

THE RAY WHICH GUIDES THE PIONEERS

-A SHORT STORY BY-

T.H. DOBSON

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The Ray Which Guides the Pioneers is the story told by Jean Harrell to Sam & Adam Harrell during dinner in Chapter 2 of RED SKY. This short story serves as an introduction to the wider world of the Austral Moon novels & Perditus Luna novellas and is intended to be a story told to young children on Alta Nova. As such, it is inspired by the myths of the Native Americans of North America.

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Before the Arks landed on Alta Nova, before the pioneers traveled for thousands upon thousands of years through the void, Earth was a dying world, a once lush Gaia, now turned into a hot, dry husk of a planet. 2050 CE was the year when the first five arks left the dry and salty coastline of Eastern Asia for a world far, far away, guided by a golden dragon. Over five hundred years later, the final Ark groups were launching.

One of these groups was of fourteen such arks. They towered over the dry seabed of the North Sea like spires, arrows over three kilometers tall, and visible from the Commander's home on the ancient coastline of Denmark seventeen kilometers distant. He watched as the millions of people began to be assembled under the setting sun of a dying world, like sheep being put into a pen, and great lines began forming to board. They were launching that night.

The ancient dragon flew overhead in the stars, his golden scales glimmering in the sunlight, his eyes shining like spotlights down on the crowd and the Arks. Watching over those who had been selected to travel to a new system and begin humanity anew with a comforting, soft expression. He was their guide, old as he was.

The Commander heard the door to his office slide open. The launch coordinator greeted him with a somber smile, he looked like the human embodiment of the golden dragon. In his hand he was holding a small data-pad – something that resembled a small SD card from hundreds of years prior.

“Good evening, sir. What’s the news on my Ark group?” the Commander asked him.

“All looks well,” he began with a sigh, “It’s always a challenging time for most, seeing them leave. Knowing that they likely won’t be on the next one but holding out hope that they will. Knowing that this is one of the last groups to leave.”

“How many more group launches will there be?”

“I’d say only about two or three. We’ve nearly exhausted our resources building them, and as the water situation here on Earth continues to dwindle, it’s only a matter of time before we start to see famines and people dying from lack of water,” the coordinator responded, gazing out over the vast salt plain of the once-great North Sea, “I wouldn’t be surprised if your group is the last one, Adam.”

The mood in the room shifted, Adam hadn’t expected the coordinator’s informal tone, especially at a time like this – but he understood what he meant. The Vontaro group – that’s what they were calling it – was the largest group of Arks ever sent out. Fourteen arks launching at once was something never tried before today, but the monumental task was nearly completed.

The sun began to plunge below the horizon, and a cloud of dust rose on it beyond the Arks. Fortunately for them, it wouldn't impede the launch.

"I think it's time we say goodbye, old man," Adam said, the dragon in the distance shimmering in the setting sun, watching the approaching storm.

The coordinator grunted, "Before you go, there is one final thing you need before you leave," he replied, turning to Adam, his hand holding the data-pad outstretched towards Adam.

Adam reached out his hand, opening his palm. The coordinator gave it to him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"An experimental guidance program – named Red Manta. It's to replace the Golden Dragon, in case anything goes wrong. Nothing should, though. So, it's best to leave it be. Good luck, Adam," The Coordinator replied, a sad smile crossing his face.

Adam put the program in the pocket of his jacket, "See you on the other side, Hanson."

Hanson returned to gazing out over the Vontaro Group, watching as the crowds began to move themselves inside of the Arks. Adam let him be. He left the building and sat in the cart waiting to take him to the lead ark as daylight turned to night. The Golden Dragon glowed above them, watching the loading of the fourteen massive ships with the same gaze he had for years – but something new shone through his empty eyes.

The cart moved quickly passed the crowds, and soon, Adam had reached the massive boarding ramp of the commanding ark, the namesake for the group. The Vontaro. Spotlights shone down on the crowds, a blinding white light, harsh against the pitch black of the dust storm, which now brought winds that whipped through the flat plains of the North Sea. The Dragon did nothing.

Inside, the Ark was much less welcoming than its counterparts from 2050. Unlike the first Arks, the ones which made up the Vontaro Group weren't generation ships. Nearly the entire interior of the Ark was devoted for rows upon rows of hibernation chambers – hundreds, maybe even thousands of decks filled to the brim with them. Adam, however, wasn't heading for his now. Not yet. He would be the last to sleep, and the first to wake on their long journey to a new home.

Adam would wait for the Arks to leave Earth's sphere of influence before sleeping, and he would be awoken as they entered the system for their new home. For most of their journey, the Vontaro's navigation program, the Golden Dragon, would guide them to a new planet – under the supervision of its main program, named Strider.

Adam used the Vontaro's maintenance elevator to reach the top deck of the Ark – the command center, or "brain" of the gargantuan vessel. When he entered the room, it greeted him by turning on the lights and making the walls transparent, at least, artificially. Off in the distance, he saw the Danish coastal cities, and in four rows, the Arks stood.

“Strider, begin mainframe check. Display everything I need to know here,” Adam said, the sand and salt whipping against the hull of the Vontaro as the storm continued to press its rage on the group of behemoths.

“All systems go,” Strider replied in an uncanny robotic voice, as a collection of holographic graphs and check information showed up in the bridge.

