun he'd sipped sparingly from his meager water source, but knew that was a delaying tactic, at best. If he couldn't effect a change, then this race could only end one way. The pace of the pursuit had settled into a less fevered thing. Yaphet maintained a fast jog that kept him just out of bowshot, while the pursuers loped along at a pace it seemed they hold for hours. There was a basic inequity built into the pursuit...there were eleven of them and only one of Yaphet. That meant that the pursuers could drop out, locate water and food, rest, and then rejoin the chase. The

pursuers could keep this going for days if they had a mind to. Yaphet had only a third of a flask of water left, a few snack bars, and no opportunity to rest, refill, and recuperate. There was no positive outcome for Yaphet.

As darkness settled it became clear that the bipeds were slowing and falling farther back. When the sun, turned from punishing yellow to somber red, then fell below the grass and tree line, the pursuers stopped altogether. Risking a total halt in his flight, Yaphet scabbled partway up one of the trees and peered back along his trail. A quarter of a mile back he could see the flickerings of a small fire. The bipeds were camped for the night. The question became...would they turn back in the morning, or continue the hunt? Yaphet could only make one safe assumption.

With night vision that was noticeably superior to the bipeds, they were creatures of the day and sight hunters, Yaphet continued on. He walked a bit faster than one might on a casual stroll; a pace that quickly increased the separation. Still, the savannah stayed flat and he didn't cross a water source. His canteen was all but empty. He stopped for what he hoped was no more than two hours and slept, waking before the first hints of sunrise. Within minutes of resuming his walk he noticed the land began sloping down. Hopeful that it was a good sign, he increased his pace a little and within shortly could hear the lapping sounds of tumbling water. A stream, small enough to easily jump, was cutting its way through the immense field of grasses.

Yaphet drank long, filled his canteen and drank again. With no reason to do otherwise he followed the stream's course. He would so until just after dawn. The slight valley that the stream had cut for itself over untold centuries meant that Yaphet's line of sight was limited. It would be possible for his pursuers to approach much to close before he would see them. With a water



source at hand, and a way to cool down if he over-heated, Yaphet increased his walk to a full gallop. Then, opening his carapace, he spread his wings and lifted off the ground.

From forty or fifty feet up he could see only savannah. It went on for miles, nothing but grasslands and a sparse population of trees. Setting his wings, Yaphet glided back down to the ground. Two hundred yards along he came to a small pool where he stopped and immersed himself. The cool water brought his metabolism back to where it should be, and he just felt better for being able to rinse away the accumulated dust and personal odor. With the first faint blush of red dawn beginning to show, he resumed his fast walking pace. Twenty minutes later the morning was well on its way to being day.

With morning light to see by, he took a moment to write down his flight yesterday, the trek in moonless dark, and the finding of the brook. At the end he jotted...*no relief in sight*. Yaphet decided to risk another flight, both to view the landscape in better detail, and to see if the bipeds had picked up the pursuit.

This time he pushed hard to gain height, reaching nearly one hundred feet before the effort became more than he could sustain. Behind him there was no sign of the hunters. That didn't mean they weren't coming. He thought they were. Ahead, slightly left of the rising sun, there was an odd sort of visual waver in the air. With an effort he regained some lost altitude. Fixing his wings he recommenced to gliding on a shallow line back to earth. In the distance, perhaps four miles away, was a rising thermal of air. Something was breaking up the monotonous savannah lands. Something was heating up faster than the grasses.

Staring into the fully exposed morning sun, a dense thicket just three feet away at his back, Yaphet looked down at least two thousand feet. Far below the crest of the escarpment on which he stood was a forest of green, a ribbon of flashing silver water cutting through it. Large

birds circled and climbed in the rising thermals. Here might be his salvation. Left and right the cliff ran as far as he could see. Some time in ages long gone a great geologic movement had jammed this plate skyward, leaving the other, wetter plain beneath. Even for a person that could fly, after a fashion, the drop was intimidating.

A thought came to him. The thought grew, matured, then morphed smoothly into a plan. Yaphet was not so highly evolved a creature that a little payback was beneath him. Pushing his way back through the thicket he moved north about twenty feet, pushed his way into the mass of twisting green leaves and peered once again at the edge. Having seen what he needed Yaphet studied the thicket then moved another two feet north. This would be the spot. He turned to the west, squatted down, and waited for the saurishians. He didn't have too long to wait.

With his sensor-node held high he saw the tooth-filled heads being held high to clear the grasses. The eleven were spread in a line across his trail, moving with purpose and precision. When they were no more than fifty yards away Yaphet sprang straight up, giving them a clear visual target on which to home. He waited and in only seconds he heard them coming. They were chirping, possibly passing information among themselves. When he estimated the gap between him and the bipeds to be no more than ten yards, he made his move. Taking a big first step, he let himself rise just enough for his back to clear the tops of the grass. The chirping noises behind him doubled on the instant. Yaphet entered the thicket, ducking slightly to shoot cleanly through the small break he'd found, with his pursuers only a single step behind.

In this particular location there had, in recent days or weeks, been a collapse of the cliff edge. Topsoil and brushy thicket had made the long tumble to the valley below. Here the thicket grew right up to the edge.

Bolting through without slowing, Yaphet cast himself into the open air, waited two seconds, spread his carapace open and unfurled his wings. The four lizard-like hunters that were closest had no wings to deploy. Screeching what were most likely imprecations, they began the journey down to whatever might be their version of an afterlife. Turning his sensor-node to catch the view behind, Yaphet saw the remaining seven, two were helping a third by pulling him back from the edge. All were making a horrendous racket of screaming, screeching, and bellowing. Arrows flew by but they were all wide of their mark, the senders of the barbed messages being too incensed to take proper aim.

