

Prisoners of Perfection

by Tom and
Johnny Lichtenberg



Prisoners of Perfection

Epic Fail: Book Two

Tom Lichtenberg

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Chapter One

It was a rat that led the way, the first one ever seen in the forest prison world. It was Soma who saw it first. From high above the forest floor, perched on the top of a blue eucalyptus, she heard an unfamiliar scrabbling sound, and peered down between the leaves to see a creature sneaking its way among the duff. She assumed it was a squirrel, of course, since squirrels were familiar and fairly numerous, but this one was missing all the fur off its tail, and it was squeaking. Soma swung down from branch to branch and in moments had snatched it up by that very same tail, but quickly dropped it as it lifted and squirmed to bite her hand. The rat hit the ground running but Soma pounced again, and this time grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, so it couldn't reach her with its teeth. The rat struggled and kicked, but Soma held on tight, and carried it back to Bombarda's hut by the lake. He'd know what it was, she thought. Bombarda knew everything.

He was sitting by the fire in the middle of his house, warming his hands and watching the smoke curl up through the hole in the roof. It was not cold outside, but Bombarda was always cold inside. He felt the chill in his bones, his eternally sixty-four year old bones. Of all the luck, he was one of those cursed to stop aging when he was already old, not like Soma, or her near constant companion, Squee,

who were both eight, and had been eight for so long now that no one could say how many years it had been. No one even tried to guess anymore. Since the day when The Hidden One had died, the inmates of the forest prison had hoped against hope that there might be a true cure for their immortality. All of them had been locked away, cast aside by a mortal civilization that could no longer tolerate their presence.

In the beginning, when the first of their lot had randomly turned up, not aging past some binary birthday, be it eight or sixteen or thirty two or sixty four, or even one hundred and twenty eight in the extremely rare case of The Hidden One, way back then the first reaction of the normal humans had been jealousy accompanied by fear, then anger and rage. The immortals were seized and eagerly experimented upon, even tortured and dismembered in a mad race to discover their secret, a secret that was never detected. It had to be something in the genes, but if it was, it was locked away in all the infinite so-called junk DNA that littered their bodies like everyone else's. Scientists failed, and doctors failed, and politicians failed, and the mob ruled in the end. They were tossed into this mutated forest prison, a jail whose infinity matched their own interminance. The forest had no boundaries, or none that anyone could determine. Anyone who came close to an edge, or thought they did, found themselves somehow transported, instantly and seamlessly, to another part of the woods entirely.

Bombarda, the old pulp fiction writer publicly known as

Gowdy, had spent years, decades, maybe even centuries, seeking a way out. He had made many attempts. He had tried to burn down the forest, but the curious trees were resistant to flame. He had tried hacking away at them with sharpened stone axes, but the crazy trees grew back just as fast as he could cut them down. Just as the immortals could not become ill or seriously injured, neither did the trees ever seem to suffer any great or permanent damage, no matter what anyone tried to do to them. Bombarda tried digging a tunnel. He set his Watchers about it, his gang of perpetual children who did whatever he ordered them to, who obeyed him because it suited their fancy, they enjoyed it, and anyway they were infinitely bored besides. The tunnel led them nowhere, only around in circles though they dug it as straight as could be. This prison was impossible, from its vegetation to its population, not a bit of it could be explained except by accidents of scientific research. The forest had once been a university arboretum, but it had expanded and changed and taken on a life of its own, eventually expelling its original inhabitants, who fled for fear of becoming forever lost in its tangles. That is when the government took it over and found it to be the perfect solution to its problem of the immortals, and what to do about them.

Anyone who did not age like a regular person, anyone who exhibited the symptoms, was rounded up and summarily tossed into the forest world. There were some cases of false diagnosis. These individuals lived and then died. The rest merely lived. The forest provided plenty in the way of fruits

and berries and tubers. Hunger was not a problem, and neither was shelter or weather. The world had its own particular climate, not too hot, not too cold, and almost maddeningly unvarying. It rained a bit every day, and a bit every night. Clouds came and clouds went. The sun came up, the sun went down. The moon, however, never rose, though there were stars. No one ever understood about the moon. The lakes did have tides, but no one knew how. The moon must be there, they decided, but hiding. Without the moon and its phases, time was bereft of its markers. The stars always seemed to be in the very same places. The sun never altered its angle. It was almost as if, no, exactly as if, it was not the actual sun, and they were not the actual stars. It must be a fake. It was all a big fake.