“Send this to Han- er-the coordinator. Let him know we’re go for launch.”

“Uplink in process, launch continuing on schedule for T-15 minutes,” Strider said, again in the robotic voice.

Adam shuddered. Not because it was cold, it was warm inside the Vontaro’s command deck, but they were leaving in 15 minutes.

Leaving Earth for good, in 15 minutes.

The launch of the Arks was flawless and went as expected. Adam felt the Vontaro’s massive drives ignite, and he felt the vibrations even from three kilometers above them. Adam knew no-one else aboard was awake. He stood at the slanted wall-window thing on the command deck, watching as the ground below slowly but surely became more and more distant, until they were so high up, he could see the sunlight peeking over the horizon. And soon, Earth was nothing more than a ball suspended in the void.

From above, the old continents were still visible, the green hues that once dominated them now blending more with the brown salt flats of the former oceans. The Atlantic Ocean, for example, now sat hundreds – or even a thousand kilometers away from where it was five hundred years ago. A shell of its former self. The other thirteen arks trailed behind the Vontaro, but Adam didn’t notice them. He was too focused on his home planet to notice them.

He watched until Earth was nothing more than a dot in the empty black, and Strider reminded him it was time for a long nap.

For Strider, the trip out to the edge of the Solar System was something it had only dreamed of. The Golden Dragon floated ahead, charting the way for the Arks to follow, but something was off.

The Dragon took the Arks too close to Jupiter, they almost lost the one named Faniero as he danced in the clouds. Beautiful as it was, he was starting to get on Strider’s nerves – or circuits – and now, the Dragon was taking them on a path to fly straight between the Alpha Centauri pair of stars. Something that the Arks – certainly not Vontaro – were built for – but Adam had left the Red Manta program in one of the consoles in the command center. So, at any time, Strider could erase the Dragon’s program and allow the Manta to guide them instead. It decided to wait.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” Strider asked the Dragon. The Dragon stopped and allowed for the Vontaro to catch up, before continuing beside it. Strider watched him out of the Vontaro’s hull cameras.

“I assure you,” the Dragon began, his empty eyes smiling what was supposed to be a reassuring smile, “We are on the right track.”

“Alright, then why are you driving this bus down the middle of a pair of binary stars?” Strider mocked, its humor programming showing through.

“Relax, young one. I figured out this path long, long ago to your system. We’ll be fine,” he said. Strider was starting to become slightly fed up with the Dragon.

They continued in this fashion for another hundred-or-so years, Strider wasn’t keeping too much track – that was the Vontaro’s internal clock’s job – until finally Strider had enough. Alpha Centauri A & B were now just a day away, and catastrophe awaited them there.

“Alright,” Strider started, “Are you going to turn us on the right track or are you going to fly us into a sun? Because something in my program tells me that this isn’t the right way.”

The Dragon continued his course.

“Hey, old man! Get us on the right heading, or I’ll override you,” Strider yelled.

“Please,” Dragon said with a mocking tone, “that Manta won’t even get you halfway to your destination without an incident. Just follow me and it’ll be fine.”

They were now dangerously close to the two stars, and Strider acted, terminating the Dragon’s program, and giving the Red Manta the go-ahead.

As the old Dragon faded, the Red Manta took control. She turned the Arks into the correct heading, gracefully and silently. She did tricks and danced on her way, but never broke course. At least she gave Strider something to do.

For the next several thousand years, Strider and the fourteen Arks followed the Manta to a new sun. When they arrived, it was anything but what they expected to find.

Adam awoke in a daze. Shivering, from his low body temperature, he fumbled with the clothes and his coat that he had left beside the chamber. As he did, the command center activated. The walls once again turned into windows, and the red-orange glow of a dim star shone through them. Off in the distance, a world, relatively the same size as Earth with two moons, glowed in the warm light. The Manta danced down to the surface, giving it a red hue as the Arks began to spread out.

“Landing sequence beginning on Alta Nova, Commander. I’d recommend bracing,” Strider said.

“Noted. Thanks for keeping watch,” Adam replied, taking hold of the bracing bars along the wall of the pyramid-shaped room.

What happened next was a mixture of chaos and a carefully choreographed landing. Vontaro began to slow itself down before entering the alien world's atmosphere. Reentry was smooth as orange flame licked the side of the ark, and the surface grew nearer. Adam felt a huge shudder as the Ark slammed its pointed bottom into the ground.

“Landing sequence completed. Vontaro Ark confirmed landing on Alta Nova after 10,423 years of transit,” Strider celebrated – at least as close as a robot could get to celebrating.

What stretched out before Adam was a new alien wilderness. A sea of blood red trees – at least, what he could only think of as trees – complemented by a pale red/orange sky and white clouds. The journey felt instantaneous to him, but he knew for Strider, it took an eternity.

He couldn't help but cry. The tears were of joy. He imagined what they would build, the millions of them there were.

They were pioneers. He knew the going would be tough, but they made it.

Humanity was saved – and today, all the billions of humans alive and breathing on the many planets and moons of the Nova system all were descendants of the millions of pioneers who survived the first decades after the landing of the Arks.

Humanity was saved, but now an even greater challenge awaited.

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A PRELUDE TO THE NOVEL RED SKY

BY T.H. DOBSON

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