Yaphet turned his attention to stretching his flight out to the greatest possible distance. Every fifteen seconds he would give three strong flaps of his wings, gain a bit of altitude, and begin gliding anew. In this way he was able to cover, he figured, nearly four miles from the cliff base before he had to begin looking in earnest for a landing site. At a height of one hundred feet above the treetops he began a wide looping turn back to a small clearing he'd seen. A bright sparkle had looked to him like moving water.

A quarter mile short of the clearing, and not far above the highest branches, he was startled from his concentration when an arrow thunked against his ventral plate. In the next second, as he banked sharply away, two more arrows whizzed through the space he had just vacated. Although his flight muscles were tired, he snapped out four hard strokes and continued to bank away. The turning cost him altitude. With no clearing in sight, Yaphet looked for other options, finally settling on an immense tree that appeared to have had a massive branch torn loose in recent years. He continued his banking turn, using the changing perspective to help him place the tree, and the part of the tree he was aiming for, precisely.

He'd never even attempted a landing of the sort. Although he'd seen birds make their last minute flair to achieve a stall just at the point where they wished to perch, Yaphet had no such competence. He hit hard. It was by sheerest luck rather than quick thinking that his left manipulator arm and his left foreleg were able to latch onto the edge of the damaged tree where the branch had torn free. And while that no doubt saved him making the hundred foot tumble to the forest floor, it also caused him to flip and crash a second time into the tree. He heard his dorsal carapace crack, and felt a jab of intense pain as his right wing, not fully refurled, was crushed by the edge of the insulted carapace. He was knocked breathless and could do nothing more than simply hang and wait to regain a breathing rhythm. When, after more than a minute, Yaphet felt he had some control of his body and breathing, he twisted about and pulled himself onto the snarl of woody fibers. It was immediately clear why the branch have given way. The tree's trunk was hollow, eaten out by invaders that had since moved on, leaving a gaping hole in their wake. With hardly a thought Yaphet shoved his jacket into the opening. Following that he removed his web-belt and let it drop into the tree. Then, pushing, scrabbling, and twisting himself, Yaphet was able to make his own way into the hollowed space. Once in he had a not uncomfortable volume in which to settle. Taking a drink of water, reckoning he was safe for a time, he relaxed all six legs and lowered himself down to the soft bed of rotting wood, and slept.

When next Yaphet was fully awake it was to a well begun sunrise. He'd nearly slept the sun around. Following hard on consciousness was pain. His injured wing throbbed, he fallen asleep without taking the time work at tucking it in properly and now it was swollen. Dried blood had it glued to the edge of his carapace. He used up nearly all of his remaining water softening the blood enough that he could prise the wing free and get it re-furled. The last of the water he used to help wash down the remaining rations bar and the leftover crumbs of the others. Feeling

refreshed, though still sore, and even though his re-furled his wing still ached, he looked up and appraised the climb back to the opening. He thought it perhaps two and a half times his own body length.

Dividing his time between looking up at the opening and the climb required to get there, and his diary, Yaphet expressed his optimism that he may have evaded both the original hunting party, and those that had most recently fired on him. Still, he had no illusions. It seemed the saurischians were common to the area. Long term survival was going to require locating a geography where they weren't. It was always possible that a passing ship would pick up his beacon. It was designed to call out its plaintive wail for years.

Thinking he was about as rested and restored as he was likely to get, Yaphet pressed his dorsal carapace against one side of the tree and braced all six feet against the other. By moving with care, and grunting frequently with the growing pain, he was able to work his way up. Everywhere he scraped against the inside of the tree a viscous yellow sap began to ooze slowly out. It wasn't long before his dorsal carapace was thick with it. He fell twice before learning how to use the sap to help rather than lubricate his climb. Finally he did make it to a point where he could reach up and grab the opening. His hands were covered in the yellow goo. Thinking he was home free, his jacket and web-belt tied to him with the light cord, he needed only to squirm his way back out, climb or lower himself to the ground, and look for water and food. Soon, very soon, it became obvious that he was not going to be able to exit the tree. Between the original impact at landing on the tree and then the secondary impact when he'd flipped over, plus the swelling being caused by his damaged wing under his carapace, Yaphet was not going to fit through the opening. His body was just too swollen, there was no way.

After nearly a half-hour of wiggling, squirming, and cursing, he dropped back down to the floor of the hollow. His landing was not well executed and he began coughing. That went on for nearly a minute and in the end he saw his hand reddish-brown with fresh blood. He had internal damage as well.

After taking several minutes to assess his situation: no food, no water, trapped inside the tree, and coughing blood, Yaphet settled himself as comfortably as he could and took out his diary.

\* \* \*

Sadie held the transceiver up and studied the digital display. She swung the device to her left and then her right. Choosing the direction that seemed strongest, she advanced carefully through the thick understory. Omar, carrying a large pack and a shoulder-fired beam rifle, walked several steps behind her. Their landing craft was about a hundred yards away in a small clearing.

“This way,” Sadie said, unnecessarily. Omar wasn’t likely to hare off in some other direction.

Six minutes later Sadie stopped, swung the transceiver left and right again, then walked around the large, barkless tree in her path. Finally, with her head cocked slightly to one side, she said, “Whatever is giving off the signal is inside this tree.”

Omar, looking up the tree and then back down, walked over to it and rapped the rifle butt against it.

“Hollow,” he said, just as an arrow thunked soundly into his backpack.

`end