Bombarda had once kept a marking of time, tallies scratched into rocks, but there weren't enough rocks in the forest to note all the days that went by. It had to be many thousands, he thought, hundreds of years if not more. There was never any word from outside. Already it had been a very long time since anyone new had arrived. The last of the prisoners were all veterans by now. The tribes, for the people naturally organized themselves, like among like, were all set and stable, and any old conflicts had long since resolved themselves in futility. There was no point in not getting along, in not letting each other alone. The cave dwellers stayed near their caves. The river folk camped on their banks. The tree people lived in the canopy and all the various groups kept out of the way of each other. Even the loners remained all alone. Altogether Bombarda figured

they numbered a couple of thousand, no more. Most of them lived in the moment, hopeless and bereft of even a mere curiosity. Gone were the days of want and desire. Gone were the dreams of rescue or even escape. Nobody thought about that anymore, except for Bombarda, who still thought of little else.

His was a thirst for revenge. He had cultivated this lust for a very long time, and was not going to give it up easily. Even after all of his attempts had led to nothing but failure he still dreamed every night of discovering a way out, a way back into the civilized world, where he would find the people who'd done this to him, and he would show them no mercy at all. He had once been a quite famous author, who wrote bloodthirsty books of horror and carnage, bestsellers all, and had been living a life of luxury and adulation when somebody noticed there was something unusual about him. For at least twenty years he had stayed exactly the same. Not even a hair on his head was different after all of that time. His editor, his agent, his publicist, his fans, all of them had gotten much older, but not Gowdy, no, he didn't change. There were whispers of magic and witchcraft, of bargains made with the devil, just as in one of his books, but soon enough the agency put it together, and determined him to be an immortal. One night, while he was sleeping and dreaming of white puffy clouds, they knocked down his door, they seized him and dragged him away. Before he was even awake, or so it seemed to him later, he had found himself alone and abandoned in this cursed forest prison.

The first person he'd met was The Hidden One. She and her grand-daughter, Ember, a wise and precocious child, acted like gatekeepers back in those days, welcoming in all the new prisoners, and showing them how to get along and get by. He'd never forgiven them for that cruel hospitality. Instead of helping him stay, they should have been helping him leave. He knew it wasn't their fault, and that his judgment was completely unjust, but that's how he felt, and he honored his feelings by staying loyal to them, regardless of situations or facts. He plotted and schemed, but it did him no good. He couldn't even enjoy the unquestionable beauty of his immediate surroundings, his self-built cottage on the banks of a lake, with the mountains in the distance, and the sparkling rivers that flowed in and flowed out. He sat by his fire and kept his inner fire burning. He kept birds in cages. He had trained some of them to leave and return, and had set his Watchers to follow, hoping they would lead the way out, but the birds never did. They just flew around and came home. Now he hated them too, but he couldn't get rid of them. Even when he destroyed all the cages, the birds still came home, and nested on the roof or inside along the walls. He tried to ignore their singing and chirping. Let the children enjoy them, he thought, while I remain bitter and cold. The children did love all the birds, gave them names and chased them around. They had begged Bombarda to make them new cages, which he eventually reluctantly did. He would have reason to be glad he had done so.

Soma came bursting into the hut with her new prize possession, the curious rat. The rat sensed the presence of

birds and perked up in her grasp, sniffing and twitching and hoping to get its claws into some of their bellies. The birds, for their part, those that could, flew right up and out through the hole in the roof with the smoke. Bombarda turned to look at the girl.

“What have you got for me now?” he asked. Soma was always bringing him something, if only a leaf, for him to identify and teach her about. She knew as much about the things in this world as he did, only her memory was not quite developed, and she had trouble holding on to her knowledge, or at least she pretended. The truth was she enjoyed making her mentor feel needed and important.

“I don’t know,” she said, and this was also the truth. “I thought it was a squirrel, but look at its tail.”

“It’s a rat,” Bombarda said with a sneer. “Just a common, filthy rat.”

“Can we keep it?” she asked. “We could put it in a cage.”

“If you like,” he shrugged as if the whole matter was of no interest to him, but he watched closely as she put it inside of an empty one.

“Where did you find it?” he said.

“Out there,” she gestured. It didn’t really matter to her where she’d found it. One place was the same as another in the forest.

“It must have come from somewhere,” Bombarda murmured, suddenly intrigued. New things never happened

anymore. New creatures never entered their world, and nothing ever left unless it was eaten. He stood up, creakily, and walked slowly towards the rat. He peered closely into the cage, and the rat peered just as closely at him. "Will you show me the way?" he asked it, and the rat twitched its whiskers as if it answered, maybe. Maybe I will if you let me out of here, but then again, maybe I won't.

"This could be the very thing we've been waiting for all along," Bombarda said to Soma, who smiled, pleased to have possibly pleased him.

"But how," he turned back to the rat, "how can we make it show us the way, and how can we even keep up with him." "That's easy," Soma said. "We tie him, right? Get a long vine and we tie him. Then we hold on to one end and see where he goes."

"You're the smart one," Bombarda said with as close to a smile as he could. "You always were the smart one," he added, and gave her a small pat on her nearly bald little head. Soma grinned and said,

"What do we name him?"